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Uexküllian phenomenology

Abstract: Uexküllian phenomenology is derived from the Umwelt theory of the Baltic-German biologist Jakob von Uexküll. Its basic premise is that we can assume the universal existence, in the realm of life, of a genuine first person perspective, i.e., of experienced worlds. This assumption characterises Uexküllian phenomenology and makes it a genuine perspective within phenomenology. In this article I prepare the ground for such a phenomenology by treating the notion of phenomenology, the relation between semiotics and phenomenology, Husserl's notion of Lebenswelt, and finally the notion of Uexküllian phenomenology. The purpose is to make the case that Uexküllian phenomenology is justified, and to situate it within phenomenological and semiotic thought at large.

Keywords: biosemiotics; Jakob von Uexküll; Lebenswelt; Umwelt theory; semiotic phenomenology

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1 Introduction

This article assumes that Jakob von Uexküll's notion of "Umwelt" is, as Deely (2013: 10) states, a "phenomenological concept". As Deely (p.11) claims, the term Umwelt, "as later taken up, adopted, and developed by Jakob von Uexküll had a great deal to do with both phenomenology and semiotics, and indeed defines a cross-road where the two developments unmistakably intersect".[1] Since the Umwelt can be conceived of as a phenomenological concept, we can rightfully develop an Uexküllian phenomenology, i.e. a phenomenology derived from the Umwelt theory of Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944). Particularly important for this purpose are his main works – namely *Umwelt und Innenwelt*

1 Cassin (2014: 1223), which summarizes some of the term's historical usage beginning in 1800, describes 'Umwelt' as "[p]opularized by ecology in the sense of 'environment'". In German, Umwelt actually *means* "environment", which was the case in Uexküll's lifetime too. Through Uexküll's work, the term has to some extent been adopted in English usage.

der Tiere (1921, 2nd ed.), *Theoretische Biologie* (1928, 2nd ed.), *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen: Ein Bilderbuch unsichtbarer Welten* (first published 1934) and *Bedeutungslehre* (first published 1940; for both the latter cases see Uexküll 1956 [1934/1940], translated to English as Uexküll 2010).

"Umwelt theory" can be rephrased loosely as "theory of the environment", but to understand the term "Umwelt", one must learn how Uexküll's idea of the "environment" differs from mainstream conceptions of the environment. In Uexküll's perspective, the physical environment – our material surroundings – is relevant to biology only in so far as an organism relates to it, by perceiving it and acting upon – i.e. responding to – it. But, alas – except for human beings (for which the totality of the environment equals "world"), organisms don't ever relate to "the environment" as such. Each organism, each species, and so on, relates only to those aspects of their physical environment that make sense to them, and have a function for them. This is why we can say that each kind of living being has its own characteristic Umwelt, or phenomenal world. In Uexküll's thinking, this is true of humans, too – so our human Umwelt has to be understood as one Umwelt, one phenomenal world, among many others. Through their interrelations, the manifold Umwelten of the living constitute what we call "nature". The "subjective biology" that Uexküll called for – an approach to the study of living organisms, systems, and processes that treats living beings as proper subjects, each with their own semiotic capacities – is today advanced by biosemiotics, the semiotic study of the subject matter of biology.

2 On the notion of phenomenology

The fields of phenomenology and semiotics are equally diverse, and thus equally hard to present in any comprehensive way. While most scholars today recognize Edmund Husserl as phenomenology's founding figure – some too rigidly so; devaluing any phenomenological strain of thought that is not sufficiently "Husserlian" (according to one interpretation of Husserl or another) – some, especially French phenomenologists, have counted even Kant and Hegel as phenomenologists. What is more, phenomenology has in several notable cases been taken to overlap with existentialism, especially in the French tradition. While modern phenomenology began in Germany and spread through France, it is by now no doubt an international movement of thought. But how can it be defined, and delimited?

Heidegger's opaque case, and his personal relationship with Husserl, is one odd chapter in this story. What, then, about simply following Husserl's definition of phenomenology? Alas, he did not offer *one* definition of phenomenology. His conception of phenomenology was in constant development, and there are immense differences among his various notions of phenomenology. Though he made a number of attempts, Husserl never succeeded in developing phenomenology as a *philosophical system*. His writings are diverse and in his own words incomplete. Even studying his vast *Nachlass* would not get us all that far, since at any rate there is no "final version" of his approach to phenomenology.

What counts as phenomenology? As with the term 'Umwelt' in the case of Uexküll, the term 'phenomenology' (or 'Phänomenologie') existed long before Husserl adopted and redefined it. Kant might have been the first scholar to apply the term 'phenomenology' in a scientific, non-philosophical context. This first mention appeared in his 1786 publication *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft*, where phenomenology denotes one of the four branches of the science of matter (physics), more specifically the branch that deals with apparent motion, or motion as a modality. Thus it was confined to a problem of physics. According to Spiegelberg (1982: 11), the first philosophical usage of the term 'phenomenology' appeared in 1764 in Johann Heinrich Lambert's *Neues Organon oder Gedanken über die Erforschung und Bezeichnung des Wahren und der Unterscheidung von Irrtum und Schein* (see Lambert, 1990 [1764]). Here, phenomenology denoted the theory of the varieties of illusions. Lambert likely inspired Kant to adopt the term, albeit in redefined versions – first, as we have seen, in the context of physics, and soon with a redefined denotation in the context of philosophical metaphysics. The term 'phenomenology' does not in fact appear in Kant's *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (cf. Kant, 1996 [1787]), but in 1772 he wrote a letter to Marcus Herz in which he stated that the first theoretical part of his forthcoming work on the limits of sensibility and reason would consist of two parts, the first on general phenomenology ("die Phänomenologie überhaupt") and the second on the nature and method of metaphysics (*ibid.*). At this stage, Kant in part equated his critique of pure reason with 'phenomenology'. As Spiegelberg notes, however, "such a critique of human knowledge has by itself little if any affinity" with post-Husserlian phenomenology.

