

thinking

togetherness

ANDREJ BOŽIČ (*Ed.*)

**THINKING TOGETHERNESS**

**PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY**

Dr. **Andrej Božič** is research fellow at the Institute Nova Revija for the Humanities (Inštitut Nove revije, zavod za humanistiko; Ljubljana, Slovenia).

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Jan Strassheim

# “PASSIVE” AND “ACTIVE” MODES OF OPENNESS TO THE OTHER

## ALFRED SCHUTZ’S PHENOMENOLOGY OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

*Abstract:* In order to clarify the structure of intersubjectivity that underlies any social world, Alfred Schutz developed a “mundane” phenomenology based on a constructive criticism of Husserl’s transcendental approach, and with reference to Max Weber and Henri Bergson. The paper addresses Schutz’s understanding of the relation between ego and alter ego as the focal point of intersubjectivity. His analysis hinges on “types,” which mediate between “lived experience” in its fullness (*Erleben*) and selectively articulated experience (*Erfahrung*). I argue that Schutz’s analysis, unfinished during his lifetime, can help us identify a problem which also applies to more recent work, such as Dieter Lohmar’s. By itself, a tendency of experience to follow types only allows for “passive” ways of being open to another person. In order to grasp the relation between ego and alter ego that makes our everyday intersubjectivity possible, we need to assume an additional tendency, an “active” openness, which inherently motivates our experience to transcend types.

*Keywords:* Alfred Schutz, types, intersubjectivity, otherness, relevance.

A founding figure of what is variously called “social phenomenology” or “phenomenological sociology,” as well as the godfather of the original “social constructivism” (Endreß 2016), Alfred Schutz is a household name. But he is also a frequently misunderstood philosopher. Jürgen Habermas (1987), for instance, seminally portrayed Schutz’s work as a direct application of Husserl’s

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thoughts to the social world. The reality was more complicated.<sup>1</sup> Schutz drew on phenomenology and other sources (such as Henri Bergson) to develop his own independent account of sociality. His work shows, on the one hand, how phenomenology can help elucidate otherwise unclarified fundamental structures of the social world. On the other hand, it helps us identify problems that future phenomenological research into sociality will need to solve. In the following, I will focus on Schutz's contribution to our understanding of the relation between *ego* and *alter ego* as the pivotal moment of intersubjectivity. Schutz's approach, I will suggest (in section 1), hinges on the concept of "types," which he deploys in constructive criticism of Husserl. I will then argue (in section 2) that Schutz's analysis, unfinished during his lifetime, raises a problem, which also applies to more recent approaches (such as that of Dieter Lohmar) and which remains in need of further investigation: how should we understand the way, in which an ego's experience is truly *open* to the otherness of an alter ego?

### 1. Schutz's mundane phenomenology and the role of "types"

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Since his university studies in Vienna, Schutz pursued the goal of building a philosophical foundation for the social sciences, especially for the budding discipline of sociology as Max Weber had conceived it. During the 1920s, although he knew some of Husserl's works, he could not see their relevance to his research and instead relied on Henri Bergson's philosophy of life. Only in 1929, when reading Husserl's *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (Husserl 1969), did Schutz discover that Husserl, too, wanted to clarify intersubjectivity as the foundation of the social world. He immediately turned towards phenomenology, and published his findings in 1932 in a book entitled *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (Schutz 1967). He sent a copy to Husserl, who replied with a letter calling him "one of the very few who have penetrated into the deepest, and unfortunately so difficult to penetrate-into, sense of my life-work and whom I regard as its promising successor" (Husserl 1994, 483). He invited Schutz to Freiburg and offered him to become his research assistant.<sup>2</sup> What may have impressed Husserl was that Schutz's reading of

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1 On Schutz's relation to Husserl, see also Schutz 2011.

2 Schutz declined, as he had a position in Vienna and a family to support.

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phenomenology was informed by a constructive criticism already apparent in his 1932 book. This needs some explanation.

