Understanding Meaning-Formation Processes in Everyday Life: An Approach to Cultural Phenomenology

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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses a phenomenological explanation of the processes of meaning-formation that take place in everyday life. Whereas various social sciences have taken a structuralist standpoint and refer to cultural structures that inform and shape the way things are experienced, classical philosophical epistemology, in contrast, has put an emphasis on the individual mind as the active center of meaning-formation. The author argues for a cultural phenomenology that is capable of giving a philosophically satisfying epistemological account of individual experiences that are culturally structured. As a result, meaning-formation processes are viewed as reciprocal enactment of mind and world, creating the qualitative dimension of meaning of human being-in-the-world.

How to explain the processes of meaning-formation that take place in the course of our everyday life experiences? What is a good epistemological account for the qualitative dimension of our situated being-in-the-world that is disclosed in the way the world and things are meaningful for us? How does one perceive and form the meaning of a situation or an action she or somebody else undertakes? Or, to put these questions in terms of phenomenology: how do we experience something that has a recognizable identity, value, and meaning – such that it provokes an embodied reaction? How does something become experienced as good or bad, beautiful or ugly, pleasant or disgusting? How are these meanings formed, and from where do they derive their truth-value, and validity?

Let us look at the following examples of communicative action that are typical to everyday life: A parent asks his child: "Why do you wear these

uncomfortable clothes?" "Because I want to be cool", the child answers. In the workplace somebody answers the question "Why don't you help me?" with a short statement: "I am sorry, but it's not my responsibility". Or consider two relatives speaking: "I am broke. Could you help me out with some money?" "No, I don't think that this is right. You should earn your own living". How is it possible that two people are communicating with each other in these examples, for in spite of the conflict of values and expectations it seems that the interlocutors do understand each other's intentions and reasons? Or at least they both believe that they make meaningful statements that justify, or at least explain, their attitudes and corresponding behavior, i.e., they believe that they make statements that explain and perhaps validate the positions they take both to themselves and to another person.

Or, to take another example, "Mama, see the Negro! I am frightened! Frightened! Frightened!" cries a child in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967: 112). Compare its normativity and "naturalness" in the 50's of the last century to our embarrassment about racist attitudes today. How do the categorizations that define our sight of other people enter our minds and how do they shape and define our *individual* experiences, not talking about the emotional, social and political nature of an intersubjective encounter? Or consider how our seemingly physical bodily responses, such as disgust towards spoiled or contaminated food depend on the cultural context. Charles Darwin (2002) describes two different experiences of such disgust during one and the same encounter between himself-an European-and a native from Tierra del Fuego archipelago: "In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty" (255). Both sides of the encounter are experiencing disgust towards the same object, and yet for completely different reasons: the disgust of the native was provoked by unfamiliar and seemingly improper culinary technologies, whereas "the European's" disgust was provoked by the touch of hand of a "naked savage" that he knows to be unhygienic. How does the meat portion as an object of these experiences become determined as disgusting? From where do the meanings of a particular object–spoiled meat in one occasion, and possibly contaminated meat in another–derive its truth and its validity?

Classical philosophical epistemology has usually seen the mind of an individual as a locus and agent of all types of meaning-formation. Intersubjective

similarities and overlaps have been seen as deriving from universal human nature, or from logically determined necessary conditions of experience, whereas intercultural differences have been viewed as different stages of approximation to a (Western version of) realization of human nature. Sometimes this attitude has been called egocentric of egological epistemology. Structuralist and post-structuralist authors, in contrast, have suggested that meanings draw their determination, truth-value, and validity from cultural structures that are present in any society. Thus, for example Clifford Geertz (1973) argues that our actions and thoughts become meaningful by being formatted by "structures of signification" - social symbolic systems that can be found in religion, myths, common sense of a society, and ideology (9). Social psychologists claim that our actions and thoughts, individual and collective self-identification, decision-making, and habitual life-styles – are all structured by nets of social representations, stereotypes, or interpretive schemes. Likewise, sociologist Jeffrey Alexander has launched a project of "cultural sociology" (to be distinguished from the traditional sociology of culture) in order reveal "cultural structures" that are responsible for producing social meanings (2003). According to him and Philip Smith (1993), cultural structures are to be understood semiotically: "We would like to propose that culture be thought of as a structure composed of symbolic sets. Symbols are signs that have a generalized status and provide categories for understanding the elements of social, individual, and organic life" (156). Pierre Bourdieu (1998) discusses the nature of such structures as following: "Social agents construct the social world through cognitive structures that may be applied to all things of the world ... (Cassirer calls these principles of vision and division ʹsymbolic formsʹ and Durkheim ʹforms of classificationʹ: these are so many ways of saying the same thing in more or less separate theoretical traditions)" (53).