It was Hegel (1977) who first elevated something called "phenomenology" to the rank of a full philosophical discipline with lasting influence). Husserl did not refer much to Hegel, and his status as a precursor, if not initiator, of phenomenology is debated at best. Altogether there are at least a dozen of instances of fairly independent philosophical uses of the term 'phenomenology',

not counting the various definitions applied by phenomenologists in a narrower sense (Spiegelberg, 1982: 11–18). Peirce was the first American philosopher to develop a notion of phenomenology. Not much will be said about his approach here, but a few words are required at this point to make some facts evident. First, we note that Peirce throughout his thinking life applied a number of different terms, using the term 'phenomenology' in the main only in the period 1902–1904.[2] As Spiegelberg (1982: 17; 1956) details, his struggle with Hegel's thought is the most likely reason for why he eventually abandoned the term (in an overlapping interpretation, Peirce abandoned the term 'phenomenology' partly in accordance with his ethics of terminology, so as not to saturate an existing term defined by others with totally new meaning). At any rate Peirce's conception of what is here called phenomenology overlaps in part with that of Husserl, but is simultaneously different enough to warrant a characterisation as a genuine theory (or idea) of phenomenology, on a par with Uexküllian phenomenology as *another* genuine theory of phenomenology.

To bring this subsection to a close, and in anticipation of the next section, "Semiotics and phenomenology", we note that there are thus far three major examples of systematic semiotic phenomenology: 1) several of Merleau-Ponty's key texts present explicit corrections of Husserl's work, and some of them refer to von Uexküll, 2) Alfred Schütz, in his *Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967) and his essay "Symbol, Reality and Society" (1972) develops a specific theory of semiotics which goes beyond Husserl, and 3) Karl Bühler, in *Sprachtheorie* (translated to English in 2011 [1934]), corrects Husserl's linguistics as presented in *Logical Investigations* (1970b) in terms of semiotics.[3]

The latter of these, Karl Bühler, explicitly acknowledged the existence of biosemiosis. In an interesting passage in Bühler 1936 (18f, cited in Eschbach, 2011 [1982]: lxx), he writes:

> On a purely empirical basis it can be shown that an organization, a systematic formation of Gestalt processes to the ends of life does not occur anywhere without significative

2 However, since Peirce at one point equated phenomenology with his "Doctrine of the Categories", some would hold that his entire work in semiotics is phenomenological at bottom.
3 I thank the editorial team of *Chinese Semiotic Studies* for pointing this out. On a separate note, in a peculiar fashion, there is an interesting development of phenomenology taking place in three steps, from Husserl's last, unfinished work (1954, cf. 1970a) via Merleau-Ponty's last, unfinished work (1968) to David Abram's contemporary work (1997, 2010), where the former unfinished work(s) plays a significant role for the later philosophers in this line of thought in phenomenology. This prospective, processual, or unfinished aspect of phenomenological thought is mirrored in Heidegger's (1962) and Sartre's (1958) promised but never delivered sequels to their main works.

> exchange. [... A] planned economy of material processes is not possible without significative exchange. In principle the same device as the one that can be inferred from the human organization of transportation [traffic lights etc.] is encountered everywhere.

Among the examples Bühler discusses are the societies of bees and termites. "If it is indeed the case that significative exchange plays such a decisive role in the life of man and the animals", Eschbach (2011: lxx) comments, "the kinds and levels of sign systems must be identified in order to be able to answer the question of the common ground and the differences in the use of signs in man and animal" (pp. lxx–lxxi).

3 Semiotics and phenomenology

We are located at the junction of nature and culture, and of semiotics and phenomenology. Can they be reconciled? More particularly, can subfields such as biosemiotics and eco-phenomenology be mutually enriching? The author of the current article believes that they can. The semiotic study of life and the living can emerge as properly informed only if it is capable of incorporating observations made in natural science, philosophy, and cultural studies alike. The semiotic study of nature entails an experiential turn in the study of life processes. Perception is – or should be – at the heart of the life sciences.

In certain manifestations at least, semiotics and phenomenology have a lot in common as overarching fields of foundational importance for more specialised disciplines. Carl Stumpf (1848–1936), for instance, conceived of phenomenology as the "first layer" of any science, and characterised it as a pre-science. Some semioticians – biosemioticians, at least – would make similar claims on behalf of semiotics. We could daringly suggest that the overall task of semiotics conceived in such a fashion is to examine the very possibility of meaning. Here, Uexküll's Umwelt theory contributes substantially with its depiction of the human Umwelt, which constitutes the actual perceptual horizon of any scientist or researcher. Semiotics can be applied further to analyse the scientific languages used in scientific descriptions. It can thus be argued that semiotics is (potentially) both a pre-science and a meta-science.

