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Phenomenological explanation: towards a methodological integration in phenomenological psychopathology

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Abstract
Whether, and in what sense, research in phenomenology and phenomenological psychopathology has—in addition to its descriptive and hermeneutic value—explanatory power is somewhat controversial. This paper shows why it is legitimate to recognize such explanatory power. To this end, the paper analyzes two central concerns underlying the debate about explanation in phenomenology: (a) the warning against reductionism, which is implicit in a conception of causal explanation exclusively based on models of natural/physical causation; and (b) the warning against top-down generalizations, which neglect the specificity of the individual. While acknowledging that these two caveats express serious concerns regarding the debate on explanatory models, I show that phenomenology has the resources to respond to them. These can be found in analyses of different types of causation relating to different regions of reality and in the structure of explanatory models based on exemplarity. On the basis of these analyses, I defend a pluralist account vis-à-vis explanatory models.

Keywords Causality · Conditionality · Motivation · Phenomenology · Exemplarity.

1 Phenomenological explanation: towards a methodological integration in phenomenological psychopathology

It is generally assumed that the scientific value of a theory lies primarily in its explanatory power (see Woodward & Ross 2021). Scientific theories do not merely describe or report about singular phenomena—be they natural, psychic, or social. They also

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aim to clarify the reasons why, given certain conditions, a specific phenomenon occurs and must occur, and why certain rules apply to certain classes of phenomena. There is a long-running debate on whether the natural sciences and the humanities can both provide explanatory models, on the limitations concerning attempts to develop explanatory models valid for all sciences, and on the appropriateness of considering explanation as the mark of scientificity *par excellence*. This debate featured a distinction between "explaining" and "understanding" that became particularly prominent in the 20th century. This distinction marked the still largely persisting dichotomy between the natural sciences, which explain by means of deductive-nomological models, and the human sciences, which resort to a form of understanding based on description and interpretation.

Phenomenology, in particular phenomenological psychopathology, has a complex position in this debate. One can distinguish two main clusters of issues concerning the explanatory power of phenomenology, which I would schematically characterize as:

a) issues concerning the extent of causal explanatory models, and
b) issues concerning the generality of explanatory models.

Leaving aside what may be its explanatory principles, a theory is called explanatory insofar as it claims to have general validity, and therefore a normative function, in the analysis, interpretation, and/or prediction of empirical occurrences. Yet, a rather widespread trend is to restrict those principles to *causal* principles of explanation, thereby often taking *natural* causation as paradigmatic for all kinds of causation and naturalistic causal explanation as paradigmatic for all kinds of explanation (see Descola 2022), This, however, seems to be based on postulating some equivalences and generalizations: "explanation" and "causal explanation" are often treated as synonymous and, when they are not, other types of causation (such as psychic causation) are somehow understood according to the model of natural causation, or even as specifications of natural causation. But is it legitimate to assume these equivalences and generalizations? Would it not be more appropriate to acknowledge a plurality of modes of explanation and thus to consider causal models as one specific kind of explanatory model? This would mean recognizing the epistemic value of other approaches that, while being explanatory, are not based on natural causation or constructed on the template of causal models.[1] On the account I wish to defend, this recognition is necessary if philosophical theories are to be given an explanatory function.

Phenomenologically-oriented discussions concerning both clusters of issues—those relating to more or less explicit assumptions about causal explanatory models and those relating to the generality of explanatory models—warn us about the pos-

[1] I am referring here quite generally to the causal laws developed by the natural sciences. It should be emphasized that even in this area there is a diversity of causal models, often of great complexity. Yet, what matters here is primarily the generally shared idea of a necessary connection, recognizable on the basis of objective and potentially measurable criteria between an event and its effects. As has been pointed out (Schmidt, 2018), one can also understand this approach in light of the reduction of any form of causality or "if…then" relation to the *causa efficiens*.

sible implications of overemphasizing the role of explanation, which may be at odds with the phenomenological method. In parallel with the above-mentioned clusters of issues, we can briefly characterize these warnings respectively as:

a) the warning against reductionism implicit in understanding causal explanation according to the model of natural causation, and
b) the warning against top-down generalizations that overlook the specificity of the individual.

