

Community and Media: a Weakness of Phenomenology?

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The development of global communication through the Internet leads to the rise of new communities of a special kind mostly centered in particular web sites. An outstanding example of such communities is found in the more or less tight research communities linked through the web and whose members are academics. It is possibly to suppose such communities have general goals as the quest for truth, the progress of mankind and the like, apart from their particular research goals. This kind of communities may be used to look back to the classic *phenomenological* question of the “community”. Surely, the main fact about the phenomenological theory of the community is the sharp distinction between an “authentic” and an “inauthentic” mode of community. Such a distinction has far-reaching consequences that are still insufficiently known. The goal of this paper is to shortly recall this phenomenological distinction and to confront it with the kind of web-communities the research ones are or, alternatively, to confront the classic phenomenological theory of the community with the fact of the web-communities, for it may be the classical theory shows a weakness to cope with such a fact.

1. The Fundamental Phenomenological Model

The phenomenological thought-model I am now interested about grounds on the Husserlian distinction between “sign” and “thing”, the last being the “phenomenon” proper. Signs stand for and this means they “are there” instead of things, but things “are there” in themselves. In fact this implies two sharply distinct modes or kinds of consciousness. One is aware of something (X) in itself or, on the contrary, of that thing (X) through the consciousness of a sign (Y) referring to it (X). The second mode of consciousness is “improper”, whereas the first one is “proper”. This basic distinction leads to Husserl’s well-known motto “to the things themselves”, or as Max Scheler puts it, to the phenomenological goal of “a continual de-symbolization of the world” (S10 384).¹ Instead to dwell by mere signs one should strive to the things themselves.

Of course, the idea is far more complicated than just formulated in the last sentence. According to phenomenology, all things are “relative to the consciousness”² or “in-existent”³, that is, they are what and how they are only in and for certain modes of consciousness. The primary mode of consciousness is just that, in which something is “given in itself” or as “itself” (cf. Id1 126). This mode of consciousness is perception in a broad sense, but whose basic or paradigmatic mode is vision. The seen “is there”, what is evident by simple comparison with remembering or with imagining. A content of consciousness is “given in itself”, that is, “being there”, only in vision, but not in remembering or in imagining, for in remembering or imagining the same content is not there. For the mere signified thing the situation is even worse, because in remembering or in imagining I have an “intuitive” content, that is, I know or I imagine how the thing is (looks), while for the mere signified I really neither know nor imagine how the thing is (looks) (cf. III 116). Mere signification means I mere speak of or hear about the thing but I have it not really seen, that is, I do not know the thing itself. Signification is, thus, the “void” mode of consciousness of something, whereas vision is the consciousness of the thing itself in the mode of “fullness” (Id1 126). In very vivid remembering or imagining something there is “fullness” to a great extent, but the thing “itself” is not there (cf. III 116). “Selfness” explains the phenomenological postulate of the superiority or primary character of visual consciousness compared with remembering or with imaginative consciousness; and both “selfness” and “fullness” explain the primary character of visual consciousness compared with the “signifying” one. In mere signifying consciousness of a thing, the thing itself is not there, nor one even imagine it; one is aware of it only through *something else*, which it is not itself, namely the *sign* that stands for it. The thing is, thus, given *improperly* or in an inauthentic mode, while the thing given in a visual consciousness is given *properly* or in an authentic mode (cf. II 44, 360).⁴

2. Development of the Basic Model

For brevity’s sake the fundamental distinction arising from the discussed basic model can be stated as the distinction between the “properness in the givenness” of something and the “improperness in the givenness” of it. But this model must be developed to reach the distinction concerning the way or mode of the *givenness of the community*.⁵ The next step is a remarkable idea several phenomenologists have developed or applied (Scheler, Heidegger, Stein, Walter). The main point is from now on not only the difference

between sign and thing in itself, but a very radicalization of the model of “selfness”. The presence or givenness of the “thing in itself” demands now to prevent not only signifying, but *any* form of *relational* consciousness. To formulate it simply, to be conscious of something (X) in relation to some other thing (Y) amounts to “improperness” in the consciousness of the thing (X): the thing in question (X) is, in such case, “improperly” given.