Given such unbounded ambition and scope a remark on systems building in philosophy with a critical view to dogmatism is in place: Namely, one should bear in mind that even though the laborious construction of philosophical systems can be of great value, it is not an enterprise that should be taken to be *definitive* in any meaningful sense of that word. For any follower of Husserl or Peirce, it is worthwhile to bear in mind that although both of these largely

systematic thinkers attempted throughout their lives to develop something akin to a perfect system, they never felt themselves that they managed to actually do so. A definitive version of either of their philosophies was never presented. Accordingly, any Husserlian or Peircean alleging to present anything akin to a perfect system should be met with a great deal of suspicion. If there was one thing both Husserl and Peirce promoted through their work and their work styles, it was a sort of *rigorous yet innovative analysis* that was never to be incarcerated by dogmas past, and only temporarily (and thus hypothetically) even by the dogmas of their own making.

Both semiotics and phenomenology are such diverse areas of study that to purport to represent most of their significant interconnections could only be justified in the setting of a separate book-long work. In addition to biosemiotics it is in recent times perhaps especially *cognitive semiotics* and *biohermeneutics* that have shown an interest in, and signalled affiliation with, phenomenology (though much the same could be said about the existential semiotics of Eero Tarasti and the semioethics of Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio). If nothing else these instances are proof of a substantial interest in phenomenology among biosemiotics' "closest relatives". In 1982, a special issue of *Semiotica* was devoted to semiotics and phenomenology.[4] Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) is among the notable names that have been involved in semiotics and phenomenology alike, which includes Husserl and Peirce. Contemporary voices of some resonance that relate to both fields include Frederik Stjernfelt (2007), Göran Sonesson (2007), Anton Markoš (2002), and Richard Lanigan (2007; cf. also 1972, 1977, 1984, 1988, 1992).[5]

Though there was little direct or indirect influence between Husserl and Uexküll, the notion of Umwelt and the notion of Lebenswelt are as we will see in section 4 "Husserl's notion of Lebenswelt" in part interrelated and partly overlapping notions. The term Lebenswelt only won acclaim after Merleau-Ponty introduced it in his writing based on his studies of the originally unpublished parts of *The Crisis*. The version of *The Crisis* that was published in

4 See Lanigan (Ed.), (1982).

5 Lanigan's 2007 paper has the subtitle "Towards a new science of *semiotic phenomenology*" (my emphasis). In Lanigan 2005, he treats the "semiotic phenomenology" of Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, and refers (p. 7) to "the foundational work in *semiotic phenomenology*" of Peirce and Cassirer. Lanigan's approach, however, generally differs from that of the current article in that his programmatic statements apply to the human realm only. Sonesson's 2007 paper has the subtitle "A study in *phenomenological semiotics*" (my emphasis). These two titles from 2007 are ample proof of the occurrence of other contemporary attempts at fusing the two fields to some extent.

Husserl's lifetime was published in 1936, two years after Uexküll's book *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen* and four years before *Bedeutungslehre* (see Uexküll, 1956 [1934/1940]; cf. Uexküll, 2010), Uexküll's last major work – but notably with the drafted sections about the Lebenswelt omitted. Two years later Husserl died, and ten years before the drafts on the Lebenswelt were published posthumously as part of an expanded version of *The Crisis* in 1954, Uexküll died. In the initially omitted parts of *Die Krisis*, Husserl argued that the crisis of European science was due to neglect of the Lebenswelt, from which it originates. The Lebenswelten, Husserl thought, were structured, and these structures were to be studied so as to reinvigorate the faltering scientific enterprise. In Husserl's view, the only way to restore the viability of science was "to realize that science was in fact nothing but a distillate, as it were, from the fuller life-world" (Spiegelberg, 1982: 146). These observations resonate well with Uexküll's views presented at the end of *Bedeutungslehre* and other places.

Perhaps the first two questions we should ask when discussing the relation between semiotics and phenomenology are these: Does phenomenology have to be Husserlian? And does semiotic phenomenology have to be Peircean? Though we find some common ground with Uexküllian phenomenology in both Husserl's and Peirce's respective phenomenologies, our general answer to these two questions is "no". The worldviews of Uexküll, Peirce, and Husserl, in short, were so different that it is more fruitful to portray their approaches as three genuine perspectives than to try to equate one of them with one of the others. A rejection of Husserlian phenomenology, then, is not by implication a rejection of Uexküllian phenomenology – nor is a rejection of Peircean phenomenology by implication any rejection of semiotic phenomenology in general.

Semiotics and phenomenology are both scholarly enterprises concerned with (the origin, emergence of) *meaning*. That does not make the two designations synonyms. However, inquiring into the semiotic aspects of phenomenology and the phenomenological aspects of semiotics, one fact that definitively deserves mention is that Husserl developed a semiotic theory of his own (see for instance Husserl, 1994). Semiotic theoretical development also occurs in *Logical Investigations* (Husserl, 1970b) and *Formale und Transzendentale Logik* (Husserl, 1974 [1929]). Spiegelberg (1982: 89) asks:

> How far can this picture [Husserl 1970b and 1974] be related to the teachings of recent semiotics, especially to the distinctions between syntactic and semantics? [...] Husserl himself developed [...] an a priori grammar for all possible languages [...] For semantics, understood as a study of the relationships between signs and designate, Husserl did not set aside any separate study; yet his later phenomenology of meanings includes the theoretical insights from which rules concerning legitimate and illegitimate meanings

> could be derived. Husserl was primarily concerned in pure logic as a study of the designate of our symbols, both as propositional meanings and as ontological objects meant through them, prior to studying their relationship to the stratum of linguistic expressions. Such study may then lead to the formulation of semiotic laws and rules.

