

Adriana J. Mickiewicz

Polyphony of Anxiety

The Interview with Stefano Micali about
His Book *Phenomenology of Anxiety*

Adriana J. Mickiewicz (A.J.M.): I would like to begin our conversation by asking about the methodology You used in your book to describe the category of anxiety. Several writers have offered radically different interpretations of phenomenology throughout the history of philosophy. How do you apply phenomenology to the description of affects and anxiety in particular?

Stefano Micali (S.M.): Before answering the question about the phenomenology of anxiety, it is important for me to clarify the relation between philosophy and phenomenology. Let us start from the nature of philosophy. It is clearly impossible to define philosophy straightforwardly. However, one can retrace specific trends in contemporary thought: one striking aspect is the acute interest in marginal phenomena and anomalies. I will try to explain this aspect in more detail. After Kant, in philosophy, what becomes very dominant is the tendency to draw cartographies of a transcendental or quasi transcendental kind, by introducing differentiations of ontological, epistemological, ethical, aesthetic, and religious dimensions, at the same time, establishing, in each case, the limits of their “legitimacy.” For reasons of principles, these cartographies leave some phenomena outside because they these phenomena are considered

meaningless or illusory. Yet, we should not forget that what is considered insignificant might also conceal what is foreign to the current dominant framework, what is radically other to it. This otherness can be the future source of a novel experience that will open up a new order. According to Adorno, if philosophy does not remain open to that which is radically other (and which might manifest itself in marginal phenomena today), it would be reduced to an activity of violent normalization, of conceptual policing: it would slavishly enforce a certain order. Philosophy, on the contrary, must always be aware that experience has, in itself, an excess that can never be brought to expression. Philosophy attempts “to immerse itself in things that are heterogeneous to it, without placing those things in prefabricated categories.”¹ In my view, Husserlian phenomenology offers the most sophisticated *instrumentarium* to do justice to this open-ended character of experience. It is precisely in this sense that I have interpreted the principle of all principles of phenomenology elaborated by Husserl in *Ideas I*: “No conceivable theory can make us err with respect to the principle of all principles: that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of knowledge, that everything originarily (so to speak in its personal actuality) offered to us in intuition is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, also within the limits in which it is presented.”² The paradoxical aspect of this principle of all principles is its anarchic character: every new insight (“Anschauung”), every new experience in a strong sense must be taken as foundational to an order of meaning irreducible to anything else. Husserlian phenomenology thus revolutionized the criteria and principles governing the legitimacy of “logos.” Heterogeneous

¹ Th. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton, Routledge, London 1973, p. 13 (*Negative Dialektik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1966).

² E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1982, pp. 52–53, trans. modifie (Hua III/1, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag 1976).

experiences, such as the religious experience of a mystic or the phenomenon of derealization within the depressive condition, are to be considered legitimate sources of knowledge that are not to be traced back to something other than themselves: they are to be studied in their distinctive ways of appearing. At the same time, one must carefully demarcate the limits within which these different phenomena manifest themselves. Phenomenology thus means mapping out a cartography of a transcendental kind that always remains unstable because it is open to the arising of new experiences which in their turn will inaugurate new orders.

It is important to clarify that I employ phenomenology in a post-Husserlian way. It is well-known that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology has been very controversial from the very beginning: it has received criticism from different perspectives – just think of Heidegger and Scheler. And still, Husserlian methodology must remain the obligatory point of reference for renewing phenomenology. Exemplary in the past have been Patocka's proposal of an a-subjective phenomenology or Marc Richir's more recent transcendental refoundation of phenomenology. Phenomenology as a philosophical method presupposes a critical confrontation with the three constitutive procedures of Husserlian phenomenology: 1) transcendental *epochè*, which suspends our original belief in the existence of the world independent of us; 2) eidetic reduction aimed at identifying the invariant moments of phenomena; and 3) systematic analysis of the correlation between noesis and noema, between objects and intentional acts. The notion of intentionality remains the departure point also for those paradigms that want to go beyond the Husserlian framework. In *Autrement qu'être*, Levinas defines subjectivity as such through the notion of traumatism. Traumatism is characterized by a radical diachrony, namely by the impossibility of establishing a "synchronous" correlation between the acts of consciousness and the object of consciousness. If one is traumatized, she is so overwhelmed that she becomes unable

to see anything: there is no intentional object. Still, in this case, I believe that intentional consciousness plays a major role as a reference point. A critical discussion both with Husserl's philosophy and also with a post-Husserlian phenomenology understood in a very broad sense (including authors such as Derrida or Blumenberg) is, in my view, necessary in order to describe the complexity of affective life.