I take these views to be deriving from the basic structuralist insight of the 20th century that a particular meaning is dependent on, and is made possible by, a general structure, be it the structure of language or any other language-like system, which can be used for coding a particular expression. This relationship between the general structure and a particular expression is similar to the one between *langue* and *parole*, to use the terms of Saussure's general linguistics. Applied to social and cultural life this general structure has usually been identified as a system of culture, or as cultural structures. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has summarized the structuralist way of conceptualizing culture as follows:

> The structure sought by the structuralist understanding of culture is the set of generative rules, historically selected by the human species, governing simultaneously the mental and practical activity of the human individual viewed as an epistemic being, and the range of possibilities in which this activity can operate. Since this set of rules precipitates into social structures, it appears to the individual as transcendent law-like necessity; owing to its inexhaustible organizing capacity it is experienced by the same individual as his creative freedom (61).

The idea of cultural structures forming the meanings of particular cultural expressions and activities constitutes the core of what has been called the cultural turn in the humanities of the 20th century. This view assumes that we can explain the meanings of particular expressions by contextualizing them within a set of cultural structures, as for example Paul Ricoeur (1990) writes in the *Time and Narrative*: "To understand a ritual act is to situate it within a ritual, set within a cultic system, and by degrees within the whole set of conventions, beliefs, and institutions that make up the symbolic framework of culture" (vol. 1: 58).

The cultural turn is often associated or identified with the linguistic turn from where the structuralist idea originated, but applied to cultural matters the general structuralist idea had to undergo an important transition from structures that are universal and atemporal to structures that are historical and culturally particular. Levi-Strauss' cultural structuralism has been unanimously criticized for assuming the same set of basic cultural structures for all cultures of all times. What has been identified as the post-structuralist turn in human sciences repeats basically Hegel's reaction to Kant's transcendental philosophy. Hegel agreed with Kant about transcendental structures being operational within human experience, but he insisted that these structures are subjected to historical and social development. Today cultural structures are seen by most, if not all, research as historically changing and as culturally localized. The insight about different peoples and historical epochs having their distinct cultural structures has become one of the cornerstones of contemporary understandings of culture. It does not mean, however, that cultural structures have lost their transcendental nature from the point of view of an individual, appearing to her, as Bauman suggested, at once as a law-like necessity and as a means of her creative freedom to produce meanings. Thus Foucault (1982) famously describes cultural structures (he terms them "rules of discursive formations" (38; 48-49)) as historical *a priori* (127-128).

Thus the idea of cultural structures formatting or shaping the meanings in everyday situations is wide-spread in the humanities and social sciences, and especially so after the cultural turn. In sociology this approach is often named social constructivism or constructionism. But we do not have a philosophically satisfying account of the processes of meaning-formation on the level of an individual mind that would explain the involvement of cultural structures. We will have to specify immediately, though, that while it is widely agreed that cultural structures can explain the meaning of a particular act of expression, this does not mean that cultural structures would give a causal explanation of an individual act. Cultural structures are necessary conditions of the intersubjective validity of the meanings created, but they are not producing the particular acts of meaning-formation themselves.