In what remains of this section, I briefly treat the semiotic reception *qua rejection* of Husserl (by way of John Deely) and even more briefly the phenomenological reception of Uexküll (by way of Maurice Merleau-Ponty), and explain the idea of phenomena conceived of as a layer of semiosis in summary terms.

Unlike the semioticians mentioned previously, John Deely is a contemporary voice of considerable resonance who has quite explicitly dismissed the enterprise of phenomenology (lest it be pure Heideggereanism).[6] Deely is representative of the attitude that semiotics is more progressed than phenomenology, and that phenomenology is largely a dated enterprise. Deely (2007: 7, fn.9) asks:

> Why should there not be a postmodern rebirth for phenomenology, wherein the modern idealistic limitations of its founder and founding are overcome? I would agree that, even though Husserl himself opted for idealism, a phenomenologist can *opt* for realism. Phenomenology as a method is "on the fence" between realism and idealism. But by its method Phenomenology is not, and has no way of moving, *beyond* the modern impasse; it can only take sides *within* the modern context and as a matter of "individual preference", in contrast to methodological principle.[7]

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6 In Deely and Novak (1970) Deely refers (p. 330) to "the essential superiority of Heideggerean phenomenology over every other form". He further states (p. 331):

> that the Heideggerean conception of Phenomenology departs from the Husserlean conception precisely on the basis of the key aspects in which Heidegger's notion of "das Sein" differs from Husserl's – still more from Brentano's – conception of the "Intentionalität des Bewusstseins" [intentionality of consciousness] and agrees with, or rather returns to, the classical notion of "esse intentionale" as first formulated and subsequently developed in the Arabic and Latin traditions of Aristotelian commentaries culminating in 1637 with the Cursus Philosophicus of Jean Poinsot.

7 This corresponds to Deely's statement in Tønnessen and Deely (2011: 181-182):
Phenomenology as it came out of Husserl is an epistemology, and it is a very modern idealism. You could be a phenomenologist and not necessarily be an idealist, but as a matter of fact Husserl was an idealist. And as a matter of fact, within phenomenology you do not have the means to make a decision between realism and idealism. So the whole problem of idealism versus realism is a creation of modern philosophy, and it is the problem that semiotics moves beyond[.]

Deely's claims are in short 1) that Husserl was an idealist, 2) that phenomenology is epistemology, not ontology, and 3) that Husserl's phenomenology was Cartesian and thus typically modern. However, 1a) Husserl's later approach in *The Crisis* was arguably at odds with idealism and 1b) major phenomenologists including Merleau-Ponty were not idealists, 2) major phenomenologists including Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre did not conceive of phenomenology as an epistemological enterprise only, 3a) Husserl's later approach in *The Crisis* was arguably explicitly at odds with Cartesianism, and 3b) major phenomenologists including Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty were consistently anti-Cartesian. There is thus not sufficient reason, in my opinion, for being as dismissive of phenomenology as Deely is.[8] See also Jeffreys (2010).

Deely's overall framework is detailed in *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001), in which he divides the history of philosophy into four eras: 1) Ancient thought, 2) Latin thought, 3) Modern thought, and 4) Postmodern thought, which Deely takes to be synonymous with semiotic thought. His rejection of Husserl and in consequence phenomenology must be seen in light of his categorization of Husserl as a Modern thinker. The Moderns, in Deely's reading, starting with Descartes, took representations to be self-representations (i.e. ideas) only, and thus lost sight of representations as other-representations, which leads to a (triadic) conception of sign that transcends, and bridges, the different modes of being. It is therefore, in Deely's thought, only postmodern, i.e. semiotic, thinkers that can overcome the age-old contradiction between idealism and realism. In that grand narrative Deely frames Husserl as an idealist.

As for the phenomenological reception of Uexküll's work, Merleau-Ponty, for his part, related explicitly to Uexküll in his lectures in the late 1950s, as reflected in the posthumously compiled work *Nature*, which has only fairly recently been translated into English (Merleau-Ponty, 2003). Merleau-Ponty's treatment of Uexküll as described in *Nature* took place in the second in a series of three courses that he held a few years before his sudden death. It is worth noting that this second course began with Descartes, and can be seen as an attempt to deconstruct the Cartesian notion of nature and offer an alternative to it. It is in this context Uexküll's Umwelt theory is treated by Merleau-Ponty – as

8 As indicated in footnote 6, Deely's early work was more supportive of phenomenology, but then in an explicitly Heideggerean version. See also Deely (1971), which endeavours to make sense of "the meaning of being" in Heidegger's philosophy.

a potential substitute for what he regarded as a highly problematic conception of nature.[9]

What does it involve to conceive of phenomena as a layer of semiosis? It must imply conceiving of phenomena as semiotic, and further conceiving of some further semiosis as non-phenomenal, perhaps located "below" and "above" the layer of phenomena. More specifically, we conceive of this further, non-phenomenal (or non-perceptual) semiosis as being super-perceptual and sub-perceptual respectively (cf. Tønnessen & Tüür, 2014). There are thus in basic terms, in the grand scheme of things, three layers or levels of semiosis – and phenomena, the perceptual kind of semiosis, is situated as the central layer.

We can envisage at least four different possible fundamental relations between semiotics and phenomenology:

1) that these are two distinct fields,

2) that these are fields that overlap but furthermore cover their distinctive areas,

3) that semiotics encloses phenomenology altogether, and

4) that phenomenology encloses semiotics altogether.