In this paper, I argue that, although these warnings need to be taken seriously, the answer cannot consist in abandoning the claim that phenomenological analyses have an explanatory power. Although it is based on a descriptive method, phenomenology is intended to have explanatory power. Phenomenological descriptions are different from ordinary descriptions precisely insofar as they aim to provide an account of the eidetic laws that govern experience, and thus at elaborating a viable theory of the structures of consciousness, which can explain concrete experiences (see Mertens, forthcoming; Sass 2014; Schmidt, 2018). In what follows, I take phenomenological psychopathology as a privileged field of applied phenomenological research in order to show why the priority of phenomenological description does not rule out explanation. In the first section, I reconstruct the framework of the issues schematically reported above and notably distinguish between a dichotomic view of the relation between explaining and understanding and a reductionist view. While the distinction between explaining and understanding maintains the explanatory autonomy of theories related respectively to the domains of nature and mind or psyche, reductionist approaches tend to recognize only one explanatory model, the naturalistic one, and in this sense to trace psychic reality back to natural reality. In the second section, I examine how causal explanation is understood in phenomenology, thereby notably assessing wherein the risk of reductionism more precisely lies and how alternative, non-reductionist, causal models can be elaborated. In the third section, I discuss exemplarity or exemplary causality as a fruitful model of explanation in phenomenology and phenomenological psychopathology. I emphasize both its epistemological and its ontological implications, which notably contrast the dichotomic view on explaining and understanding by elaborating an integrative, bottom-up model of explanation.

2 Framing the problem of explanation in phenomenological psychopathology

In phenomenology, there is a clear tendency to attribute priority to description over explanation, and sometimes to consider description and explanation as two alternative methods. For instance, consider this passage from the preface of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*:

> It is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analysing. Husserl's first directive to phenomenology, in its early stages, to be a "descriptive psychology," or to return to the "things themselves," is from the start a foreswearing of science.

> I am not the outcome or the meeting-point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily or psychological make-up. I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological or sociological investigation. I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, ix)

Written by Merleau-Ponty, who devoted much of his work to the relation between phenomenology and the sciences, this passage certainly cannot be understood as a form of philosophical antagonism to science. Rather, the passage warns against an understanding of natural causation as the unique model of explanation, to which all phenomena, including mental phenomena, must conform. Such a warning is even more explicitly formulated in the field of phenomenological psychopathology. For instance, consider the following passage from the introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*:

> Psychiatry looks for a way to connect first-person experience with brain functioning. Phenomenological psychopathology aims to bridge understanding (*Verstehen*) and causal explanation (*Erklären*) in research as well as in clinical settings. As the science of abnormal subjectivity, psychopathology relies both on explanations based on deductive and inductive methods, and on understanding that is achievable only by immersing oneself in a singular situation. Phenomenological psychopathology in itself is prior to any causal accounts of subpersonal mechanisms. At least some of the inconsistent and heterogeneous results in neuroscience research are perhaps the result of insufficient knowledge in descriptive psychopathology. Basic psychopathological knowledge is a prerequisite for research in explanatory psychopathologies and it can help clarify fundamental concepts in biological psychiatry. We must accurately describe the phenomenon before we can arrive at a satisfying explanation. (Stanghellini et al., 2019, 5)

This passage clearly contrasts both the general view that the only scientific models of explanations are the ones based on natural causality and the more specific view that natural causality should also underlie any viable explanatory model for psychic experience and its disorders. Yet, a closer look reveals that the claim in this passage is twofold, going beyond this critical assessment. While recognizing that both causal explanation and phenomenological-descriptive or hermeneutic understanding have an explanatory power, the authors claim that there is a need for their integration. However, they also suggest that one should recognize the priority of phenomenological-descriptive analysis over causal and subpersonal explanation. In so doing, the authors interpret causal explanation as the reconstruction of subpersonal mechanisms or neurobiological processes. In naturalistically-oriented psychopathology, neurobiological processes are generally assumed as the explanans for psychiatric diseases, thus for phenomena experienced at the personal level, and the authors resort to phenomenology to contrast this view.