Various disciplines report the need for such an account that would be able to connect cultural structures with the processes of sense-formation within an individual mind. Thus Jennifer Dornan (2004) argues from the point of view of anthropology of religion that "in general, religious systems are seen as structures perpetuated by the black box of an abstract 'society' while the subjective experience of individuals that make up society is often ignored" (25). But the question is, she states: "what is the connection between an individual's embodied experience of sacred and the larger, shared system of belief that is part of a religious structure?" (27). Historian John. R. Hall (2000) points to the same issue: "... culture can be theorized at two different 'levels' – specific cultural meanings and generic cultural structures. Yet this distinction requires an account of the relationship between the specific and generic, at least if generic concepts are to have any utility" (332). Psychologists Cor Baerveldt and Paul Voestermans (2005) define the main task of cultural psychology as to understand "... how people come to commit themselves to shared norms of understanding that concern humanly constituted realities like 'honor', 'motherhood', 'dignity' and 'respect'". And this task brings cultural psychology to the "questions of how people come to 'share' certain ways of understanding the world" and "the question how consensual modes of understanding acquire their 'force' or 'compellingness'". According to Baerveldt and Voestermans both questions do not have epistemologically satisfactory answer in most brands of cultural theory (449-450).

The literature on the philosophical treatment of cultural structures is too vast to give a systematic or historical overview of it here. However, most of it

concentrates on cultural structures themselves, their types and classification, their historic development or non-development, their cultural relativity, etc. Most often these theories deal with the function of cultural structures on the level of a society as a whole or on the level of certain social groups. Much less emphasis has been given to the issue of how the cultural structures function on the level of an individual consciousness and action that are shaped by these structures.

The aim of the following part of the paper attempts to contribute towards creating such a theory, and I intend to do so by returning to the basic phenomenological insights of Edmund Husserl. For this I intend to utilize two basic insights of his phenomenological theory – (1) the account of meaning-formation, seen as a key-element in shaping the contents of individual experiences, and (2) the idea of intentionality of these contents that is achieved by means of their meaning. These insights do prove to be useful in our purposes even if Husserl himself saw his phenomenological method, at least as presented in his main published books, serving a very different philosophical task. Thus, to return to our initial questions, how do we create and perceive meaningful messages that have a surplus value of justifying, explaining, or legitimizing (or the opposite) a particular attitude or action? How do we create humanly constituted values, such as coolness, responsibility, justice (in distribution of money), or dietary or racial typifications, and how do we use them in the acts of identification and communication in such a way that the contents of these acts obtain intersubjective validity and a justificatory or legitimizing or provoking function in a given social encounter? What allows for such culture-dependent processes of meaning-formation? Or, to use Kantian vocabulary: what makes these culture-dependent meaning-formations possible?

A phenomenological account must start from the analysis of individual experiences, and here we departure from structuralists and post-structuralists, analytic philosophers of language, and even from most of the philosophers of culture by assuming that meaning is to be found in human experience that raises from interaction between the world and mind, rather than in words, sentences, signs, definitions, propositions, actions, rituals, institutions, or in the systems of these components. When yielding to a phenomenological point of view, we assume that the very object of our research are the intentional contents of experience.

Usually the intentional contents of experience are called objects in phenomenology, but the notion of an object (*Gegenstand*) has to be taken most

broadly – as any identifiable unit that we are aware of. As Donn Welton (2000) explains, the "...object (*Gegenstand*) is much broader in scope than "thing" (*Ding*) or even "fact" (*Tatsache, Sachverhalt*). Anything to which we can refer is an object, including essences" (37). In a word, as long as we are conscious *of* something (which is almost always the case), an intentional object is constituted. An intentional object is constituted even in dreams and imagination. Husserl claims that if one thinks of God or an angel, or of such a logically impossible idea as a circular quadrangle, we are still dealing with an intentional object. (2001c:127). This is why consciousness is always a consciousness *of* (something). Dagfinn Føllesdal has given an insightful reformulation of this feature of Husserl's notion of intentionality that takes into account the objectively or materially non-existent objects: "consciousness is always *as if of* an object. What matters is not whether or not there is an object, but what the features are of consciousness that make it always be *as if of* an object" (1998: 577).