In my own work I vouch for position 3.[10] This implies that of the two terms 'semiotics' and 'phenomenology', 'semiotics' is definitively the most general term. The main axiom of Uexküllian phenomenology as presented in the context of this section could be that *the phenomenon is a special case of semiosis*. Semiosis, in other words, is the general entity, or process, of which phenomena are part. The axiom just mentioned could be taken to imply that phenomenology can be regarded as a subdiscipline of semiotics.[11]

9 For a brief treatment of Merleau-Ponty's take on Uexküll, see Tønnessen (2009: 60); for a much more comprehensive treatment of both Merleau-Ponty's and Heidegger's relating to Uexküll, see Buchanan (2008).

10 Husserl, who held that the phenomenological threshold is lower than the semiotic, would likely argue for position 4, or alternatively position 2. John Deely's rejection of phenomenology to the effect that these are mutually excluding fields (i.e. competing perspectives) implies adopting position 1.

11 My assertion that semiotics may be conceived of as more comprehensive than phenomenology may strike many as absurd, given that Husserl, for one, held that phenomenology envelops all the phenomena of mind. The difference between Uexküllian and strictly Husserlian phenomenology on this point is that the former operates with a vastly wider notion of 'mind'. While a Husserlian phenomenologist may find Uexküllian phenomenology to be absurdly broad, speculative, or conceptually bewildered, an Uexküllian phenomenologist may find Husserlian phenomenology to be unduly narrow.

4 Husserl's notion of Lebenswelt

In Herbert Spiegelberg's monumental *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (1982, 768 pp.), Uexküll is mentioned only once (p. 146), in the context of Husserl's development of the notion of *Lebenswelt*:

> Now this world in the sense of an all-inclusive horizon was clearly not the world in the sense of objective science or cosmology. It was the world as experienced by a living subject in his particular perspective, however distorted, hence clearly a subjective and relative affair. The only form in which this concept had found entrance into science was that of a subjective environment (*Umwelt*) as introduced into animal psychology especially by Jakob von Uexküll.[12]

In preparation of this article's concluding section, on the notion of Uexküllian phenomenology, it is crucial to address the question concerning the possible association of Husserl's *Lebenswelt* and Uexküll's *Umwelt*. To what extent are they comparable, or even overlapping notions? "Consciously we always live in the life-world", Husserl (1970a: 379) wrote in what would become one of the appendices to *The Crisis* ("[The Life-World and the world of science]"); "normally there is no reason for making it explicitly thematic for ourselves universally *as* world. Conscious of the world as a horizon, we live for our particular ends, whether as momentary and changing ones or as an enduring goal that guides us".[13]

The term 'Lebenswelt' occurs occasionally in some earlier texts by Husserl (in his manuscripts as early as 1917, and in print first in 1924), but emerges only as a special and prioritised theme in *The Crisis* (1970a), Husserl's last and unfinished work (Spiegelberg, 1982: 162). The first times the notion was mentioned in print in Husserl's lifetime, it referred to items shared by several people in the same "life group".[14] In the posthumous version of *The Crisis* (1954; cf. 1970a), the Lebenswelt surfaces as a special theme in section h), in Husserl's

12 Note that Uexküll did not approve of the animal psychology (Tierpsychologie) of his time. More accurately, the notion of a subjective world was introduced by Uexküll in biology via the emerging field of ethology (the study of animal behaviour).

13 The Lebenswelt has by now twice been characterised by mention of the term *horizon*. "Of considerable importance", remarks Spiegelberg (1982: 117), "was [...] Husserl's new concept of the horizon of the perceptual field, inspired largely by William James' conception of the 'fringes' of our perceptual consciousness. It finally led to the development of the phenomenology of the life-world encompassing all horizons".

14 As such it resembles my notion of *common-Umwelt* to some extent; see Tønnessen (2003: 288–291).

discussion of Galileo's "mathematization of nature". The title of subsection h) is "The Life-World as forgotten foundation of meaning for natural science". This famed and influential subsection was, according to Spiegelberg (1982: 162), inserted into the manuscript only at the galley stage. "This fact and the absence of the concept from both the Vienna and the Prague lectures", he writes (*ibid.*), "suggests that it was not until 1936 that the idea became focal in Husserl's thought". Given that Husserl died in 1938 that would leave only two years at most for its proper development by Husserl.

But as a matter of fact, the sections on the Lebenswelt were *omitted* from the version of *The Crisis* that appeared while Husserl was still alive. As Spiegelberg (1982: 144) narrates, "[p]ractically nothing of the theme of the *Lebenswelt* or world of lived experience was known to outsiders during Husserl's lifetime. The only time that Husserl came close to releasing it was when he prepared the second instalment of the *Crisis* text [cf. Husserl, 1954, first published in 1936[15]] for publication in *Philosophia* during his last years".

In Carr's observation (1970: xli), the Lebenswelt presents Husserl's phenomenological program with two overarching difficulties.

> One questions one of the most important aspects of Husserl's over-all theory, and the other threatens to undermine its claim to scientific rigor. In the first case, if we take seriously the "pregivenness" of the life-world, upon which the author repeatedly insists, Husserl's earlier idealism seems to be in difficulty. [...] if it [the life-world] is in turn to be dealt with in terms of transcendental constitution, as Husserl also insists, then it seems to lose precisely what was described as one of its essential features, its pregivenness.