Delving a little deeper into the implications of these observations allows us to see how two main views on explanatory models in the philosophy of mind—a reductionist and a dichotomous view—underlie this remark in the context of psychopathological research. Inspired by Dennett (1969), the reference to subpersonal mechanisms has been understood in two ways (see Drayson 2014; Musholt, 2018). On one understanding, the personal and the subpersonal are explanatorily autonomous: phenomena on the personal level are *understandable*, while phenomena on the subpersonal level are *explainable.* This is how the distinction between the personal and the subpersonal has been taken up in the Pittsburgh school, also with reference to Wilfrid Sellars's distinction between the space of causes and the space of reasons (McDowell, 1994; Sellars, 1997). Despite the important differences, this approach entails a dichotomy that is at least partially similar to the one between *Erklären* and *Verstehen* in the German debate going back to authors such as Droysen (1882) and Dilthey (1924). On another understanding, defended by psychological functionalists, the distinction between the personal and the subpersonal is a whole-part distinction within a functional system involving doxastic and pre-doxastic states. This view holds that the two levels are not autonomous, for personal-level explanation is eventually causally reducible to subpersonal-level explanation (Stich, 1978).

The functionalist view is the main target of phenomenologically-oriented criticism. This clearly emerges from the above-quoted passage from the *Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*. Occasionally, this criticism is developed by resorting to arguments that support a dichotomic view on understanding and explaining. However, as I will argue in the second and third sections of this paper, this is not necessarily the adequate approach to criticizing reductionism. Both seminal and more recent research in phenomenology shows that elaborating on the integration between explaining and understanding is a more promising approach. Such methodological integration is itself based on a complex ontological inquiry into the living subject in relation to its environment.

Phenomenologists advocating this integration warn against kinds of naturalistic or cognitivist reductionism that seem to be implied by the functionalistic account: we cannot assume that experiential, personal phenomena can be fully explained on the basis of either natural causes or cognitive computational states. However, they also warn against a dichotomic view of physical and mental phenomena. These warnings have become particularly urgent in recent debates, informed by developments in cognitive science and neuroscience research. Accordingly, phenomenological psychopathology has also been faced with the challenge to position itself with respect to forms of naturalism and cognitivism, which have become dominant in medical science, and in psychiatry in particular. Similarly to the humanities and social sciences (see, e.g. Descola 2022), phenomenological psychopathology confronts both the demand to develop a general and predictive theory (often inspired by the principles of natural/physical causality) and its own claim for interpretive autonomy. But compared to the social sciences, this tension is further amplified by two factors: first, the dominant character of a naturalistic view of medicine in general and psychopathology in particular; and second, the fact that psychopathology is an applied science, aiming not only the elaboration of a theory, but at the demonstration of the pragmatic implications of such theory (e.g., of its diagnostic or therapeutic benefits). Thus, the tension

in which phenomenological psychopathology is confronted with can be schematically reconstructed as follows.

On the one hand, medicine and the neurosciences tend to conform to explanatory models of scientificity. The main goal of these models is to objectively recognize the neurobiological causes or the impaired subpersonal and subdoxastic states that underlie and explain pathological experience. These models tend to be privileged, if only because they can be more easily controlled in experimental settings than environmental factors and, more generally, factors related to subjective experience. They tend to trace the psychic-experiential dynamics back to organic and/or neurological dysfunctions. They also often imply forms of standardization and objective measuring that grant scientificity as well as the effectiveness of therapeutical interventions or preventive measures.

On the other hand, phenomenological psychopathology builds on the claim concerning the irreducibility of its object of inquiry: human experience and its disturbances. Explicitly contrasting all reductionist approaches, phenomenological psychopathology counters epiphenomenalist and reductionist assumptions, notably arguing that psychic and psychiatric diseases are not diseases of the brain, but of the human being as an embodied organism, and as an acting, feeling, and thinking person (Fuchs, 2011). The opposed view, however sophisticated in terms of modular functionalism, would reduce the human being to the mere complex of neuronal processes, genetical algorithms, and digital patterns of behavior (Fuchs, 2021, 11), and would consider consciousness and subjectivity as nothing more than a naïve illusion of everyday life (see Fuchs 2021, 11, 179–201; Slaby 2011). Phenomenological psychopathology should investigate suffering human beings, which require holistic consideration in terms of their concrete bodily existence (Fuchs, 2021) that is responsive to and interacts with the world and with others (Goldstein, 1934; Waldenfels, 1998, 95–111, 112–144, 2019; Summa 2020). The meaningfulness of embodied and existential interactions with the world and with others, as well as their disruptions in psychopathological diseases, require a non-reductive approach which systemically integrates the different layers of subjective and interpersonal experience.