Whenever something is experienced in such a way that it can be identified, recognized, memorized, recalled, or spoken, felt, being excited, bored or irritated about, - the phenomenon is invested with a certain meaning. As Husserl famously put it, experiencing something means experiencing something *as* something. In other words, an object that we are conscious *of* is always experienced *as* having a certain meaning or sense. But the most important issue in our purposes is Husserl's suggestion that the effect of intentionality of an object is achieved by means of its meaning.

As Husserl explains, for any complex act of consciousness, there is a specific part-act that dominates over the rest of the part-acts. This dominating part-act is the act of sense-bestowal (*sinngebender Akt*) that gives to the whole complex of perceptions a specific meaning that applies to all of them and binds them together (2001c: 117-118). The binding function of the dominating sense-bestowal act is performed by the "sense of objectifying grasping (or: comprehending)" (*Sinn der gegenständlichen Auffassung*) or put shortly, the "grasping (or: comprehending) sense" (*Auffassungssinn*) (2001c: 121-122). J. N. Findley has translated the term *Auffassungssinn* as the "interpretative sense", which conveys indirectly the same idea: it interprets the objects of part-acts as belonging to the whole of the complex act. The "interpreting sense" consequently defines *as what* the intentional object is perceived. By the same token, an intentional relationship is constituted that makes the intentional object experienced *as if* being independent of our sense-bestowing activity.

Thus we can conclude that meaning functions in the processes of sense-bestowal as a subjectively added surplus value that is responsible both for the identity and objectivity of the object. It achieves this by the "ensouling" grasping of the sensed contents *as* belonging to something numerically identical and objectively existing.

In the *Logical Investigations,* the "grasping sense" is also called the "matter" (*Materie*) of an act (2001c: 122-123). In the *Ideas* the concept of "noematic sense" (*noematischer Sinn*) can be interpreted as playing a similar, if not an identical role. As Føllesdal argues, there is a component of *noema* – the "objectual (*gegenständlicher*) or noematic sense" – that is common to different acts that have the same object (1969: 682). The noematic sense is not a part of the physical thing, nor a part of the intended object as intended, but that which "animates" the intended object as a whole by forming its identity and by constituting that *as what* the object is perceived. It is also that which creates the intentional effect.

However, here we need to be clear about the difference between two types of meaning, both of which can be interpreted as *Auffassungssinn* and the noematic sense. One is a particular meaning of one and the same particular intentional object, which can be experienced in different acts, and the other a general meaning by means of which this particular object, but also other objects of this type, are grasped. If we take one of Husserl's favorite examples – dice, then we will need to distinguish between the particular dice, the surfaces of which I may comprehend from different points of view and which I can intend to in different complex acts, and the general notion of dice that I am using for naming this particular object *as* dice. I identify this particular object by the name dice (and not by the name rabbit, for example), but I will also do so regarding other small cubes with one to six dots symmetrically placed on each their sides. Obviously I do not develop the general notion and the name of dice in the course of the series of perception of this particular dice, and yet it is constitutive of my perception of this particular thing. If I did not know what dice in general is before I looked at this particular thing I would at best recognize it as a cube with some symmetrically placed dots on its sides. From here it is clear that we need an account of this general element of meaning that precedes the meaning-formation of a particular object. Whereas the debate over the meaning of *noema* has been to a large extent textual and has concentrated on what Husserl as a historical figure could have had in mind, I would like to argue that a sound and complete phenomenological theory of human experience needs an account of

cultural (and not necessarily linguistic) structures. Therefore, whether it was the intent of Husserl or not, I propose to read what Husserl has identified as the "grasping sense" as a general meaning that precedes a particular complex act due to the cultural knowledge internalized by our consciousness. As we said above it is the very same element of experience that constitutes the identity and objectivity of the intended object. In other words, I propose to interpret the grasping sense of perception as an element of internalized cultural structures that can be called cultural forms or symbols. Accordingly, a cultural form of dice is needed to perceive a particular cube *as* a dice. And it is precisely as a dice that this object has intersubjectively recognized identity and objectivity. We should notice that perceiving this particular cube as dice does not emerge as a result of sedimentation of my individual past experiences with such cubical things; for without cultural forms these things would never become dice for me. Or what is the same, the cultural form of dice cannot be seen as an accomplishment of one's solipsistic egological life of dealing with the particular type of material objects, but has to be seen as an element of intersubjective life that is embodied and situated within the real social world of reciprocal culturally regulated action.

