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Questioning the Phenomenological Foundations of Marton's Research Approach

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Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to try to answer the question: is phenomenographic research underlying (in a broad sense) phenomenological assumptions? It is an important question because opinions on this topic are divided. Some researchers argue that phenomenography derive from philosophical phenomenology. Phenomenology is even treated as a philosophical foundation of phenomenographic research. In this article I argue that the statement on similarities and connections between the two approaches and especially the claim that phenomenography has phenomenological roots are based on mistaken interpretation of the method created by Ference Marton.

Keywords: phenomenography, phenomenology, philosophical foundations, qualitative research, pedagogy.

The article attempts to answer a question whether phenomenological objectives constitute the foundation of phenomenographic research (in its broad sense). The question is justified since the literature on phenomenographic research and empirical papers based on the methodology sometimes claim that Edmund Husserl's (1980, 2000, 2006) phenomenology and the concept of phenomenographic research are closely linked and the phenomenology is even treated as a philosophical foundation of phenomenographic research (Gibbs et al., 1982; Morgan,

1984; Prosser, 1993; Uljens, 1993; Uljens, 1996; Svennson, 1997; Kubinowski, 2010). I believe that the claim is essentially false. Therefore, the article claims that the statement on similarities of the two approaches and the claim that phenomenography has phenomenological roots are based on a misinterpretation of the method created by Ference Marton (1981). The article focuses on selected aspects of the phenomenographic approach, which, in my opinion, directly or indirectly support my thesis. Thus, I avoid arguing with opponents of the said understanding of phenomenography. While developing the article, I resigned from introducing and describing theoretical and practical solutions pertaining to phenomenographic research, since the purpose of my paper is different and the literature had already described them extensively and in greater detail.

Antirealistic grounds of phenomenographic research

The answer to the question about the phenomenological foundations of phenomenographic research is not unequivocal, since even Ference Marton based his approach on a phenomenological model of searching for the essence of things. He has not placed the essence of things, if we can discuss such beings in the context of phenomenographic research, in any metaphysical explanatory model. This can be well illustrated by two interrogative statements¹ by Marton (1981) included in his paper on *Phenomenography – describing conceptions of the world around us*. It seems that the juxtaposition of such examples *per se* suggests an antirealistic attitude present in phenomenographic research.

The first statement includes a question about the objective status of things:

Why do some children succeed better than others in school?

The sentence refers to the “reality” assuming an overt or a tacit supposition that there is something extra-linguistic that we can refer to in the language we use, we can ask about, and we can (at least potentially) explain. The question denotes firm metaphysical assumptions that can be brought down to two statements as follows:

- a. transcendent and epistemically autonomous reality (R) exists as regards any mental acts (including cognitive acts),
- b. the reality, referred to in a), is cognitively accessible (at least in its part or aspect).

¹ Sentences which apply to a certain social phenomenon but do not „grasp” the idea in its possible phenomenological understanding.

Both (a) and (b) can be considered as “classical” postulates of epistemological realism (ER). However, there are sufficiently enough arguments to support the ER statement, nor arguments justifying the metaphysical realism. Both positions are a part of the purely philosophical discourse and are debatable on such grounds only – while considering analytical arguments put forward by critics of the epistemological realism (cf. antirealistic positions by Michael Dummett, Hilary Putnam and Nelson Goodman). Although the ER seems to be well justified, its popularity is usually based on a common sense believe that accessible reality exists (I do not claim that the position of the epistemological realism does not have reliable philosophical grounds, whereas its popularity is based on a naive approach to reality. Undoubtedly, the ER is thoroughly discussed by the analytical philosophy. Nevertheless, the position in its simplified and somewhat naive form seems to be commonly accepted, e.g. in nature and social articles, due to its common sense (non-scientific) dimension and exceptionally “suggestive” character. The ER can be, of course, treated as a scientifically useful postulate (from certain point of view), especially when treated as a normative category). However, it is not knowledge, but a kind of a conviction deeply rooted in our awareness. We should remember that apart from our strong epistemic intuition about the existence and accessibility of the world, epistemological realism has solid “cultural grounds” originating in an antic tradition, chiefly the philosophical thought of Aristotle, which to a large extent shaped our contemporary attitude to science as a means to “discover” (rather than to create) our reality. In this particular way we may explain the “natural” resistance against any antirealistic trends.