The first difficulty, then, concerns a conflict between pregivenness and transcendental constitution. Husserl's beloved notion of the 'transcendental', however, was fuzzy and in constant development. As to idealism, it is by no means essential for us to come to the rescue of Husserl's earlier understanding – in fact, being in conflict with idealism does not pose a problem to us at all. The second difficulty emerging from the introduction of the Lebenswelt theme in Carr's reading concerns a conflict between the Lebenswelt as pregiven in the sense just mentioned and how theory then comes to depend on the Lebenswelt as its only source. "But if every theoretical activity presupposes the structures of the life-world, this must also be true of phenomenology, which in this case cannot be without presuppositions" (*ibid.*). Again, this poses a problem for phenomenology as outlined by Husserl, but not for Uexküllian phenomenology,

15 Note that the 1954 version includes parts not included in the 1936 version, in the form of appendices. See also Husserl (1970a).

since Uexküllian phenomenology does not have to claim to be without presuppositions. Carr's observations imply that phenomenologists have to choose sides between the early Husserl and the late Husserl, but do not pose any related problem to an Uexküllian phenomenologist, lest she be of an idealist persuasion or hold that phenomenology is without presuppositions even with regard to the role of Umwelt for theory.

As Spiegelberg (1982: 144) notes, the some ninety pages of *The Crisis* that are, in its draft version, devoted to the subject of the Lebenswelt "do not contain more than first indications as to the directions" of Husserl's final, radical step in developing phenomenology. If we are nevertheless to discern to what extent the notions of Lebenswelt and Umwelt are comparable, or even overlapping, our first observation will have to be that there is a profound difference between Uexküll's theoretical starting point and that of Husserl. Namely, while Uexküll places any lifeworld in principle on equal terms, and emphasises differences, Husserl takes the human lifeworld to be the default lifeworld. Admittedly, Uexküll did in one sense also begin methodologically with the human lifeworld, and then proceed by identifying those of the human Umwelt objects that were also to be found in non-human Umwelten. But Uexküll's interest for significant, radical otherness results in a pluralistic worldview all the same, and he stresses that there is a difference between Umwelt methodology and the manifold reality of nature. Neither Husserl nor Heidegger, the second most influential phenomenologist, had any comparable detailed interest in the lifeworlds of other creatures.[16] While Uexküll's worldview is pluralistic, theirs is gradualistic in the sense that non-humans are simply more or less human-like. To them, Man and his world is the only measure for what counts as real and significant.

When Husserl says that "[c]onsciously *we* always live in the life-world" (1970a: 379, my emphasis), he refers to humans, to people. But that does not mean that he conceived of the Lebenswelt as a human enterprise only. As Carr states in a footnote to *The Crisis* (Husserl, 1970a: 6), 'surrounding world' is used throughout for 'Umwelt' in the English translation. The term 'Umwelt' appears already on one of the first pages, in a central passage (*ibid.*).

> In our vital need – so we are told – this science [contemporary European natural science] has nothing to say to us. It excludes in principle precisely the questions which man, given over in our unhappy times to the most portentous upheavals, finds the most burning:

16 Of course, neither Husserl nor Heidegger was a biologist. But in as much as they addressed matters of Man's exceptionality, they had an obligation, even as philosophers, to familiarise themselves with biological knowledge. Heidegger's notion of 'the animal' as "poor in world" (Heidegger, 1995) in principle is particularly telling of his sweeping conclusions.

> questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of this human existence. Do not these questions, universal and necessary for all men, demand universal reflections and answers based on rational insight? In the final analysis they concern man as a free, self-determining being in his behaviour toward the human and extrahuman surrounding world [Umwelt] and free in regard to his capacities for rationally shaping himself and his surrounding world [Umwelt]. What does science have to say about reason and unreason or about us men as subjects of this freedom?

Surely, the use of the term 'Umwelt' in a German text is occasionally tricky to interpret, given that it can refer either to 'environment' in its common, general sense or to the more specific Uexküllian notion of Umwelt. In some cases, however, Husserl refers explicitly to animal lifeworlds. In one of the appendices to *The Crisis*, for instance – "The attitude of natural science and the attitude of humanistic science: Naturalism, dualism, and psychophysical psychology", written before 1930, Husserl (1970a: 331) refers to a new attitude toward men and animals, "toward men and animals not as bodies to be investigated consistently and descriptively in the attitude oriented towards nature but as *men (or animals) who have their bodies as living bodies, who have their personal surrounding world* [*Umwelt*], oriented around their living bodies as the near-far world [...]" (my emphasis). In this case, there is no doubt that 'Umwelt' is applied in an Uexküllian sense. We find a similar statement, one that stresses Husserl's gradualistic stance with regard to the human species and how other lifeforms compare with it, in the main body of *The Crisis* (Husserl, 1970a: 238, my emphasis):

> As the correlative abstraction teaches us, man (and everything else that is real in animal form) is, after all, something real having two strata and is given as such in pure experience, purely in the life-world [Lebenswelt] [...] The individual psychology must, then, be the foundation for a sociology and likewise for a science of objectified spirit (of cultural things), which after all refers, in its own way, to the human being as person, i.e., to the life of the soul. *And all this can be applied by analogy – just as far as the analogy reaches – to animals, to animal society, to the surrounding world* [*Umwelt*] *with its specifically animal signification*.

To summarise, Husserl's conception of Lebenswelt implies that there are animal lifeworlds (Lebenswelten) as well, "as far as the analogy reaches". The human Lebenswelt is the measure of other lifeworlds, and their model insofar as methodology is concerned. While there are limits to the degree to which the Lebenswelt notion and the Umwelt notion are comparable, they evidently partly overlap. To the extent that this is the case, one should not forget that Uexküll's development of the Umwelt notion for the most part *preceded* Husserl's development of the Lebenswelt notion (in that sense, we could even claim that

there is a measure, albeit small, of Uexküllian phenomenology in Husserl's late phenomenology).