Schutz agreed with Husserl that an ego's experience of an alter ego plays a crucial role for intersubjectivity and with it for the constitution of our entire objective "world" valid "for everyone." The other person is "the *first affair that is other than my Ego's own*," and all "transcendencies [...] originate first of all as 'others,'" "in the form, someone 'else'" (Husserl 1969, § 96). Nevertheless, Schutz doubted that a *transcendental* ego would be able to experience another person as another person. After all, the transcendental ego's "sphere of ownness" had been construed by bracketing the "world of the 'non-Ego,'" including all egos other than itself. How can such an ego contain within it, as Husserl claimed, the "motivational foundation" for experiencing something that has been methodically excluded from its experience? Husserl himself called this an "enigma" (*ibid.*) and deferred its solution to later investigations. But the argument presented in more detail in *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl 1960) did not convince Schutz. Much later, "to get twenty years of reflection off my chest" (Schutz and Gurwitsch 1989, 262), he published an article (Schutz 1966b), in which he rejected Husserl's attempts at a transcendental approach to intersubjectivity published up to that point.<sup>3</sup> All of these attempts, according to Schutz, begged the question by tacitly presupposing an experience of alterity already present within the ego. When I experience *another* ego as such, I am already intending something that "transcends" my transcendental "sphere of ownness." And on pains of circularity, this experience cannot be explained by something that is built on this "first affair that is other than my Ego's own," i.e., by the intersubjectively shared world of physical objects, language, and culture.

Nonetheless, his doubts about the transcendental approach never led Schutz to abandon phenomenology. Instead, he chose to start out from one of the alternative "ways" that Husserl described in the 1930 "epilogue" to his *Ideas* (Husserl 1989, 405–430; Schutz 1967, 43 f.). What Husserl called a

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<sup>3</sup> This is an important qualification, as Schutz (1966b, 78) himself stresses. Schutz died in 1959 and never read Husserl's extensive manuscripts on intersubjectivity that Iso Kern edited in three *Husserliana* volumes in 1973. A "posthumous" dialogue between Schutz and Husserl on intersubjectivity might produce quite different results, but has to my knowledge not been systematically undertaken so far.

“constitutive phenomenology of the natural attitude” allowed Schutz to analyze the underpinnings of our everyday experience characterized by an attitude, in which we take for granted the existence of the world and the others around us. The focus of this alternative “way” is on the “mundane,” or worldly, “empirical” ego rather than its logical matrix, the “transcendental” ego.<sup>4</sup> This ego does not constitute other egos and the world around it by analogy to its experience of itself, or as “a ‘modification’ of myself” (Husserl 1960, 115), but is born into a world of others that preexist it. And, Schutz (2003, 115) stresses, “as long as human beings are born by mothers and not produced in retorts, experience of the *alter ego* will genetically-constitutionally precede experience of one’s own self.”<sup>5</sup>

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A central element of Schutz’s mundane phenomenology of intersubjectivity is the concept of “types.” Already in his Bergson years, he had analyzed experience (*Erfahrung*) in terms of “forms of life” that highlight only certain aspects within the streaming fullness of “lived experience” (*Erleben*) while neglecting all other aspects of it (Schutz 2006). In his 1932 book, he combined this interpretation of the Bergsonian *durée* with Husserl’s analysis of streaming consciousness. The selective articulation of experience is now described in terms of “types.” Within the analysis of intersubjectivity, the internal articulation of experience through “types” plays the same role as the earlier “forms of life.”<sup>6</sup> I can never access another person’s stream of lived experience in its fullness. To do this, I would impossibly need to *become* the other by forgetting myself, changing into their body, and living through their entire life

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4 As Schutz (1967, 44) himself stresses, his approach does not invalidate the insights of transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology deals with the formal structure of *any* conscious subject (including hypothetical aliens or gods), while Schutz’s mundane phenomenology deals with the special case of the empirical ego as a *human* subject. Unlike the “anthropologism” that Husserl perceived in Heidegger at the time and rejected as a non-phenomenological project, Schutz’s work was in the spirit of an anthropology that Husserl himself claimed was contained within phenomenology (see Strassheim 2021).

5 Cf. similar formulations in: Schutz 1962, 57, and Schutz 1966b, 82.

6 The concept that links both conceptions is “meaning” (*Sinn*), which Schutz understands as a “tension” between the fullness of lived experience and its selective articulation. Schutz’s aim since the 1920s had been to clarify the notion of “meaning” central to Max Weber’s interpretive (*verstehende*) sociology.

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as it has accrued up to the present moment. What I *can* do is to “understand” the other through the medium of “typifying” constructs. Types never offer more than an “approximation” to the other’s lived experience in its fullness. But, to the extent that both my own experience and the other’s experience are *themselves* internally articulated by selective typification, types constitute a formal bridge between us.