Considering the tension just sketched regarding the epistemological status of phenomenological psychopathology in relation to the previously mentioned distinction between reductionist and dichotomic accounts of the relation of describing and explaining raises a crucial question. As indicated above, phenomenologists generally claim that the experience of the human being, and notably the experience of psychopathological suffering, is irreducible to the neurobiological modifications of the human brain. There remains a question, though, about whether this claim implies neglecting the influences that modifications in the body (and in the brain) may have on experience. I believe that the answer to this question is no. In fact, answering this question affirmatively would imply subscribing to the dichotomic view and this would be inconsistent with the appeal to an integrative model. More importantly, this would also be inconsistent with the phenomenological analyses of the influences of material/physical alterations in the body on psychic experience, *without* considering the former as the unique and natural cause of the latter. In other words, the problem of reductionism is precisely that of tracing all kinds of influences between the bodily organism and the mind to either a kind of natural causality or a computation

mechanism, according to which, for instance, a cut on my finger causes an altered perception of the objects I touch, or the increase of serotonin in brain synapses causes a positive mood.

3 Causal explanation and the problem of reductionism

3.1 Husserl's seminal analyses of causal explanation and ontology

That assuming natural causality or computation as *the* explanatory models for the relation between mind and body is profoundly wrong is clear to Edmund Husserl, who develops a material ontology of mind and body precisely opposing this view. This may be called an explanatory account insofar as it aims at clarifying how different causal relations characterize different regions of being—notably the region of nature, of the somatic body, and of the psyche—and how these may be related to each other.[2]

In a general sense (one that does not restrict causality to natural/physical causation), all causal relations are schematically considered "if…then" relations. The concept of reality, then, can only be understood on the basis of these relations:

> According to our analyses and with regard to the essence of the experiences in which reality is constituted, the cognition of reality and the cognition of causality are inseparably one. *All science of the real is causally explanatory* actually and in the sense of Objective validity *wants to determine what the real is*. The cognition of causal relationships is not something secondary to the cognition of the real, as if the real were first of all in and for itself, and then only incidentally, as something extra-essential to its being, came into relation with other realities, having an effect upon them and being affected by them (undergoing effects), as if, accordingly, cognition could bring out and determine an essence proper to the real that would be independent of the cognition of its causal relations. The point, rather, is precisely that it is fundamentally essential to *reality* as such not to have a proper essence *of that sort* at all; rather, it is what it is only in its causal relations. (Husserl, 1980, 3)

However, "reality" as a general concept encompasses not only the domain of physical/material reality: it also encompasses the reality of the lived-body and of the soul. Thus, the general concept of reality precisely designates the domain in which causal

[2] Husserl (1983, 18–20). introduces the concept of region in order to define the theoretical domains of competence of the different sciences, empirical and especially *a priori* Thereby, the concept of region is based on the assumption that the world, as the totality of possible objects of experience and cognition, can be theoretically considered on the basis of the ontological (formal and material) distinctions between different types of objects. Regions are distinguishable heuristically in empirical terms, according to a classification of what actually occurs in experience. The classification of regions of being, however, is ultimately grounded on eidetic analysis, that is, on the study of the essential structures that pertain to each region of being and allow us to distinguish regions of being from one another. The analyses I trace here presuppose this idea of regional ontology and thus aim to elaborate on the *structures* that characterize the modes of being of material nature, the somatic body, and the psyche, as well as their relations.

(i.e., generally understood "if…then") relations of some sort hold. But this concept of causality should be further specified in relation to three regions of reality: physical/material reality, somatic reality, and psychic/mental reality. The distinction among these three regions is phenomenologically grounded on their respective features, which we can glean by means of descriptive analysis. Notably, material reality is not intentional, while mental reality is intentional; and somatic reality is a hybrid, having features of materiality and features of psychic reality. "If…then" relations should be specified in connection with these dimensions of reality: physical *causality* determines material reality, *conditionality* determines somatic reality of bodies as sentient organisms, and *motivation* determines the reality of the psyche and of the spirit.[3] Crucially, even if they regulate empirical reality, for Husserl these different "if…then" relations are not to be understood only in terms of a constant conjunction between events. Rather, they should be understood as relations that define the different layers in the regional ontology of the bodily subject.