The point at which Uexküllian phenomenology and Husserl's late conception of phenomenology are the most similar concerns the lifeworld (as in the human Umwelt) as the forgotten foundation of meaning for natural science. As discussed in section 2 (On the notion of phenomenology), Husserl's ideas about phenomenology were so rich, so manifold, and so contradictory that it is not only hard to define 'phenomenology' consistently, but even to define what 'Husserlian thought' as such involves. This fact should embolden us to pursue our deepest intuitions regardless of dogma and tradition. Rethinking phenomenology is justified by the mere fact that Husserl himself never stopped rethinking phenomenology.

5 The notion of Uexküllian phenomenology

The reason why it makes sense to propagate a variant of phenomenology under the label 'Uexküllian', apart from the descriptive foundation in Umwelt theory, is that Uexküll's fundamental premises about the nature of life are desperately needed in our time – and in the life sciences of our time. While today's life sciences are for the most part reductionist – neglecting the reality of the individual, the primary stakeholder in nature – Uexküll's call for a subjective biology echoes Husserl's call for a return to the things themselves in the most meaningful way possible, by in effect implying a return to the study and perception of *nature qua individuals, nature qua living creatures*.

Perception is not as such a self-reflective activity, but rather a sustained attempt of grasping something that in part opposes the subject and in part constitutes its very being. There is a world out there – a world of differences, a world of creatures, almost all of them differently constituted than ourselves, but many of them nevertheless constitutionally related to us. In this world of existence-through-and-with-others, *consciousness* no doubt plays a part, but by no means delineates the horizon of our entire bodily awareness. In fact, consciousness is but a special case of *awareness* – a much more common phenomenon, appearing in countless forms ranging from the amoeba to the (ludicrous?) human genius. While consciousness might very well represent the most novel evolutionary innovation in which we partake, being conscious is, in general terms, *not* a prerequisite for navigating in the world of the living. For us

humans – us mindful creatures – the existential (and epistemological!)[17] challenge is first of all a matter of not getting trapped in our own minds. By neglecting the *foundation* of consciousness – its natural sources, its bodily underpinning, and its evolutionary roots – we risk being very poor examples of big-brained animals.

What I present under the label of 'Uexküllian phenomenology' is characterised by an assumption of the (in the realm of life) universal existence of a genuine first person perspective, i.e. of experienced worlds. Uexküllian phenomenology as I view it is an example of – a special case of – a *semiotics of being*, taken to be a study of signs designed so as to emphasise the reality of the phenomena of the living (see Tønnessen, 2010).

No doubt some semioticians will think that Uexküllian phenomenology is not sufficiently or properly semiotic, and some phenomenologists will think that Uexküllian phenomenology is not sufficiently or properly phenomenological. This would at least be a predictable fate for a daring philosopher-become-semiotician who easily risks being regarded as a philosopher only among semioticians and as a semiotician only among philosophers. It would also be an implication of the radicality (as in novelty) of Uexküllian phenomenology as it is presented here. Accepting Uexküllian phenomenology presupposes a willingness to think anew about what phenomenology is all about. It cannot on all points be in accordance with old definitions of phenomenology, for in itself it entails elements of a new definition of phenomenology.

In this section I consider how Uexküllian phenomenology differs from traditional phenomenology – which has for the most part been consciousness-centred – how it differs from notable phenomenologies by not adopting neutrality with regard to the reality status of phenomena, and how it resembles other phenomenologies in various aspects. As well, I point further to the theoretical possibility of other conceptions of Uexküllian phenomenology than that of the current article.

First, however, a disclaimer is called for. As I have argued (especially in Tønnessen, 2009), the Umwelt theory of Jakob von Uexküll needs to be updated with regard to its neglect of the historical dimension of life processes. At some other points, as well, his work is too marked by his time and his concrete influences – a case at hand is his relation to Kant (described in Brentari, 2015 as Uexküll's "Kantian problem"). If one examines the way Uexküll himself tried to generalise his biological findings and make them relevant for politics, the

17 And ethical!

picture becomes even gloomier (treated in Harrington, 1999; Tønnessen, 2003; and Beever & Tønnessen, 2013; see also von Uexküll, 1920). A general disclaimer is therefore in order: Uexküllian phenomenology as portrayed herein is loyal not to Uexküll's thought in detail but to his essential finding that nature is constituted by the intricate relations of all living creatures, which are all subjects of the phenomenal world at large. Uexküllian phenomenology should be rigorously undogmatic. This applies not only to Uexküll's work, but also to semiotics as a scholarly discipline.

The definition of phenomenology in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Smith, 2011) reads like this: "Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view". Such a notion of phenomenology is much too narrow to even begin to cover the substance of Uexküllian phenomenology. While this definition is largely in line with the conception of the phenomenal world of Kant, Hegel, and *the early* Husserl (not the late Husserl),[18] it is outdated if we consider contemporary ecophenomenology or indeed Uexküllian phenomenology.