Schutz’s notion of “types” (or “typification”) was initially inspired in part by Max Weber’s concept of an “ideal type.” According to Weber, the analysis of social phenomena, such as institutions, interactions, or history, cannot be based on strict and universal “laws.” But neither can it be based on uniquely individual actions or biographies. An ideal-typical analysis happens in-between: it assumes a certain degree of generality both within each individual and across individuals, but it does not claim universal validity, and sometimes it even serves to highlight exceptions and counterexamples. What makes this more than a methodological device (which might be of interest to social scientists only) is the underlying idea that ideal types reflect “typical” views, motives, or expectations in the actual social world that allow individuals to coordinate with each other.

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In order to clarify the philosophical grounds for this idea, Schutz used Husserl’s own concept of “types.” From 1932 onwards, he read the manuscripts for what would become *Experience and Judgment* and discussed them with Husserl. Types, unlike strict rules, laws, or ideal essences, produce continuity in experience without shutting out discontinuity. That is, on the one hand, by highlighting recurrent or constant aspects within our experience, types help us recognize familiar objects or events and make us expect the same patterns to reappear in future experience as well. In this sense, they are crucial for our “faith in the continuity of our real experiences,” as Schutz (1966c, 100) puts it. But, on the other hand, this faith reaches at best what Husserl (1973, § 77) calls “presumptive certainty”: a certainty that is always “on notice” or, as Schutz likes to say, knowledge “taken for granted until further notice.” Types are enriched and modified over the course of our experience. There may be exceptions and disappointments. And sometimes, the type itself is proven wrong and must be replaced (Husserl’s example of this is the recognition that whales are fish but belong among the mammals). In other words, types are in principle open to discontinuity.

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Due to this combination of continuity and discontinuity, of closed patterns in experience and their open development and application, types (far more than Husserl's invariable "eidetic" structures; see Schutz 1966c) became central to Schutz's analysis of intersubjectivity.

(a) On the side of continuity, intersubjectively shared types enable us to engage in smooth or institutionalized interactions. We can have social relationships that rely on interlocking routines and standard expectations, and we can typify each other as carriers of typical roles and attitudes. This side of types also explains small and large tragedies that arise in everyday life. The "elusive other" (Barber 1988) escapes the net of our typifications, and especially in modern, "rationalized" societies unique individuality is often simply disregarded in favor of "anonymous," typified functions (Natanson 1986). Moreover, persistent difficulties and misunderstandings may occur between people who rely on different systems of types, for instance, between members of different cultures.

174 (b) But, on the other hand, types remain open to discontinuity and thereby to ever new situations and individuals. We can get to know the other person better, who, as we are aware, is always more than their typical role. We can learn to understand other cultures, as we know that not everybody relies on the same types. This side of types is often overlooked, but it is at work everywhere. Our everyday language, for instance, does not—not even ideally—follow strict "rules," as Habermas claims, but it involves linguistic types which leave indefinite leeway for local variations and creative uses. Indeed, if this were not so, language could not support human communication (Strassheim 2017). Schutz (1964) compares this dynamic aspect to the interaction between musicians who must adapt their performance to each other and to the occasion even when they are playing the same score.

In other words, the concept of "types" as flexible patterns within experience is highly useful for phenomenological analyses of both the individual and the social dimension. Within the Husserlian tradition, the type has more recently been rediscovered as a basic category that can be productively applied to daily practical routines as well as to more creative dimensions, such as dreams or phantasy (Lohmar 2008 and 2014). Nevertheless, the *openness* of types contains within it a problem that can only be solved at a deeper level of analysis.

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## 2. The problem of “active openness” to the other beyond types

What is it that allows me to gain access to the individual or cultural other, even when this other transcends the types that are at my disposal? A preliminary answer might be that, in order to do this, I must return to the “fullness” of my lived experience. Schutz had, in his Bergsonian period, argued that this fullness is not only infinitely richer than the small selections which make up my articulated, intentional experience, but that it transcends even basic differentiations between emotion and intellect, between my mind and my body, or between my “inner” life and the “outer” world.<sup>7</sup> It is tempting to think that lived experience also transcends any fixed differentiations between myself and the other. At any rate, it is related to an infinite potential of mutual perception and interaction among people who are in each other’s presence. Interactants, especially in mutual bodily presence, expose to one another a constantly growing “fullness of symptoms” (*Symptomfülle*) far beyond ready-made typifications, a fullness, in which their individual streams of experience can mirror each other and approximate a lived “we” (Schutz 1967, § 33 f.).