The second sentence proposed in Marton's article (1981) reveals a discourse nature of phenomenographic research. The question:

What do people think about why some children succeed better than others in school?

is a clear explication of the essence of the phenomenographic approach. It fully exposes the contextual nature of our thinking within accessible cognitive models. We can conclude that it denotes a constructivist shift. The sentence does no longer refer to a somewhat obscure category of *reality*, understood as an autonomous being itself, but it implicates the “shift” of a cognitive accent to the level of a singular experience. It is less important what a person thinks about a specific part of reality than what can be described as a collective perception of specific phenomena.

While trying to define the object of phenomenographic research, Marton uses such terms as “people's thinking”, “conception”, “experience”, “interpre-

tation”, “understanding”, “apprehension”, “perception”, “conceptualization” (Marton 1981, p. 178). Certainly, the goal was not to order and classify thinking about the object of phenomenography (it seems that he introduced terminological chaos). Nevertheless, we may risk a statement that the purpose of the “mental phenomena” list was not to provide a precise definition of a single object of research, but to bring us closer to the proper understanding of a not completely tangible object of phenomenographic research.

Phenomenographic studies have “distributed” ways of understanding of physical or social phenomena (essentially it is to a certain degree communicable; however, it may take various mental forms. It can be inexplicable and vague image or something perceived by the subject as vivid and clear, something recognizable, something he can clearly describe verbally using precise terms). Nevertheless, phenomenography does not always deal with the description of a person participating in research, who become a medium helping to grasp various ways of conceptualization of a given phenomenon. Consequently, this has an impact on the attitude towards a phenomenon, situation etc. Tejendra Pherali (2011) rightly defines the goal of phenomenography by saying that

Phenomenography “is a research methodology that aims to actually investigate the conceptions people have in relation to a particular phenomenon that give rise to their behaviours” (Pherali, 2011, p. 7).

Summarising this part, we may say that statements (i) and (ii) suggest the existence of two (independent) spheres, which can be rightly explicated by two possible perspectives: *the first-order perspective and the second-order perspective*. Marton emphasises that the adoption of such a bipolar approach has nothing to do with any metaphysical distinction (Cf. Marton 1981, p. 178). He separates himself from “recognizing” in phenomenography a position (although “merely” presupposed) in the dispute over metaphysics. Thus, he neither studies nor questions such theses in any of their forms. As emphasised by the author of *Phenomenography – describing conceptions of the world around us*, in essence the distinction to the first-order perspective and the second-order perspective is simple and pragmatic. However, it is possible to ask a question whether Ference Marton is consequent when he declares a total and complete separation from any metaphysical consideration, which in fact means that for Marton his research conception is also free from such issues.

Two perspectives

It should be emphasised that the second-order perspective is not a derivative of the first-order perspective. Moreover, it seems that such a perspective enables to assume a specific position towards the object of research. It means that once we adopt the second-order perspective, we turn specific experience epistemically present in various conceptualizations into the object of phenomenographic research, as described above. Thus, a researcher attempts to determine how an individual understands the world, with the use of available reality description strategies. Marton and Booth have emphasised that the understanding of how people solve problems or handle specific situations depends on understanding how they encounter those problems, situations etc. Our reactions and capability to act in specific conditions result from our perception of the reality around us. The phenomenographic perspective has been aptly described by Marton and Booth who said “[...]a capability for acting in a certain way reflects a capability experiencing something in a certain way” (Marton, Booth, 1997, p. 111). The attempt to understand why we act in a certain way needs to be preceded by a question about our way of thinking. In a sense, the latter is a kind of a “subjective reality” which can be considered a direct result of phenomenographic research (Osteraker, 2002). While trying to justify the adoption of the second-order perspective, Marton (1981) points to specific properties of human thinking which can only be grasped when we examine a single mode of experiencing.