All this becomes even more obvious if we return to the examples from the beginning of the paper. Let us first look at the statements that serve as messages of communication between individuals, but also as means of their practical positioning and behavior. From the phenomenological point of view these messages are experienced both by the sender and the addressee as contents of experience with a certain meaning, even if these meanings are not identical for the sender and the receiver. However, as long as the communication takes place the intentional reference is formed for both. In the first three cases one of the interlocutors becomes conscious of a justification of a particular attitude of the other: the child wears uncomfortable clothes because she wants to be cool; the colleague does not help because she feels this is not her responsibility; and the relative refuses financial aid because she does not think it is right.

The addressee does not just become conscious of the particular intention of the sender – the insistence in continuing wearing the clothes, refusal of help and financial aid. Rather, the addressee receives the content of the message *as* explaining, justifying or legitimizing (or failing to do so) the particular intention of the sender. In other words, the addressee does not just comprehend the sender's proposed action about her request. She also feels the sender's intention justified or not, right or wrong, legitimate or not, true of false, etc. The same can be said about the child's reaction when it does not just see a person of dark skin

color, but she sees such person *as* a "Negro". Darwin and the native perceive the meat portion *as* provoking disgust, because the first sees it as contaminated because it is touched by a bare hand of somebody who does not work in the kitchen, whereas the native sees it as spoiled by improper culinary treatment.

Where does this additional effect, this surplus value that makes us feel something in addition to identifying the particular action, person or object, derive from, if analyzed phenomenologically? I propose it comes from cultural forms that are used both for communicating and perceiving the message, as well as in perceiving and making sense of things and people around us. The ideals of coolness, responsibility and righteousness that the senders referred to, as well as the racist classification and the culinary norms are intersubjective cultural forms belonging to our internalized cultural structures. They have a specific intersubjective validity and power that obviously pre-exist the particular act of meaning-formation. If the ideal of coolness would be the child's private object of desire, it would make no sense to refer to it in order to explain or legitimize one's behavior to another person. In fact it would make it impossible to be cool, since being cool is at least partially a result of a particular type of social recognition. The same holds for responsibility: if responsibility were nothing more than somebody's private ideal, one could not justify his behavior using this word; not even to herself. In order for this justification to be effective it must be presupposed by the sender that everybody feels about this ideal in the same way as she does. And the same must be true for the classificatory act "Negro" or for the Darwin's and the native's emotion of disgust. The child experiences the person it encounters to be frightful not because of her own racist classificatory act, but because in her experience the person appears *as* a "Negro," resulting in an act of perception which is frightening. The child's feeling of fear is not a result of a category mistake or a wrong attribution, or anything that it did at the moment of perception. If the child had met the person of dark skin without having been brought up in the racist cultural milieu, she would have simply recognized another human being with dark skin. Therefore the frightening effect of the "Negro" is a surplus value of this particular act of perception that is included in cultural forms already before the particular act takes place.

These examples demonstrate that when cultural forms are involved in meaning-formation they are not at all so fittingly applicable to the concrete sensuous contents, as the example with dice suggests. Their suitability is in fact rarely unproblematic and they are inclined to lead the sense-formation in the direction that is not necessarily desired or at least purposefully chosen by the

experiencing subject. And often we are consciously aware of competing and even conflicting cultural forms that produce different surpluses of meaning, as the case with Darwin's meat portion demonstrates.