While I interpret Umwelt theory as a genuine theory of phenomenology, and thus as qualified phenomenology, it must be acknowledged that this is a special take on phenomenology that will inevitably be regarded by some as in fundamental conflict with phenomenology as they conceive of it. A point at hand is the role of *subjective appearance*. For David Abram as well as for Charles Sanders Peirce and Edmund Husserl, phenomenology is, or should be, concerned with subjective appearances *as they appear*, regardless of their connection to any 'reality'. This stand is typical of Abram's phenomenological animism (see my critique in Tønnessen, 2011[19]), Peirce's phaneroscopy, and

18 To the extent that the former two addressed matters of phenomenology in a modern sense of that word.

19 In defence of Abram, we should consider what his animism aims at. This is a crucial point, since in his view revising this one point in his philosophy would likely tinker with his overall message. Abram's animism can fruitfully be contrasted with Cartesian dualism – as an attempt to deconstruct, or counteract this long-held metaphysical thought (Wendy Wheeler pointed this out to me). Instead of distinguishing between mind and matter, Abram seems to suggest (and in an all too narrow way, at that), we should take refuge in immediate experience as it is. This refuge is apparently a logical step, in terms of phenomenology. – Is Abram's animism in line with Husserl's phenomenology? On one hand, the two appears to agree that any belief in the existence of things underlying experience should be suspended. On the other hand, Abram might actually be said to be in violation of the principle of bracketing, given that he appears to draw ontological conclusions based on his animism. The later Husserl would likely criticise Abram for taking a naïve, natural attitude as his alpha and omega.

Husserl's phenomenology alike, and occurs as one of the core criteria for what counts as phenomenology in Spiegelberg (1956). My stand is instead that even though absolutely all (human) perceptions are worthy of analysis and comment, it is crucial to distinguish between those perceptions that correlate to corresponding realities and those that do not. In the latter case we often have to inquire into the *symbolic construction* that must be understood in order to explain how such perceptual inconsistencies can arise in the first place.

Where Husserl and Peirce – and arguably Abram, given his animism – stress the principal insignificance of whether or not phenomenal objects have real existence beyond their appearance, Uexküllian phenomenology has evolved from empirical science and presupposes the assumption that *wherever there are functional relations there are real, existing entities or processes*. Distinguishing between real and illusory objects thus becomes pertinent. In place of Husserl's phenomenological slogan "To the things themselves!" we can credibly place our own *To the Umwelt objects themselves*!

What other approaches in phenomenology is Uexküllian phenomenology in line with? As it turns out, it has aspects in common with several approaches, but differs from each of these in other respects. Like Heidegger's phenomenology, for instance, it at times resembles (philosophical) anthropology. Like Merleau-Ponty's and Sartre's phenomenologies it emphasises the role of the corporeal, and like Sartre's phenomenology it stresses (in my concrete version of it) phenomena related to *absence* and *meaninglessness*. All that said, Uexküllian phenomenology does differ fundamentally from much that goes under the name of phenomenology. Husserl for one did not envision any phenomenology of particulars (nor did Peirce). On this point, however, Uexküllian phenomenology has a number of allies in post-Husserlian phenomenology, but none of these have taken as its starting point that absolutely all living creatures are englobed in phenomenal worlds, and thus that we can

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At any rate, Abram's animism finds support in its alliance with oral cultures and typical animal experience alike. In order to *become animal* in the sense of Deleuze (see Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, and the title of Abram, 2010), we have to do as the animals do. From that perspective Abram's animism is simply a consequence of his empathic attitude to animals. I could further argue that a sort of alignment with physical nature, with seasonal variations, etc., constitutes a suitable ideal for a way out of the ecological crisis. From that perspective one could choose to see Abram's animism as an allied view, in that Abram favours exactly this kind of participatory relationship with both living creatures and physical nature in a wider sense. Our conclusion must be that Abram's animism serves a number of good intentions that are worth following up in their own right, but that it serves poorly as metaphysics or ontology.

legitimately speak about individual phenomenologies (in the sense of "the phenomenology of individual X") throughout the realm of the living.

Uexküllian phenomenology in my depiction is particularly affiliated with a line of phenomenological development that goes from the late Husserl via Merleau-Ponty to the contemporary phenomenologist David Abram. As Spiegelberg (1982: 538) narrates, "what Merleau-Ponty attempted was to go beyond Husserl by consciously extrapolating certain lines, mostly from unpublished texts, as far as he knew them, and by playing down others in the published writings". In a somewhat comparable vein, I build on yet go beyond the phenomenological works of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Abram. My natural affiliation with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is best expressed by way of his cherished thesis of the *primacy of perception* (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1962). If I have adopted this thesis without much critical reflection, it is testament to the fact that I do associate with his approach.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to make clear that Uexküllian phenomenology as it is conceived of in this article is not the only possible version of Uexküllian phenomenology. One could for instance have envisioned an ahistorical (to some extent even an atemporal) Uexküllian phenomenology – which might have been more in line with both Uexküll and Husserl, judging by the letters contained in their respective works. That road, however, is not the one taken here, since I regard the ahistoricity of the Umwelt theory as its weakest point, and regard *change*, in contemporary times, as a core topic. Such an Uexküllian phenomenology might have been "more Uexküllian" in a strictly biographical sense, but it would have been poorer qua phenomenological philosophy, and qua philosophical theory relevant for contemporary science. Had my concern been that of the historian of philosophy, that approach would certainly have been more appropriate than my current undertaking. But my primary concern is to contribute to an updated Uexküllian thought, and I can thus not offer allegiance to Uexküll in all details any more than I am prepared to offer allegiance to all that is associated with the term 'phenomenology'.

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20 According to Deely (personal correspondence), these were written fully by him.

21 Martin Heidegger's 1927 draft for Edmund Husserl toward a proposed joint article for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

22 See also Deely and Novak (1970).

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