A.J.M.: In Your book, You combine phenomenology with a polyphonic approach, referring to very diverse ways of describing anxiety. You analyse different philosophical approaches (mentioning Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and Blumenberg, among others), as well as literary works, paintings, and psychological research. Against this rich background, the complexity of the phenomenon of anxiety becomes evident. However, one may question whether phenomenology, which traditionally aims to grasp the essence of a phenomenon through methods such as *epoché* or eidetic reduction, is a good fit for polyphony. Therefore, I would like to ask how the phenomenological approach can benefit from embracing a polyphonic perspective.

S.M.: How is it possible to do justice to anxiety from a phenomenological perspective? One immediately faces different difficulties. The first theoretical challenge is the following one: traditionally, anxiety is defined as being open to the nothing: it does not have an intentional object. If phenomenological investigation should start from the notion of intentionality, how is it possible to address anxiety from a phenomenological perspective?

A second problem is related to the ordinary language. We may use very different expressions to define a "comparable" affect such as fear, anxiety, worry, apprehension, preoccupation, anguish, angst etc. Does each of these terms refer to a heterogeneous phenomenon or, rather, indicate the same experience? If we translate these words into a foreign language, which shifts do

then take place? It is important to find a balance between two opposing tendencies in relation to the linguistic expression and conceptualization of the affects: a pure constructivist approach and a kind of naturalistic account. I think both of these approaches are not viable since they are one-sided. In my view, it is problematic to establish a perfect continuity of an affect such as shame or fear in transcultural terms, as if fear would be exactly the same in all different life-worlds, as if these emotions, moods, feelings etc. would not be “affected” by specific metaphysical or theological presuppositions, by economic systems in different social and cultural contexts. The choice of a term to express an emotion is very significant because it draws our attention to a distinctive feature of the experience: a specific aspect will be in the foreground. As is well known, the word “anguish” emphasizes the moment of actual suffering. If we intend to draw attention to the psychopathological aspects, it is “natural” to use the word “anxiety.” I tend to agree with Borges’ conviction that, *stricto sensu*, the notion of “synonymous” is a fictional concept: each word has a specific resonance, and is linked with distinctive associations in a way that makes it impossible to find a perfect equivalent in the same or foreign language. Therefore, learning a language also means acquiring the possibility of expressing new colors of our affective life. A term both expresses and makes a specific affective experience possible. In other words, affects, to some (relevant) extent, are shaped by the different life-worlds. At the same time, the idea that there is a clear-cut set of affections, as if they were separate and incommensurable entities to each other, is to be rejected. If this were the case, an affect would in principle be completely inaccessible outside a given linguistic community. In reality, the encounter with what is radically other can awaken the right resonance in our life-world: there is always a certain interweaving between me and the other, between the foreign culture and mine. Despite the cultural differences among different experiences of anxiety, one can sense that there is “something” in common – an overlap that should not be overlooked and yet

one that is not directly objectifiable. To refer to this (essentially elusive) “something” one could use Merleau-Ponty’s category of “wild being.”