We may conclude that in a subtle manner both (first- and second-order) perspectives set a demarcation line between what we ordinarily think exists independently from our perception and what is relative to our cognitive capacity and a manner of mental representation - in particular conceptual representation (this exposes the boundary between common sense thinking and epistemological antirealism referred to and accepted by phenomenographers). The adoption of the second-order perspective opens a space for discussion on the source of our understanding and, at the same time, conceptualization of certain phenomena. In this context, once we reject the epistemological realism, we should ask what and to what extent shapes our perception of reality? Is it only the broad cultural context or also biologically (evolutionally) determined factors shaping our perception of the world? Contrary to previous declarations, those issues actually provoke Marton to enter the area of metaphysical considerations (Marton, 1981, pp. 179–180).

The typical for phenomenography distinction into what is real and what is apparent is a clear interpretation issue. Marton refers directly to works dis-

cussing the issue of social development of reality. Following Schatzmann and Strauss (1966), he emphasises that the manner in which an individual perceives his reality depends on his cultural environment in which he was brought up (Marton, 1981, p. 179). He also quotes a very constructivist statement by Buck-Morss:

[...] a structural identity between mind and society and that the logical structure of abstract formalism, far from being universal, is itself a product of history, i.e. the form of cognition is itself a social content” (Buck-Morss, 1975, p. 37).

Thus, we can assume that the founder of phenomenography accepts the thesis according to which the language we use (in particular the ideas we use while conceptualizing) determines what and how we experience things. In this particular instance, it seems that it is language which “precedes” experience. Nevertheless, Marton does not aim at classifying, comparing, explaining, predicting or valuing modes of reality conceptualization (Marton, 1981, p. 180). The only goal is to find and classify forms of thought in terms of how people living in a given society (using specific language) interpret various aspects of reality (socially significant aspects). Therefore, Marton seems to accept the position of the cultural relativism and perhaps even the conceptual relativism (variety of which is ontological relativism, close to thinking mode of antirealism and constructivism). Nevertheless, regardless the mode of understanding of phenomenography by Marton, it seems that the adoption by a researcher of the second-order perspective as such is a declaration on the deviation from realism, perhaps towards constructivist thought.

Why phenomenology cannot be a basis for phenomenography

Undoubtedly, phenomenography somewhat resembles phenomenology when it refers to phenomena related to human consciousness. However, it seems that it is not possible that the two approaches could be associated with one another, especially that phenomenology cannot be treated as a philosophical basis for phenomenographic research. I assume that for better understanding of the relationship, instead of links and similarities, we need to look for differences which may cast some light on the possible treatment of both conceptions as related. Consequently, in this paragraph, I primarily list and comment on differences between phenomenology and phenomenography, as indicated by Marton in his work on *Phenomenography – describing conceptions of the world around us*,

and then I consider selected aspects of Edmund Husserl's epistemology, including a particular instance of the understanding of the "life-world". Marton (1981) refers to four reasons for which phenomenography should not be considered identical to phenomenology:

- a. from the phenomenological point of view, the distinction between the first-order and the second-order perspectives is not possible (Marton, 1981, p. 180).

The first question we should ask regarding phenomenographic research is: what is accessible to us as researchers? Answer: mental content of people examined, expressed by their description, a description which attempts to render the said content linguistically. It should be emphasised that the researcher himself does not have a direct access to mental representations of his interlocutors, since he merely interprets the description using a specific and, at the same time, limited notions.

- b. The notion of *essence* is central to phenomenology (Marton, 1981, pp. 180–181).

Essence refers us to a certain transcendental meaning, which is epistemically accessible (at least potentially) and constitutes a certain "common aspect of reality". Phenomenography concentrates "only" on single aspects of reality (assigning meaning of construct to it), which has the following consequences (it is possible to refer to pre-suppositions by researcher):

- conceptualizations may vary (we may rightly assume that possible number of conceptualizations is finite, since it depends on cultural and linguistic² context);
 - there is no single "proper" way of reality conceptualization (it is methodological rather than metaphysical postulate).
- c. Phenomenology is oriented on the *substance*, whereas phenomenography on the creation of a research tool (Marton, 1981, p. 181).