These layers stand in a foundation relation. This means that the somatic reality of the lived-body (*Leib*) can only exist if the physical/material reality of the body exists (*Körper*), and the reality of the soul can exist only insofar as a lived-body exists (Husserl, 1989, 30–59). This foundational relation needs to be more closely considered. As Caminada (2019, 91–119) observes, on the face of it, one could understand Husserl's approach to the relation between the somatic body and the material body as a kind of supervenience relation, while the relation between somatic reality and the soul is of a totally different kind. Motivational causality, which pertains to the reality of the soul and to the spiritual world, makes these layers irreducible to supervenient properties. However, some questions arise when we address the implications of such a threefold relation between the material body, the somatic body, and the psyche.

First, one may wonder whether supervenience appropriately describes the relation between material and somatic body. This is only correct insofar as the relation of supervenience states that changes in the supervenient set of properties (in our case the properties of the somatic body) depend on changes in the properties upon which they supervene (the properties of the material body). But this is not the whole story. Acknowledging a supervenience relation between material and somatic body cannot mean claiming that their relation is univocally determined in such a way that, for instance, the higher layers of reality simply retain the properties of the lower ones. In fact, if we consider the relation between the two layers in holistic terms, as Husserl does, then we recognize that there is a retroactive effect on the founding properties once they are considered as part of a more complex whole. In this sense, to use the vocabulary of supervenience, there is a kind of "ontological feedback of the new global properties […] of the supervenient whole on the founding content" (Caminada & Summa, 2015, 10). To demonstrate this sort of feedback, consider extension. Physical bodies are extended insofar as they are composed of divisible parts, but we find that this is not the same if we consider somatic bodies, and even less true if we consider the soul. Certainly, our lived-bodies also have parts that can be cut without

[3] These three dimensions of reality, considered with the naturalistic attitude, are further related to the personal dimension of 'spiritual reality' that is also governed by the law of motivation (although it is irreducible to the realm of natural reality).

compromising their existence as somatic reality (e.g., hair, fingernails), but the lived-body cannot be cut into pieces and thereby maintain its somatic reality. This is clear if we consider the "extension" of sensings: felt pain or a touch sensation can be said to be bodily localized and, in this sense, "extended" over a bodily part, but they cannot be said to be composed as *partes extra partes*. In fact, Husserl insists on this distinction, characterizing this specific kind of "extension" as "spreading-out" (*Ausbreitung*) (Husserl 1989, 157; Summa 2014b, 247–316). A somatic body cut into pieces would no longer be a *somatic* body since it would lose precisely what marks the difference between material and somatic bodies, namely sensitivity and its spreading-out. This brings to the fore the hybrid nature of somatic reality, which entails characteristics of material reality, but also of psychic reality, and therefore cannot be simply considered to be a self-enclosed layer of reality decoupled from psychic reality.[4]

Secondly, and relatedly, although the layer of psychic reality does introduce motivation as a new kind of causal connection between experiences, psychic reality is intertwined with somatic reality. In other words, the relation between the second and third levels, that is, between the somatic and psychic/spiritual dimensions, is even more intimate than the relation between the complex of somatopsychic levels and the level of material reality. While physical reality can indeed exist as non-animated reality, psychic reality and somatic reality are reciprocally intertwined in such a way that the foundation is actually mutual. The body would lose one of its essential determinations as somatic reality, namely sensing, if it was not an animated body; and conversely, the soul is not an immaterial entity that attaches to the body, rather being what determines that a body is a lived-body. In this sense, as Rudolf Bernet emphasizes, "the unity of body and soul (*Seele*) is a sui generis reality in which the two levels are not only inseparable, but, for me at least (if not for others), also indistinguishable. For Husserl, there is no *Leib* without a *Seele* and no *Seele* without *Leib*" (Bernet, 2013, 45; see Husserl, 1989, 94).[5] This distinction highlights how the decisive dimension that allows us to speak of somatopsychic reality is the dimension of sensing in its various forms (Husserl, 1980, 9–17).

Thirdly, the relevance of Husserl's material ontology of mind and body as an explanatory model is not only due to its capacity to highlight how each region or reality is ruled by specific "if…then" relations (causality, conditionality, and motivation). Rather, Husserl also shows that there are specific "if…then" relations connecting the different layers, and thus making up the unity of the experiencing individual as a whole. In particular, these relations connecting the different layers are specifications of psycho-physical conditionality and motivation. Husserl also understands them as "functional" relations, claiming for instance that the excitation of the central nervous system, provoked by the action of things in the world, "is the condition for the expe-

[4] For this reason, Husserl rightly uses apparently paradoxical expressions in order to characterize the reality of the lived-body, such as "subjective objectivity" (Husserl, 1989, 160), or designates the lived-body as "turning point", "the point of transformation from causal to conditional process" (Husserl, 1989, 168).