The third challenge is connected with the wide range of theoretical frameworks concerning the conceptualization of anxiety. If one considers the existentialistic approach – authors such as Kierkegaard, then Heidegger and Sartre – then there is a clear tendency to operate with a clear-cut opposition between anxiety and fear. Fear refers to an imminent threat within the perceptual horizon, while anxiety occurs without any reason. It is defined as an affect or mood that does not have any object: anxiety means being open to the nothingness. Furthermore, anxiety is exclusively proper to the human experience: no animal may *stricto sensu* feel anxiety. However, there is also a different approach: authors such as Kurt Goldstein and Hans Blumenberg reverse the relation between fear and anxiety. Here, anxiety is considered as a commonly shared experience between humans and the other animals. According to this approach, social interactions and symbolic activities have the power to transform anxiety into fear. Not anxiety, but fear is what is distinctive of human experience: only human beings are able to condense the free-floating affect of anxiety into a concrete fear. This is just one illustration of how various perspectives on anxiety can differ from each other.

If one closely considers the above-mentioned difficulties concerning the non-intentional character of anxiety, the ordinary language and the plurality of the theoretical frameworks, it becomes, in my view, easy to understand why a polyphonic approach to anxiety is needed. But what does polyphony exactly mean? Bakhtin uses the term polyphony to highlight a typical character of Dostoevsky’s style in which a plurality of separate and irreducible voices comes to the fore: the different perspectives do not lead to any overall synthesis either in the sense of a global view or of a dialectical movement in Hegelian terms. A polyphonic approach emphasizes the irreducibly pluralistic character of our experience through the juxtaposition

of heterogeneous perspectives. I am convinced that only by creating tension between radically different voices is it possible to do justice to ambiguous affective phenomena such as anxiety.

A.J.M.: The polyphonic approach employs not only language or different philosophical traditions but also different forms of expression, such as art or literature. What is the role of literature in Your study?

S.M.: Perhaps it is important to make a distinction between two different meanings of phenomenology. The first one would be phenomenology as a philosophical method in the post-Husserlian sense that we have already discussed. Yet, there is also a different meaning of phenomenology which might be understood as a precise, accurate description (of the structure) of our lived experiences. Husserl expresses this aspect in a wonderful way: “The beginning is the pure and so to speak still silent experience (*Erfahrung*) which first now must be brought to the expression of its proper sense.”³ The experience should be expressed in its proper sense: each new experience is looking for a novel expression. This is something very crucial for phenomenology. Exactly in this sense Merleau-Ponty states in his Foreword of the *Phenomenology of Perception* that Freud, Proust and Nietzsche might be considered as phenomenologists. Exactly in this sense, I think, some authors such as Kafka or Pessoa make major contributions to the understanding of our affective life from a phenomenological perspective.

A.J.M.: You start Your book by recounting an anecdote about a person who refused to pay rent for an apartment, claiming

³ E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. D. Cairns, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1960, p. 38 (Hua I, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, ed. S. Strasser, Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag 1950).

it was haunted by a ghost. You conclude this rather funny story with a very serious question, which is also, in fact, a political issue: When can fear be justified? I have the impression that ghosts are a recurring theme in Your book. What is the role of imagination or projection in the study of anxiety?

S.M.: First of all, I must say that I am convinced that the traditional dichotomy between fear and anxiety is misleading. As already said, according to the traditional dichotomy, the experience of anxiety is referred to nothing when the fear has an identifiable object within the horizon of perception. This perspective is present in many of the dominant phenomenological accounts: for example, in Heidegger's philosophy. What is very interesting to me is that this dichotomy, in different theoretical frameworks, does not take into consideration the role of imagination. For instance, in Heidegger's account of anxiety in *Sein und Zeit* and in *What is metaphysics?*, imagination is not even mentioned. In my opinion, this lack fundamentally compromises his analysis of anxiety because imagination is the true element of anxiety: anxiety moves itself in the dimension of imagination.

With regard to the relation between anxiety and nothingness, it is important to avoid two extremes: it is neither appropriate to say that in anxiety we do not perceive anything, that we are affected by "the bright night" of nothingness nor is it accurate to say that in anxiety we have an object before us. In anxiety, we tend to experience our ghosts within the horizon of the experience of the world: the borders between impression and projections, between anticipation and phantasy become very blurred. That's why, as already said, I introduced this category of quasi-intentional imaginative anticipation.

A.J.M.: In this respect, another key issue of Your book, as well as of Your previous research, is the question of temporality. How does anxiety alter the subject's experience of time?