However, it is this human ability to be conscious *as if of* something *as* something that makes it possible for her to live in culturally constituted worlds – amongst things that are determined by idealities that do not derive from the empirical characteristics of the surroundings. This ability makes possible the life of *homo symbolicum* whose classificatory acts and normative principles of action and thinking, and whose general orientation in the surrounding world, derive from what is good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, just or unjust, proper or improper, etc. Cultural forms can define the line between "us" and "them," friends and enemies, male and female, powerful and powerless. It is indeed an astonishing human capacity to have common abstract enemies whom the members of the group have never seen, but whom they know with certainty to be the enemies of a nation, of communism, of democracy, and so on, and in extreme circumstances they can sacrifice their lives in fighting them. Humans can also have ethical ideals that can determine our actions even if it does not benefit us. Or, they can have egoistic ideals about becoming rich or famous or recognized and they can subordinate their lives and the lives of their family members to these ideals. And they can have gods or any other collectively imagined divinities whom they can serve and whom we would like everybody else to serve as well.

Due to these sets of idealities presented in cultural forms all fellow human beings whom we encounter are not just others, but bearers of a very distinct surplus value of their otherness; they are either good or bad, clever or stupid, important or unimportant, valuable members of "us" or not so valuable members of "them". As it is most obviously the case with the perception of texts, the physicalistic characteristics of the sensuous body of the message do not define in any substantial way *as what* the message is perceived. Similarly in our examples of the food portion and dark-skinned person, the physicalistic characteristics are not decisive in defining the content of experience. As Embree (1997) explains, "to be sure, racial traits, such as hair color, are genetically determined, but they and what they represent need to be focused upon, typified, believed in, valued, and used in action, and this, again, is what makes them cultural" (282). A further claim is made by Theo Verheggen and Cor Baervelt (2007). According to them it is not the case that at first there are primal physicalistic properties on which cultural characteristics rest, but already the physicalistic characteristics are in fact determined culturally:

> For instance, whether a particular stone is a revered holy object or a piece of construction material depends on the codes, practices and value orientations that the members of the given community adhere to. This may be an example in which a socio-cultural influence appears evident, yet something similar is true for attributes such as the color, shape, or function an object has within a given community. These properties are no less socially determined, acknowledged, agreed, or otherwise elaborated upon than the prohibition to touch a holy stone (7).

And indeed, as long we can use a word for identifying an object or its property, it is already determined by cultural forms. To return to our example of dice, if Verheggen and Baerveldt are right, then without cultural forms we would not perceive it as a cube either. This does not mean that the *hyle* of an act of perception has no influence on meaning-formation, but it means that as long as the *hyletic* data is grasped *as* something, our perception is already culturally influenced.

We will have to maintain the difference between the meaning of cultural forms as such, and the meaning of particular everyday expressions or instantiations that are made meaningful by means of these cultural forms. In everyday situations cultural forms are applied and the corresponding interpretations occur without focusing the subject's conscious attention to the meaning of the cultural forms themselves. Cultural forms do not define *what* we experience, but *as* what we experience it. Thus even if meaning-formation in everyday life takes place in the focus of a subject's attention, it does not follow that the meaning that is formed is shaped according to the subject's initiative and will. In most cases, cultural forms function as machines – as meaning-formation automatons that leave us with the already-meaningful object of experience. In most cases, it requires an effort to deconstruct the meanings that are already formed by means of cultural forms, or to juxtapose them with different, perhaps conflicting, meanings. And the more a cultural form is socially normalized by the repeated intersubjective usage of it, the more difficult and out of place it feels to contradict it. Therefore, even if the interpretative machines would not function without the psychic energy of individuals, it does not mean that they produce results according to the choice and intention of these individuals. Being frightened by a "Negro," or being agitated by a national enemy, or feeling disgust towards the food that is touched by a naked "savage" are not expressions of individual intention, but reactions that are made normative by cultural forms. Therefore, the formation of meanings cannot be seen as a process executed by a singular agent that we assume to be the mind of

an individual. It is a co-operation and also quite often, a conflict, of several poles, or centers, of activity.