One must be aware of the really far-reaching consequences of the radicalized “improperness”-model. Traditionally Phenomenology had distinguished between *intuitive* and *discursive* (acts of) consciousness. Husserl, the founder of Phenomenology, termed the discursive acts as “thought-acts”, and they embrace any form of *discursus*, that is, of running from something (X) to *something else* (Y). For example, comparing something (X) with something else (Y) abstracting through comparing two things (X and Y), relating something (X) to one of its attributes (Y), taking together several things (X, Y, Z, ...) to build a collection, etc., are all of them discursive or thought-acts.⁶ And the key point is now that for the radicalized definition of “properness” absolutely *all* such acts, that is, thought-acts without any exception, are “improper” modes of the givenness of the thing in question (X). Such *theoretical* acts of comparing, abstracting, determining, adding, collecting, etc. are improper modes of consciousness of something, in them the conscious thing is “improperly” given.

An outstanding case of such “improperness” arising through a relation to something else, which is not the thing itself, is the *practical* one. For example, to wish, to aim at, to take, to grasp one thing (X) *in order to* attain something else (Y), implies an improper mode of the givenness of first thing (X). To put something theoretically or practically in relation to something else, implies an “improper givenness”.

3. The Mode of the Givenness of the Other

An elementary application of the radicalized model can be found just in Heidegger’s theory relating the givenness of the other in *Being and Time*. Heidegger is concerned with the modes of “being-with-one-another” (*Miteinandersein*), and according to him there is the “proper being-with-one-another” (SZ 298) or “original being-with-one-another” (SZ 174), and on the other hand there is the “daily” or “public being-with-one-another” (SZ 126, 239). The last is the mode of consciousness of the others in which they “(...) *are* that, what they do.” (SZ 126, i. a.)⁷ That means: they are *given* relating to that what they do. Or again: “In public being-with-one-another the

others encounter [that is, are given]⁸ (...) primary in looking at *what* is done and *what* is going to come out of it.” (SZ 388, i. a.) These are nothing but formulas for a *referential* consciousness of the other(s). To put it in more typical phenomenological terms, the other is “experienced” not in himself, but “looking at” something else that is not the other himself. That is nothing less than the *very structure* of a mode of “being-with-one-another”. So Heidegger asks: “(...) why should not ‘connectedness’ of Dasein be determined *from* what is done (...)” (SZ 388). The answer should be clear: because in the referential mode of experiencing the other is not given in properness, that is, in himself.

Until this point, something or an entity whatever kind, in this case the other, is related to something else, but the model covers also the relation to a mere sign or chain of signs. Heidegger says: “The other is first there from that, *what* one hears about him, from that, *what* one says about him (...)” (SZ 174). At any rate, the term “what” appearing in these formulas: “*what* they do”, “*what* is going to come out”, “*what* one hears”, “*what* one says”, indicates always that the other is given in relation to something else that he is not himself.

The cure against improperness is, to say it in this way, to switch from one mode of consciousness to a very special other, that means, to switch from the “improperness” to “properness of existence”. This is a very complicated development of the theory of the “givenness of something” we cannot discuss here, but the main point is, of course, to eliminate any kind of referentiality.⁹ And this elimination should already and above all begin in the mode of the “givenness of oneself”. For this reason Heidegger says: “When the call [of conscience] is understood (...) such understanding is more proper the more *no-relationally* Dasein hears its *own* Being-appealed-to, and the less it hears that, *what* one says or *what* is fitting (...)” (SZ 280). The point is just that there is no “what” to what Dasein could be referred or related to by the “call”: “*What* is it that has been essentially given us to understand in the call (...)? [] We have already answered this question (...) in our thesis that the call ‘*says*’ nothing, *what* could be talked about (...)” (SZ 280 c. a.). It must be noticed that the just mentioned “nothingness” is nothing but a Heideggerian paraphrase for the exclusion of any referentiality to something else than Dasein itself. So says Heidegger: “But how are we to determine *what is said* in the talk [of conscience] ...? *What* does the conscience call (...)? Taken strictly, *nothing*.” (SZ 273) It does not call to achieve any goal, defines no aim, orders no action in order to ...In other words, to come into the “properness of existence” demands to switch to a

self-referential mode of it. Only in such self-referentiality Dasein exists “proper”, and existing “properly” Dasein can avoid to refer the other to something else, it can experience the other in himself, and not related to *what* he does, not referred to *what* is said about him.