We use phenomenological research to examine a phenomenon *as it is*. While implementing phenomenographic research, we try to establish how people conceptualize certain social phenomena. There is no doubt that it is me who recognizes and understands a certain aspect of the cultural and social reality (e.g. education in its social aspect). Nevertheless, the understanding takes place

² Provided we do not share the opinion expressed by Ferdinand de Saussure for whom: "the true and unique object of linguistics is language studies in and for itself". See: F. de Saussure (1961). *Kurs językoznawstwa ogólnego* (Course in General Linguistics), transl. by K. Kasprzyk. Warszawa: PWN, p. 236.

through and thanks to assigning a meaning to a *phenomenon*, or by conceptualization of a certain part of the reality (thus constructing it). Sometimes, a researcher referring to experience, actually does it to its “linguistic image”. We may agree with Whorf that

His thinking itself is in a language – in English, Sanskrit, in Chinese. Every language is a vast pattern, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories [...], by which the personality builds the house of his consciousness (Whorf, 1981, pp. 339–340).

Therefore, the ability to symbolize is used primarily to organize a single experience and, from such a point of view, any metaphysical assumptions and statements regarding *essence*, *substance*, as well as *epoché* lose their significance and become completely incomprehensible.

d. phenomenological research covers pre-reflective level of consciousness (Marton, 1981, p. 180).

The goal of the research is to grasp the world experienced in isolation from our culturally instilled and “linguistically” shaped images of reality. Things are different when we are convinced that we are unable to grasp precisely the “essential state of things” or talk about it. Phenomenography “focuses” on studying the world represented with the entire baggage of individualized and cultural suppositions (*de facto* they enable thinking and making assessments of the world). Thus, he does not seem to show interest in discussions on existence or non-existence of something so incomprehensible as “pre-reflective consciousness”.

Although Marton was inspired by phenomenological thought, he intentionally did not subscribe to the epistemological conception by Edmund Husserl. While analysing the relationship between phenomenography and phenomenology, Michael Uljens (1996) rightly stated that the two approaches to research are “genetically” linked. Researchers dealing with the said relationship underline that links between phenomenography and phenomenology are not completely clear (Uljens, 1996; Hasselgren, 1989).

The analysis of the “life-world”, which is central for phenomenology and has been also present in the phenomenographic approach, can be helpful in solving the issue. However, it gives the term a different meaning. Due to empirical studies the individually experienced world or the everyday world has become the point of departure. The notion of the “life-world”, as emphasised by Uljens (1996), was introduced by Husserl for the purpose and in reference to

his epistemology, which highlighted it as a specific phenomenological category. For Husserl, “life-world” is a basis of human life in the world (Husserl, 1954). Something that, at the first glance, may sound as a return to a naive colloquial category of everyday life in no way applies to Husserl’s works. According to Krystyna Świącicka, “until the end of his life, Husserl remained faithful to the ideal of «philosophy as an exact science». In his program, he defined a thesis and has never questioned the value of science” (Świącicka, 2005, p. 160). In fact, science is not capable of grasping itself without taking into account non-theoretical sources. The “life-world” has become an object of philosophical consideration, and thus gained a different status from the object of phenomenographic studies for which data that linguistically interpret (conceptualize) the experience of the subject, which is within the interest of researchers, are the point of reference and the only research material. The relativist and cultural context, in which the phenomenographic research is in a sense “naturally anchored”, stands in opposition to Edmund Husserl’s anti-relativism and at the same time his absolutism. In *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl (1970) wrote:

[...] the life-world does have, in all its relative features, *general structure*. This general structure, to which everything that exists relatively is bound, is not itself relative. We can attend to it in its generality and, with sufficient care, fix it once and for all in a way equally accessible to all (Husserl, 1970, p. 139, quote after T. Zelic, 2008, p. 416).