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However, this answer has only shifted the problem. If we can gain access to the individual other at the level of our lived experience (*Erleben*) in its fullness, then how and in what sense do we access this level? After all, as Schutz argues, all our experience (*Erfahrung*)<sup>8</sup> is constituted by way of a selective articulation that neglects most of this fullness. Undivided fullness cannot be experienced as such, because, phenomenologically, experience is intentional, directed and therefore selective. Furthermore, even if undivided fullness could be experienced, a series of implausible implications would arise. If my experience reached a level beyond all distinctions between me and you, in what sense would it still be *my* experience? Furthermore, if this shared level as such granted us access to each other, why would we still need to communicate

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<sup>7</sup> It is not clear to what extent Schutz influenced the younger Maurice Merleau-Ponty who knew Schutz and his work and was for some time a student of Schutz’s best friend Aron Gurwitsch.

<sup>8</sup> Using “experience” for both *Erleben* (lived experience, fullness, *durée*) and *Erfahren* (articulated, intentional experience) is misleading, but the German distinction has no precise English equivalent.

at all—let alone miscommunicate at times—, rather than simply read each other’s minds? If we want to avoid such implications, the real problem is to explain how I gain access to the potential fullness of lived experience *within the boundaries of* articulated, selective experience.<sup>9</sup> And to the extent that experience is articulated by *types*, the concept of typification needs revisiting.

How precisely does typification work? On Schutz’s reading of Husserl’s genetic phenomenology, past experiences “motivate” (Husserl 1982, § 47) later experiences within the history of an empirical ego. Past experiences “pre-delineate” (Husserl 1973, § 8) narrow paths of anticipation and help determine which aspects of the world will come to the fore in later experiences while many other aspects will simply be ignored. Within such a motivational history, types embody a general tendency of experience to converge upon continuous patterns and to follow such patterns once they have been established. This tendency is quite pervasive, especially if we assume that our complex life in any human society is based on typical patterns and that, as Schutz argues, most of our typical patterns are acquired from the society, into which we are  
176 born. Types structure our sensual perception and our emotions, our goals, and our actions, our use of language and nonverbal signs; they shape our views of ourselves and of others, and they carve out what we expect and what we remember. And where social and cultural institutions stabilize and reinforce shared types, the individual motivation to follow them will only deepen.

But, then, what could possibly motivate my experience to *deviate* from a typical pattern? On the face of it, we might answer that I am ready to stray from a type, whenever I experience something atypical. But, if types shape our experience at all levels by picking out typical aspects of the world and ignoring atypical aspects, the very occurrence of an *atypical* experience becomes a mystery. Without an intrinsic motivation of experience to go beyond the typical, the in-principle openness that makes types so attractive for phenomenological analysis boils down to only two specific kinds of openness,

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9 Gerda Walther (1923) engaged the task of explaining the ego’s intentional access to a level that connects ego and alter ego. However, it seems she failed to reach a satisfactory conclusion before—perhaps not surprisingly, given the implications mentioned earlier—turning instead to the study of mysticism and parapsychology. I am grateful to Daniel Neumann for pointing me to Walther’s work.

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both of which may be called “passive.” The first kind of passive openness might be termed *impressionistic*: we receive impressions from something beyond our typified intentionality, from something that can somehow impact and shape our experience, even when it does not conform to our types at hand. The second kind is *forced* openness: a typical pattern is disturbed, once again from outside (e.g., an obstacle before our feet or a person who stops us) or due to some internal conflict (e.g., between different types), and this in turn forces us to question our types and to search for atypical aspects that might explain the disturbance. These are in effect two kinds of openness that can be found already in Husserl’s concept of types (Lohmar 2011).