4. Community and Society

Such an anti-referentiality model is not only Heidegger’s. Some other important phenomenologists share its main traits. But instead of considering them, it may be more instructive to draw here the attention to the general thought-model, which is not strictly phenomenological but which has been translated into phenomenological terms. We are in fact concerned with the old German distinction between “community” and “society”. It may have been the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies who wrote a book with the title *Community and Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft, 1887)*, but the basic conception goes back at least to philosophers such as Fichte and Hegel. The last one, for example, distinguishes between the state in the sense of “*organism of ethical community*” (H19 115, 120) and the state as “*society*” (H2 447) or “as aggregate” (H12 527, H10 341), according to “liberalism” (H12 535). Such distinctions are sketched in the German tradition by saying that in the “society” the individuals come together or are connected in seeking to achieve some goal (*Zweck*), which is not the permanence of the connection itself. The “society” as such has a goal outside it, constituting, thus, an “artificial” or “mechanical” connection, whereas the “community” has not end outside it, being, thus, not “mechanical” but “living”, not “artificial” but “natural”, even an entity like an “organisms” which has its end in itself.¹⁰

The point is now the idea of the “connection in order to aim something” (*Zweckgemeinschaft*). It is an organization of individual who pursue something – it may be a series of main and minor goals -, and for this reason it falls under the mentioned Heideggerian formulas. Each partaker of a *Zweckgemeinschaft* “encounters” the others and they “encounter” him in “looking at” what is aimed, seek, wished, proposed, pursued, etc. Thus, the others “(...) are that, what they do.” It should be noted that the character of the pursued goal does not matter: it may be an egoist or and altruist one, at any rate, the goal implies the givenness or experience of the other related to this goal.

5. *Community and Extreme Situation*

Heidegger's terms "daily" or "everydayness" used to refer to the "improper" mode of the givenness of oneself and, consequently, of the other(s) is not accidental. In fact, not only Heidegger but also Max Scheler, Edith Stein, Gerda Walter - to mention some of the most salient phenomenologists concerned with the mode of access to or the mode of givenness of the "community" – make the further sharp distinction between the *normal* and the *extreme* situation. The chief idea is very simple. The others are given or experienced in modus of *community* only in an extreme situation (Heidegger: "struggle"; Scheler, Stein, Walter: "war"), whereas in the normal situation (Heidegger: "everydayness"; Scheler, Stein, Walter: "peace") the others are given in modus of *society*. We can confirm this by means of some citations taken of works of the mentioned phenomenologists.

For instance, after the begin of World War I Scheler says: "A first insight, made possible by war, and which is directly linked to the form of war-experience in its fullness, is the *reality* of the nation (...). At peace, the nation is for its members more a *symbolic* concept than something *being there, intuitively* experienced (...). First at war this concept is filled with *intuition* (...). *Die reality* of the nation becomes *visible* (...). Each of us feels now it is much more *evident* the nation *is* than he himself is (...)" (S4 81). Notice the opposition "symbolic" or "signified" (improper) – "intuitive", "visible" (proper). Of course, the term "reality" means a correlate of "vision" or "intuition": in vision the seen itself *is*, it is *real*, or it *is there*.

Edith Stein makes the following distinction between everydayness or peace, and "history" on the other hand: "We encounter communities as *realities* (...): families, peoples, religious communities, etc.; but in everyday life we *see* them only occasionally; we are mainly oriented to individual persons (...) but we do not *see* the community (...). Yet, there are occasions in which we are thrown off from such orientation to the individual, and the communities come out from their '*concealing*' and mightily force our *gaze* to *see* them, for example, when peoples clash each other as enemies (...)" (J5 175n.) Notice again the opposition "seen" (proper) – "concealed" (improper).

In a similar way Gerda Walter says: "How often happens that in usual relationship one lives with other unconscious of the *connectedness* to him (...) until some day, suddenly, the connectedness as such becomes clear (...). So it is the war what

makes a people conscious of itself.” (J6 96) In fact: “The *connectedness* (...) as such and its meaning are that what here (...) can be *grasped*.” (J6 97) To grasp the connectedness means of course that the connectedness is properly given, people’s consciousness of itself means that the people as such is given for each of its members.

Finally, it is a very well known passage of Being and Time that in which Heidegger links “sharing and struggle” to “community, people” and “destiny” (SZ 384).

6. Conclusion

Here we cannot discuss the mentioned phenomenological theories in detail, but the quotations show the concrete form achieved by the phenomenological distinction between “sign” and “thing in itself” when applied to the problem of the “community”, that is, when the “thing”, to which the phenomenological lemma “to the things in themselves” is applied, is the “community”. *At first* the sharp distinction between “sign” and “thing” is developed to the distinction between “properness” and “improperness in the givenness of something”. This distinction is, *second*, further developed to the definition of “improperness” as *referentiality*: anything experienced in relation to something else, which is not itself, is improperly given. Complementary, “properness” becomes self-referentiality as the modus of experiencing something: the thing, whatever it may be, for example, the community, must be experienced in “selfness”, that is, “in itself”. This formal thought-model can then, *third*, easily be applied to the traditional German distinction between “community” and “society”, for the first one, like an *organism*, has nothing else outside or different to it, which defines or constitutes its coherence, whereas the “society” is defined in reference to something else, which is not the society itself, for example, justice, peace, equity, freedom, truth, progress, etc. Finally, *fourth*, the mode to go “to the thing itself” when the thing in question is the community, is no other than existing or living in the extreme situation of “war” or “struggle” or, *at least*, to be ready to it. And one must be aware of the very especial kind of “struggle” here involved: either it has no goal or the concrete goal does not matter, it is a very especial “struggle”, namely struggle for struggle’s sake, which is the “event” in which the people as such becomes “present” or “visible”, that is, “given”.¹¹

