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Experience

Annemie Halsema

In standard philosophical encyclopedias you will not find an entry on “experience.” That does not imply that the notion is not referred to, but that it is too encompassing and disputed to dedicate one single entry to it. Also in critical studies, such as feminist theory, it is a contested notion (Scott 1991). Should it then be part of a vocabulary that aims at bringing together notions around critique in the twenty-first century? Is experience not contaminated by **power** structures and practices, as critical philosophers from Karl Marx until Michel Foucault have argued, and as Joan Scott contends for feminist thinking? Should the immediateness and the first person **perspective** that experience implies not be criticized and embedded within a discourse that analyzes the practices that constitute something like it? Are we capable of interpreting experience, of philosophically analyzing it, as phenomenology is supposed to do? Or should we be suspicious of the immediate knowledge it presumes to offer? And last but not least, does experience not centralize the philosophies of the subject too much, instead of thinking ahead of them? This entry will therefore first show why experience is disputed, only to argue subsequently that despite this critique, it still is a notion that deserves to remain central in critical thinking.

In the philosophical tradition, experience mainly plays a role in epistemology, and was contested already long before critical

50 philosophers doubted it. In fact, it is a crucial notion in the distinction between appearance and reality that is discussed from Antiquity onwards; it plays an important role in the idealism-realism discussion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and in the rationalism-empiricism debate in epistemology; it is presumed to be *the* central concept in twentieth-century phenomenology but has already been contested by the discipline's founding father Edmund Husserl.

The notion of experience as human experience, often related to the sensations, starts playing an important role in modern philosophy, that is, from the seventeenth century onwards. In ancient Greek philosophy, contemplation of ideas was central in acquiring knowledge – be it more importantly so in Plato than in Aristotle – and human experience was not the main source of reaching true knowledge about reality. But when in modern philosophy the subject becomes the origin and foundation of knowledge, the notion of experience also gains influence. Yet, not without being questioned from the start.

One of the problems the notion of experience faces is that it can be deluded or misled and does not lead to true knowledge. René Descartes's famous problem is that one's experiences can be deceived in dreaming or by an evil demon. His doubt experiment in the *Meditations* aims at reaching the foundation of all knowledge and thus at absolutely certain knowledge. He contends that because I cannot exclude that I am dreaming, my present belief in my sensations is not sufficiently justified. While dreaming doubts the sensual perceptions, the possibility of an evil demon even calls into question the seemingly evident mathematical truths.

Another important step in thinking about experience is taken by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. While we may experience the outer world as existing independent of us, Kant contends that human experience, that is to say, sensory perceptions, are constructed by the human mind as a

combination of sensory matter that we receive and *a priori* forms supplied by our cognitive faculties (Rohlf 2014). Kant makes the famous distinction between analytical judgments *a priori*, synthetic judgments *a posteriori* and synthetic judgments *a priori*. While the analytical judgments do not pertain to experience, the synthetic do. The synthetic judgments *a posteriori* are based on experience in the sense that we need perceptual information in order to judge whether they are valid. These judgments are experiential (for instance, “this paper is white”; because paper can have several colors, I need to check on the basis of sense perception whether this paper indeed is white). The synthetic judgments *a priori* combine experiential knowledge with the *a priori* character of knowledge, that is, its universality and necessity. In other words, they are based upon experience but are not confined to experiential knowledge. This is the kind of knowledge to be found in mathematics, natural science and metaphysics.

Kant in his analysis of synthetic *a priori* judgments bridges the gap between empiricism and rationalism by arguing that there are two components of knowledge: there is something that is known, the contents given to consciousness, and there is something that knows, the active **process** of knowing. This distinction is taken further by Husserl in twentieth-century phenomenology and developed to *noema* (the ideal content of consciousness) and *noesis* (the intentional process of consciousness, its act). Therewith also the notion of experience at once is more centralized in conscious processes, and differentiated.

In the twentieth century, phenomenology developed into *the* stream of thought in which experience is central. The *Stanford Encyclopedia*, for instance, defines phenomenology as “the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view” (Smith 2013). Likewise, in analytical philosophy, phenomenology is considered to be concentrating upon the “what it is likeness” of sensations and experiences. Phenomenological research methods in the social sciences are empirical qualitative research methods that pertain to the

52 meaning people give to their lives, as expressed by them in qualitative interviews. These streams of thought relate all in different ways to the notions of “experience” and “intentionality” as developed by Husserl. The latter implies that consciousness is always of or about something. Phenomenology studies these contents of consciousness (*noema*), as well as its acts (*noesis*).

While thus centralizing the notion of experience, from the start Husserl also problematizes an overly simple notion of experience. He first of all distinguishes between *Erfahrung* (experience) and *Anschauung* (intuition), arguing that while we may experience cases that are at least supposedly real, in *Anschauung* things may also be imagined or recollected. For Husserl phenomenology does not analyze experience but *Anschauung*, phenomenological intuition. Furthermore, these intuitions have intentional quality, which implies that they are experiences of a certain type (hope, desire, memory, **affirmation**, doubt, etc.), and that they have an intentional matter: that what they are about. For Husserl, the latter, that which we perceive, the objects, are not experienced. What is experienced are our sensations and the acts that interpret or apperceive them (Husserl o.c. in Zahavi 2003, 27). As Zahavi exhibits, intentionality thus consists of “the interpretation of something *as* something” (27). Experience implies the constitution of something in our consciousness.

During the same period in which Husserl founded phenomenology, the beginning of the twentieth century, the notion of experience was severely criticized by the masters of suspicion, that is, by critical thinkers such as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. They further complicated the notion of experience by contending that human experience is constituted by economic structures and the unconscious. Instead of being certain of one’s experiences and taking them as starting point for gaining knowledge of the world, in their analysis our experience appears to be influenced by what remains outside of it. Therewith they give way to twentieth-century streams of thought in philosophy that fundamentally question the centrality of the subject and inherit

the difficulties with experience already prevalent in modern philosophy.

Notwithstanding the questioning of experience by Marx, Freud, and others, the notion today still remains relevant for critical thinking. In feminist theory, Scott's forceful rejection of the notion of experience, on the ground of its exclusivity (its being prototypical for white, middle-class women) and its being constructed by the power relations under critique, has led to defenses of women's experiences. In the context of cosmetic surgery, Kathy Davis (1997) secures the experienced body as a source of empowerment for women; Sonia Kruks (2001) argues that embodied experience for women who have faced physical violence can form an **affective** basis for solidarity. Yet, Scott's restraint about the social constructedness of experience cannot simply be put aside, presuming that there is some sort of pre-discursive embodied experience that escapes social construction and power relations. Instead, it should be contended that experience is historically and culturally specific through and through. As experience, however, it does not coincide with discourse and with prevailing power structures but can be thought of as what Johanna Oksala calls "a sense of disorientation and dissatisfaction" (2014, 396). In critical perspectives, experience itself can be critical, in the sense of exhibiting a gap with dominant cultural representations, a realization "no, these representations do not accord with the way I perceive/feel/sense myself."

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