Moreover, according to Husserl, knowledge based on intuition and essence clearly precedes empirical knowledge (Moustakas, 2011, p. 39), which in the context of phenomenography seems to be not fully comprehensible.

Considerations about the world of our existence have become purely epistemological in their nature, and frequently automatically generate mechanisms of philosophical rendering of “pragmatically”³ explicable issues. Thus, we reach a postulate of assumption-free *epoché*, which involves suspending of judgements and eliminating pre-assumptions⁴, with the goal of grasping the subject or phenomenon examined with maximum directness. The main idea is to “...allow “things to speak” and refrain from taking anything for granted (Świącicka, 2005, p. 153). According to Świącicka:

³ I.e. functioning in a pragmatic paradigm.

⁴ Which by definition seems impossible.

For the structure of ideals to be possible, the world of our experience must have a certain constant structure. Otherwise, the basic geometrical ideas would never be created. If the principle of the objective identity did not apply to our everyday experience, ideas of logic and mathematics could not be created (Świącicka, 2005, p. 155).

Husserl could phenomenologically arrive at an objective conclusion from an ordinary world solely by assuming a structural similarity of both the world and the science, i.e. basic notions of ideal sciences (Świącicka, 2005, p. 155). Thus, the idea of a theoretically not engaged description contains at least three major elements: (1) objectivist attitude, i.e. attitude concentrating solely on the object of research; (2) liberation (through exclusion, bracketing, reduction or *epoché*) from any knowledge from existing scientific and philosophical theories; (3) excluding of convictions originating from inherited traditions (Judycki, 1993, p. 26).

Husserl proposes to look at the *object* as an equivalent of multitude of experience; however, the object itself should be capable of grasping “directly and palpably”. Palpability has nothing to do with sensual cognition. It is *eidetic* intuition that we use to encapsulate general ideas. In other words, it is conscious encountering in which we grasp an object directly, without intermediary role of signs etc. Grasping of an *idea – form* requires us to grasp an individual object which exemplifies something general – *eidōs* (Galewicz, 2002, pp. 24–30).

Once collated with assumptions and conclusions proposed by phenomenography, it has slightly different priorities and consequently different epistemology. It does not look for *eidōs*, and it does not try to find the “ultimate justification for scientific knowledge” (Cf. Galewicz, 2002, p. 33), it cannot “enter” into the state of suspended judgements and reaching for hardly comprehensible non-contextual cognitive perspective (historical, social, cultural, psychological etc.). The highlighting of the goal of transcendental phenomenology makes the difference between phenomenology and phenomenography too big to call the former the basis for the latter or to point to their mutual connections.

Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology and Ferenc Marton’s phenomenography seem to be far apart. The Husserl’s metaphysical idea cannot provide a “philosophical foundation” for empirically and pragmatically oriented phenomenographic research. Husserl decisively objected to the psychological reductionism while pointing to its negative consequences – relativism and scepticism. In his

opinion, they were internally contradictory and at the same time conflicting with the conviction of the world of individual objects, as a basis for our general opinions (Cf. Husserl, 2000). Therefore, phenomenology does not resonate with goals and tasks of a phenomenographer who, by using linguistic and thus conventional and culturally relative tools, attempts to “reconstruct” the subjective understanding of a part of perceived reality.

It seems that we can consider the theoretical convergence of the phenomenographic and phenomenological approach in somewhat different categories. We may reasonably argue that transcendental phenomenology has no monopoly on the research of phenomena. Therefore, one can look for research orientations inspired by the pragmatism⁵. Alfred Schütz in his main article *On Multiple Realities* refers to William James

In a famous chapter of his *Principles of Psychology* William James (1890) analyzes our sense of reality. Reality, so he states, means simply relation to our emotional and active life. The origin of all reality is subjective, whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real. To call a thing real means that this thing stands in a certain relation to ourselves. “The word ‘real’ is, in short, a fringe.” Our primitive impulse is to affirm immediately the reality of all that is conceived, as long as it remains uncontradicted. But there are several, probably an infinite number of various orders of realities, each with its own special and separate style of existence (Schütz, 1945, p. 533).