The society is above all the modus of experiencing the other(s), in which they are related to something else, and thus - according to the thought-model we are concerned with - improperly given. Only when the others are experienced “in themselves” there is “community” there. Of course, the question normally arises at this point is, how or when are the others experienced “in themselves”. And the answer refers

to the utmost remarkable trait of the discussed phenomenological theory of the community. Only in the very especial extreme situation or limit experience of war, clash or *struggle for the struggle's sake* against other community become the others – some others, not mankind - properly given, that is, not experienced as members of a society, of which connectedness rests on some “what”. In the extreme situation the others are experienced as members of a collective, to which I and they belong (or do *not* belong) *without some reason*, a collective to which each one is not free to belong but, on the contrary, a collective that is *our* (or *their*) destiny – and obviously not every ones destiny, and, thus, an excluding collective.

Clearly, the web-communities of academics, not to say the most of others web-communities, are not defined in the foundationless way the destiny-communities are. Moreover, international academic communities every kind fall out of the limits of any destiny-community, and are, for this reason, societies but not communities proper, according to the phenomenological theory discussed above. The question is thus, if there is an alternative phenomenological theory of the community not rooted in the radicalized definition of “properness” (“authenticity”)? In any case, the epoch of the global communication and the *media rooted communities* seems to point out the inadequacy of the traditional phenomenological theory of the community to face the problems of the modern world.

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- SZ = Heidegger, M., **Sein und Zeit** (1927)¹⁶, Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1986.

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¹ See the bibliography and abbreviations list at the end of the paper.

² See: “The whole special and temporal world (...) is, according to its immanent sense, mere intentional Being, that is, such a Being that has the mere secondary, relative sense of a Being for a consciousness.” (Id1 93)

³ Husserl speaks of “mental” or “immanent objects”, that are in consciousness, so he speaks of “mental inexistence”, too (II 370, 372).

⁴ For Husserl’s exhaustive discussion of this problem see the third chapter of the sixth *Logische Untersuchung*, especially the distinction between “proper and improper illustration”.

⁵ See: “In affirming the existence of some kind of objects, one is obliged to indicate which is the kind of experience in which such an object is given.” (S2 509)

⁶ About this distinction see above all the second part of Husserl’s *Experience and Judgement*.

⁷ Cursive from the author of the cited text are always indicated through the abbreviation c. a.; otherwise cursive are from mine.

⁸ Brackets inside a quotation are always from mine.

⁹ For a detailed account of the general theory on the ground of which Heidegger rejects referentiality or determines it as the improper modus of access to the “entity in itself”, I refer to my book *Interpretación y verdad. Acerca de la ontología general de Heidegger*, especially part I, chapter 2, and part II, chapter IV.

¹⁰ It is worthwhile to notice that the German tradition we are concerned with is still alive. Already in the introductory words to the phenomenologist Heinrich Rombach’s book *Phenomenology of Social Life (Phänomenologie des sozialen Lebens)*, 1994) the old distinction between the “living community” and “inhumane concept of society” is repeated. Furthermore, Gadamer, whose links to phenomenology are well known, defends “tradition” and this means, among other things, to oppose “myth” and “organic images” against “the mechanism of society” (*Mythos und Vernunft*, in: G8 165).

¹¹ In his writings Heidegger repeats this idea many times. For example: “It is not any war, but the Π—κελο| which *first* lets divinities and humans (...) to appear (...)” (SF 44), or: “The here named

π—κελο| (...) is not any war in human way.” (EM 47) The “human way” to be at war is to make war in order to reach something. Such warfare belongs in fact to “everydayness” or “improperness”. And in this case, “(...) the difference between war and freedom becomes annulled, and thus, the difference between ‘national’ and ‘international’ becomes annulled, too.” (VA 92) In such warfare people as such remains so “invisible” as in peace; both are modes of modes of “everydayness”.