

The Phenomenology of Thinking

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Abstract:

Thinking is a central capacity of the human mind. It is at play on different levels in many of our activities. From the perspective of ordinary language use it even seems hard, if not impossible, not to think of anything at all while we are conscious. When it comes to science as a specific type of methodically guided thinking, it is employed to proceed from data and observation to theoretical models and systems. Likewise, it is by way of further thinking that we (re-)model axioms, hypotheses, experiments and instruments. Consistent with its importance in everyday life as well as science, it has become an object of study for many disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, anthropology, linguistics and logic.

Phenomenology, broadly construed as the systematic reflective investigation of the phenomena we encounter in consciousness and how we experience them, is bound to have its own characteristic perspective on thinking. The aforementioned sciences usually conceptualise thinking in isolation from it being a process constituted and sustained through the activity of the thinking subject. Nonetheless, their attempts prove to be resourceful and yield substantial results. Today we know that when we think, a manifold of processes and sub-processes occur in the 'organ of thinking', the brain. Cognitive psychological experiments are designed to test the kinds of information processing involved in thinking, and to model them as complex algorithms.

These and other empirical approaches are appropriate and very insightful in their own right. Yet, they abstract from thinking as a describable act or complex of acts, which is geared towards objects of thought in consciousness, a unique perspective that phenomenology is equipped to investigate. However, phenomenology, given its Husserlian origins with its strong focus on subjective constitution, may very well profit from insights disclosed by the empirical sciences, as well as from an exchange with analytic philosophy.

This dialogue seems particularly important in light of the recent upsurge of discussions in the philosophy of mind on the nature of thought. Central to this debate is the question whether thinking has its distinctive 'phenomenology', i.e. its describable quality of 'what-it-is-likeness' of the experience of thinking. Whereas most authors agree that there is an originary mode of phenomenal givenness of sensory and imagistic experiences, there is disagreement over what is – in contrast – called 'cognitive phenomenology'. Some authors claim that thinking is an experience with its own *sui generis* phenomenal properties, whereas others defy this notion.

Confronted with this discursive philosophical situation and the methodological as well as systematic problems arising from it, the conference aims at carving out a genuinely phenomenological take on 'The Phenomenology of Thinking' by relating these problems to insights from the Husserlian tradition. It aims to show that thinking as a mental process can be grasped using the phenomenological methods of description, variation, constitution analysis or the theory of experience and judgment.

Guiding Questions:

- What is it like to think?
- What is the act of thinking and what is its object or content?
- What types of thinking are there?
- How is thinking different from other mental processes, such as perception, remembering or imagining?
- Is all thinking conscious activity, and if not, which sub-personal mechanisms are involved?
- How does thinking relate to the body and pre-reflective self-awareness?
- How does thinking relate to concepts, language and reflective self-consciousness?
- What role does phenomenology play in the analysis of thinking?
- Does the phenomenological method imply a specific kind of thinking?