[5] See also Husserl (1989, 100): "When the soul departs, then what remains is dead matter, a sheer material thing, which no longer possesses in itself anything of the I as man. The Body, on the contrary cannot depart. Even the ghost necessarily has its ghostly body. To be sure, this Body is not an actual material thing – the appearing materiality is an illusion – but thereby so is the affiliated soul and thus the entire ghost."

riencing of the phenomena concerned on the part of the ego belonging to the body" (Husserl, 2020, 52; see Spano 2021).

Psycho-physical conditionality describes the impact of alterations affecting the physical body, via the nervous system, on alteration of bodily and psychic experience (Husserl, 1989, 60–95). If I take drugs or injure a body part, my experience of the surrounding world is altered. Here, there are at least two relations of explanatory relevance. The first is a causal relation between physical/mechanical and neurobiological processes, concerning the action of some material body on my own body, itself considered as a material entity. The second is the conditional relation between these actions and reactions and the corresponding variations at the sensory and experiential level. Therefore, we cannot say, strictly speaking, that a cut on the finger *causes* my pain, but only that it causes a laceration of the skin tissues, a loss of blood, excitation of the nervous system, etc. Similarly, serotonin does not *cause* my positive mood (and even less my happiness) but only the relevant biochemical alterations in my body and brain. All this, however, *conditions* both my feeling and the way I experience my body and the surrounding world. This is not merely wordplay or the mere substitution of "causality" with "conditionality". Conditionality clearly implies the embeddedness of the relevant modifications in a holistic context in which other conditions of experience may also play a role, and in which a first level of meaningfulness for the experiencing subject is constituted.

The motivational relation, specifically characterizing psychic reality as volitional reality,[6] is also tied to the dimension of corporeality (see Husserl 2020, 47–58; 59–67). For the lived-body, as active and moving body, is also the organ of the will (Husserl, 1989, 159–160). Spontaneous, self-initiated movement and kinesthesia based on motivational causality are in this sense experiences of genuine authorship or embodied agency. In this respect, too, we have interweaving conditional and motivational "if…then" relations, insofar as a motivational impulse that is turned into movement has an impact not only on the psychic and experiential dimension, but also on the bodily dimension, both somatic and material. Precisely due to such an interweaving, the body is also defined as the "turning point" between material and psychic reality (see Husserl, 1989, 168).

This discussion concerning the explanatory power of the causal, conditional, and motivational relations within respective domains of reality (and even bridging different domains of reality) is the basis for what Husserl's calls the "nonsense" of psychophysical parallelism, which eventually also entails a sharp critique of epiphenomenalist models of explanation (Husserl, 1989, 302–311, notably, 308). This critique holds not only for higher levels of psychic reality. It also holds for somatic reality because the psyche is not detached from the body. Epiphenomenalism fundamentally relies on a univocal understanding of causal relations. But for Husserl, the assumption that the causal relations remain the same when we consider the reciprocal relations of material phenomena and the relations between material phenomena and somatic-psychic phenomena is based on a categorial mistake. Endorsing such an assumption means overlooking the difference between experienced alterations of

[6] On the explanatory account of motivational causality, see Caminada (2019, 91–119), Spano (2021), Williams (2020a, 2020b).

the lived-body and of the psyche and alterations in material reality, which may be observed, experimented, and controlled, but are not properly experienced. Yet, recognizing that despite this distinction, there is a conditional relation between causal changes and experiential changes, Husserl also paves the way for reassessing psychophysical, bodily reality in a holistic way.

3.2 The holistic view of the living subject and circular causality

The holistic reassessment of psychophysical, bodily reality (considered in interaction with its environment) is one of the major achievements of phenomenological psychopathology. This holistic view seeks to integrate discoveries and progress in the biological sciences and neurosciences into a more complex and articulated conception of the experiencing and suffering subject.[7] This is important insofar as psychopathology has a strong applicative interest and therapeutic aims, which also presuppose some predictive capacities of the background theory—e.g., concerning the effects of a therapy, the social and environmental conditions that may foster psychiatric diseases or their recovery, etc. (Sass, 2014; Binswanger, 1913; Blankenburg, 1984; Fuchs et al., 2019; Schmidt, 2018).