According to this kind of phenomenology “world of daily life shall mean the intersubjective world which existed long before our birth, experienced and interpreted by others, our predecessors, as an organized world” (Schütz, 1945, pp. 533–534). In other words, Schütz is interested in the nature of human intersubjectivity. “The world of everyday life is the scene and also the object of our actions and interactions” (Schütz, 1945, p. 534). For the Schütz intersubjectivity is “a datum of the life-world”, not a transcendental problem. This kind of approach seems to work better with phenomenography than Edmund Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. Generally, we may say that “non-dualist ontology” of Marton phenomenographic approach was a reaction against representational epistemology. In consequence real world should be understood in the

⁵ They include e.g. Blumer’s symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986), Schütze’s phenomenological sociology, Berger and Luckmann’s sociology of knowledge (1966).

category representational world. As Merleau-Ponty's wrote: "we must not [...] wonder whether we really perceive the world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). It seems, therefore, that phenomenography can be grounded in a phenomenological approach, nevertheless different from that of Husserl's. However, the discussion of this issue goes beyond the issues discussed in this article.

From the point of view of a better understanding of object of phenomenographic research, the category of *habitus* may turn out to be useful. In the paper by Pierre Bourdieu, the category was designed to overcome the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism. As Loïc Wacquant wrote in his *A concise genealogy and anatomy of habitus*:

In his hands [Bourdieu, *note by JM*], habitus is a *mediating construct* that helps us revoke the common-sense duality between the individual and the social by capturing 'the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality', that is, the ways in which the sociosymbolic structures of society become deposited inside persons in the form of lasting *dispositions*, or trained capacities and patterned propensities to think, feel and act in determinate ways, which in turn guide them in their creative responses to the constraints and solicitations of their extant milieu (Wacquant, 2016, p. 65).

Therefore, it is not possible to separate individual from social. To a certain degree, the two worlds merge and are embodied in the Marton's category of *collective intellect*. It would not be, however, possible without our ability to collaborate which, in a sense, is supported by a complex ability to symbolize and communicate (Tomasello, 2018). Perhaps we should not look for the category of *collective intellect* in the idealized "Husserl's world" but in our specifically human capabilities. As Jerome Bruner rightly puts it „[...] not only do we make representation of the world in our minds (full of meanings) but we react with a supernatural sensitivity to its representation in minds of other people" (Bruner, 2010, p. 227).

Thus, phenomenography represents a descriptive approach, and every experience examined is described using content-related terminology (language) (Uljens, 1996). It is worth emphasising that in his article of 1981 Marton does not solve the "metaphysical problem" (Marton, 1981; Uljens, 1996). He merely states that whether reality exists or not is not a problem, and all we can reasonably say about it is that it is *the world of our experience*. Later discussions on phenomenography emphasise the relational nature of reality.

This means, in short, that reality is considered to exist through the way in which a person conceives of it. A phenomenographic conception is the way man is related, or rather conceives himself to be related, to the world. Thus, the world is thought to give itself to us through our experience of it (Uljens, 1996).

In this sense, the world seems to be “infinite in its significance”. There are various ways of understanding or experiencing of the world around us, regardless whether the understanding is based on scientific grounds or common sense. More importantly, we cannot reasonably talk about reality beyond experience, just as we can hardly compare our own perception of reality with the “reality” itself. Phenomenographer’s scientific interests concentrate less on the *world as such* but on individual conceptions expressed in a language and in a sense deeply immersed in the cultural and social context. We may risk a statement that conceptualization is not reduced to one or another use of symbols, but it is a highly complex process of creating reality, which the researcher attempts to grasp using tools available. Such an understanding of the concept of phenomenography makes it distant from phenomenology. At the same time, it makes it distant from phenomenology and brings it closer to the constructivist approach (or to variety of epistemological antirealism).

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