At this point we need to take the development of the phenomenological method further than the expanded interpretation of Husserl. Since it has mainly to do with establishing primacy of cultural characteristics over physicalistic, and with incorporating the idea of cultural structures, I propose to call it cultural phenomenology. It means accepting the view that cultural horizons of experience that are inhabited by transcendental meaning-formation automatons actively participating in the creation of meanings in individual consciousness. These machines can be defined as agents of culture, language, society, or power, depending on which aspect of meaning-formation we emphasize. But it is important to see that they have a life of their own – an independent logic of meaning-formation that might not serve the interests and intentions of the individual who is experiencing the meanings produced by them.

The term cultural phenomenology has also came up in the writings of Thomas Csordas (1997) Steven Connor (1999, 2000), Stephen Clucas (2000), Romin Tafarodi (2008), and Gary Backhaus by similar reasons – deriving from the need of understanding the impact of cultural factors for meaning-formation in everyday life. Lester Embree also brings up this term in the context of the present-day developments of Husserlian phenomenology, and associates it with the investigation of such life-worldly phenomena as ethnicity and gender, the investigation of which should be based on "sedimented" structures of life-world that can be revealed in the analysis of secondary passivity. However, Embree finds the term "life-worldly phenomenology" more appropriate for such enterprise (Embree, n.d.: 6-7).

The basic philosophical insights of classical version of Husserl's phenomenology remain, however, crucial for cultural phenomenology, even if it needs to be revised by incorporating the idea of cultural structures and cultural forms. Once we do this, it will become clear that phenomenology cannot lead us to a transcendental sphere that has an *a priori* status regarding **any** possible experience, but to a historically created cultural framework that is prior to a certain set of particular individual experiences. Obviously this cultural framework is itself constituted as a result of the cultural activity of the particular cultural community (which has, of course interacted and borrowed from other cultural communities). What is transcendental from the point of view of individual meaning-formation is at the same time culture-dependent and

culture-specific, or, put otherwise, in cultural phenomenology we are dealing with an *a priori* that is both historical and cultural. If Kant took the transcendental conditions of experience to be universal (i.e., valid for all human subjects) and ahistorical (i.e., not dependent on social context of cognition) then within cultural phenomenology we will have to regard them as collective achievements that are historically changing and culturally local. Husserl himself was moving towards historicizing the transcendental sphere in his discussions of transcendental intersubjectivity and the generativity of home-worldly normality.

The questionability of the fitfulness of cultural forms can be observed in our examples as well, for I imagine that the colleague refusing to help is probably aware of the possible alternative interpretations of her attitude, and that this might be the reason why she refers to the ideal of responsibility. The same holds for the claim "You should earn your own living". You should, because everybody should, because this is right, and it follows that I do not have to share (which is convenient, because I do not want to, but the effect of my words is that nobody can accuse me in this matter). Both sides of the encounter may perceive and understand even what is put in brackets in the previous sentence, and they can either approve or disapprove each other's positions, but at the same time they are both aware of the intersubjective power of the ideal of justice. The cultural phenomenology approach should aim to help us to develop an understanding of this type of power.

At the same time we can remain true to Husserl's project of phenomenology in one important methodological feature: we can continue proceeding from the analysis of individual experiences. We do not need to jump from what is given in experience of an individual to the analysis of "us" as a social group that has some common mental features, and we do not need to fantasize about contents of collective minds or structures of collective unconscious. We can proceed from individual experiences even if we will focus at the transcendental mechanisms of meaning-formation that are communal. By doing this, we arrive at the phenomenology of *collectively structured*, or what is the same – communally constituted, and yet *individual* experiences, which form the very subject of investigation of cultural phenomenology.

Thus the epistemological platform of cultural phenomenology is not that of classical philosophical epistemology where there is just one active center of meaning-formation that is more or less closely associated with the individual mind, but it accepts numerous active centers of meaning-formation that interact

and conflict with each other, some more and some less powerful in their mutual conflicts and interactions. In this regard, cultural phenomenology is similar to the structuralist and post-structuralist positions, except for the fact that all these conflicts and interactions take place within individual experience. The experiencing ego remains the source of psychic energy behind all meaning-formation processes and the functioning pole in all of them, even if in most cases in everyday life a more decisive role is played by meaning-automatons that shape the validity, truth, and power of the meanings that we experience.

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