S.M.: In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, time became a real obsession for philosophy: the investigation of time is the crucial question for William James' pragmatism, Bergson's philosophy and Husserlian phenomenology. Regardless of the different theoretical frameworks, the key idea is that it is not possible to comprehend the core of living beings or subjectivity without understanding the complex intrigue of time. Especially, I find that phenomenological research on time has been very productive. It suffices to recall March Richir's seminal research on the temporal structure of "phantasia" or Levinas' analysis of the intersubjective relation by means of the category of diachrony.

In my previous research, I investigated specific forms of temporalizations in different experiences, such as Christian prayer, depression or post-traumatic stress disturbances. In *Phenomenology of Anxiety*, I also aimed to analyse the complex structure of this affect from a temporal perspective. To capture this aspect, I use the term "quasi-intentional imaginative anticipation." Imaginative anticipation is one of the essential traits of anxiety: when we are anxious, we treat future possibilities and our imaginations as future reality. The differentiation between anticipation and imagination becomes very blurred. In more technical language, one could say that the doxic modality of the anticipation is attributed to phantastic possibilities. In order to illustrate this point, I referred to everyday situations, such as anxiety before an exam. Even in this simple case, it is possible to see a tension between two opposing tendencies: on the one hand, one is anxiously driven to be ready for the impending challenges. Freud speaks in this case of anxiety-preparedness. At this stage, it is also common to "project" negative scenarios in order to be better prepared. On the other hand, while taking this proleptical attitude, it is easy for one to inadvertently fall into the spiral of negative possibilities: these projections of negative scenarios do not help one to have better control of the situation, but, in fact, only destabilize the subject. These negative scenarios at first may

have a more or less clear intentional character. But when anxiety becomes more intense, these appearances become incoherent. These appearances are characterized by that specific temporalization that Husserl had described in relation to unclear phantasies: they are protean, disappearing abruptly and coming back intermittently in a very different fashion. Precisely to highlight the interrelation between imagination and anticipation and the combination of the intentional and non-intentional characters, I use the term quasi-intentional imaginative anticipation.

A.J.M.: Do you think that we today may experience anxiety in a different way than it was experienced before? Or, maybe, each era has experienced it in some different way?

S.M.: As already said, social relations contribute to the shaping of our affective life. In my book, I insisted on the ecological aspect of anxiety. Goldstein pointed out that anxiety means the inability to respond adequately to our surroundings. One cannot fully separate anxiety from the environment in which one lives. With regard to the present times, our society is certainly undergoing radical changes. I will only mention two of them: the virtualization of intersubjective bonds through social media and the imperative of optimization and acceleration: work performance must be improved in the shortest possible time. Clearly, living in such a volatile environment alters our affective life. Today, one major anxiety should be understood in terms of being left behind. Our society is extremely competitive and individualistic: everyone is expected to perform excellently in various fields. It does not surprise that all this pressure in terms of self-optimization may create a sense of indebtedness and inadequateness. Precisely in this sense I speak of anxiety of being left behind.

A.J.M.: Maybe one last question. We have spoken a lot about phenomenology as a method. What is the role of phenomenology now and what direction should it take?

S.M.: From my point of view, the future of phenomenology should move in several directions. More concretely, it is necessary to pursue a strategy that consists of at least three distinct trajectories. First of all, we need thorough reflections on the methodological aspects of our research. Phenomenology should address fundamental philosophical questions, such as the question about the transcendental, in a productive dialog with the philosophical tradition.

Secondly, it is important that we carry out phenomenology to describe productively our lived experiences today. Sometimes there is the risk for phenomenology (and also for other philosophical traditions) to become scholastic, if not epigonal. Phenomenology is not only the history of phenomenology. The productive dialog with phenomenological tradition should be functional to the methodologically thorough and accurate expression of our lived experience.

Thirdly it is essential to create a productive dialogue with other disciplines such as sociology, political sciences, anthropology, psychopathology, etc. It is impossible to separate the phenomenological analysis or our lived experience from the life-world in which our experiences are being shaped. That is why we need a productive dialogue with all different disciplines.

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