Nevertheless, I am less optimistic than Dieter Lohmar (2011) that what I would call “passive” openness sufficiently captures our actual experience of novel or unique situations, or even, for that matter, our experience of a completely *typical* situation, since any typical situation, even though it conforms to a type on a general level, is “*atypical* in its uniqueness and particularity,” as Schutz (1970, 56; original emphasis) puts it. I will conclude this chapter by first noting the reasons for my skepticism and then sketching a possible solution. 177

*Impressionistic* openness, whether based on sensual perception or on automatic mechanisms of “association,” may help explain how newborn children are motivated to form their first interests and percepts, and to gradually build up typical expectations (Lohmar 2008, ch. 7). But it does not explain why typical expectations, once established, can be modified or given up later on. To be sure, typical expectations are relatively indeterminate, vague, or “empty,” as Husserl puts it. But, if types were *wide open*, so to speak, that is, if the concrete determination of experience were left in large part to a passive impression that bypasses the intentionality of my experience, we would to that extent be advocating *tabula rasa* empiricism rather than phenomenological analysis. More importantly, we would be inviting back in problems similar to the ones mentioned above, namely problems of a supposedly immediate access to the fullness of lived experience.

As for *forced* openness, it explains part of our actual experience and action in everyday life—but only part of it. Schutz, too, was interested in the notion of a “problem” (Schutz 1966a) in the literal sense of the Greek *problēma* as “something thrown before” us. When the typical course of experience is

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interrupted, the breakdown forces us to question our types and to search for a solution. However, while this analysis fits a range of cases, it fails to account for cases, where we adapt to each other in the smooth and spontaneous way that Schutz himself compares to “making music together.” Seeing the otherness of the other person purely in terms of a “problem” to be solved would fail to grasp this essential characteristic of our social world. It is true that we often forget the actual others behind our stereotypical views of them and stubbornly ignore their frustration at being thus reduced, unless and until we meet with resistance—but this does not happen always or inevitably.

178 Even more fundamentally, the difficulty Schutz had seen as afflicting Husserl’s *transcendental* approach to intersubjectivity now seems to return in a different guise in Schutz’s own, “mundane” phenomenology (cf. also Strassheim 2021). As noted earlier, types shape a person’s entire experience of the world and their actions within it, delimiting what is familiar or normal for this person and what they accept as certain and trustworthy. Moreover, my experience of myself is based on types, through which I identify my own attitudes and goals and my roles in society (Schutz speaks of “self-typification”). In sum, types very much make me the person I am. In this sense, my system of types constitutes what we might call an *empirical* “sphere of ownness.” While different from Husserl’s transcendental sphere of ownness, it raises a similar problem: what is the “motivational foundation” for me as an empirical ego to actively look beyond the types that make up my familiar world, and to open my experience to an alter ego, a different person within their own “sphere”? If intentionality followed a tendency towards typical continuity *only*, the nominal openness of types—which made them interesting as a category for the analysis of a social world in the first place—would be rendered ineffective by a motivational lock-in.

While the late Schutz was aware of such problems in his own theory, his premature death in 1959 kept him from finding a systematic solution. As far as I can see, the only remedy to the shortcomings connected with the two kinds of *passive* openness is to assume an additional, *active* openness within experience. Indeed, Schutz’s texts contain ideas towards such an openness, for instance in his concepts of “anxiety” (inspired by Kierkegaard and Heidegger, see Strassheim 2016a) or “spontaneity” (inspired by Leibniz, see Strassheim

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2016b). This *active* openness towards what transcends typical continuity is a motivational tendency within experience that forms a tension with the other tendency, mentioned above, to *maintain* typical continuity. Clearly, neither tendency can be reduced to the other, as they pull in opposite directions. But, given the problems raised here, this tension cannot be avoided, as we need to assume both tendencies at work in our experience.

Another central notion of Schutz's might provide an umbrella for the two tendencies. "Relevance" is his general term for the "selectivity" of experience or, more precisely, for the dynamic, through which the selective articulation of experience develops in time.<sup>10</sup> The argument given here would suggest that this dynamic of experience is constituted by an inherent motivational tension which, intuitively, fits well with everyday notions of "relevance." Those aspects of ourselves and the world around us, including other people, which become "relevant" to us, may do so, because they fit with typical patterns, such as routine expectations or topical knowledge—but also precisely, because they are unusual, strange, or new, in a word, atypical. If this argument is valid, then an important task for a phenomenology of sociality, whether it follows Schutz's particular stance or not, is to clarify further, how these two tendencies logically relate to each other and how their interplay shapes experience in a way that allows us to engage with the otherness of the other person and thus to live in the intersubjective dimension that forms the basis of the human world.

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<sup>10</sup> Lohmar (2008) uses a narrower concept of "relevance" that refers to emotional or volitional interests or values invested in types. He seems to link this concept to Schutz, who, nevertheless, explicitly used the term "relevance" in a far more general sense (see, e.g., Schutz 1966a).

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