In this regard, it is important to dwell further on the phenomenological concept of motivation, which I have discussed above only in relation to embodied agency and to the body as the organ of perception. The previously considered distinction between causality, conditionality, and motivation, indeed, is accomplished in the attitude that Husserl calls naturalistic. As the discussion in the third part of *Ideas II* shows, however, motivation designates the "fundamental lawfulness of spiritual life" (Husserl, 1989, 231), and therefore it must be considered within the personalistic attitude. This seems somewhat puzzling at first. In what sense can motivation, as kinesthetic motivation for embodied agency, be integrated within a naturalistic account of the body as organ of perception, if motivation is the lawfulness of spiritual life, to be considered from a personalist perspective? The perplexity, however, only arises if we do not acknowledge how the architectonics Husserl proposes mirrors his holistic viewpoint. Precisely insofar as the inquiry is focused on the subject of experience *as a whole*, in its natural and personal dimensions, its outcome is not only the uncovering of different layers of complexity with their respective lawfulness. Nor can the outcome simply imply that the lawfulness of the more complex layers is unilaterally grounded on that of the less complex layers. Instead, the outcome also consists in uncovering different forms of what Husserl calls "inverse causality" (*umgekehrte Kausalität*), whereby the lawfulness of personal or spiritual life, notably characterizing volition, also affects the natural dimension (Husserl 1989, 258).

But what characterizes motivation as the lawfulness of spiritual reality and what distinguishes it from natural causality? While connected to the extent that they relate to different aspects of a unitary whole, natural causality and motivation should not be conflated (Husserl, 1989, 241–243). The laws of natural causality, notably of physical causality, are general laws to the extent that they are applicable, under the same

[7] In fact, it is remarkable that Husserl himself connects his discussion on conditionality with questions related to normality and abnormality in experience. Cf. Husserl (1989, 63–70).

conditions, to different instances. Motivational laws, instead, are laws pertaining to the individual or to the intersubjective dimension. They define a lawfulness that can explain moments of *this* person's life, or of the relation between particular persons, on the basis of their life history and significant interactions. Ann's experience of joy when she happened to see a sunset after a long run, for instance, is a singular experience that cannot be generalized. And her response to this spectacle is motivated to the extent that the situation has a significance for her, due to her personal life history and to her disposition in that particular situation. In spite of this motivational lawfulness *for her*, it would be wrong to both claim that everyone should feel joy in the same situation and that Ann should always feel joy when seeing sunsets. Similarly, Paul's falling into a severe depression after having lost his job, and his inability to think of himself as capable to ever find a new satisfying job, is motivated by his personal life history. But this does not mean that this expresses a generalizable law according to which everyone who loses their job falls into depression. The lawfulness of motivation, accordingly, explains certain events and personal responses to the extent that it brings to the fore the significance of experiences for the person, in a way that is not simply applicable to other cases or generalizable in this sense. Based on the issues raised in the introduction, and particularly the reference to generality, one can certainly wonder at this point in what sense this individual lawfulness can aspire to have explanatory power. Isn't it a contradiction to claim that motivation expresses a personal lawfulness and that it has an explanatory function, assumed that explanatory models claim to have a general validity? As I will argue in the third section, this is not necessarily the case. Personal motivational lawfulness can indeed also have an epistemic significance beyond individual explanation, but this should be understood on the basis of the structure of exemplarity.

These insights on causation and motivation and the connected holistic view of the living subject are taken up not only in current phenomenological psychopathology, but also in the phenomenologically inspired philosophy of biology. One crucial concept introduced in these contexts, which I wish to briefly discuss before turning to exemplarity, is "circular causality" (Fuchs, 2007, 121–131; Thompson 2007, 62–72, 371–372).[8] Partly inspired by the phenomenological account of conditionality and motivation, the explanatory models relying on circular causality aim to account for the reciprocal influences between the different layers of reality. We can find remarks on the need to understand causal processes in a complex and dynamic way, which accounts not only for one-way cause and effect relations, in authors such as Merleau-Ponty (1967), Goldstein (1934), Buytendijk & Plessner (1936), and von Weizsäcker (1986). These views appear to be consistent with the view of Husserl, which we

[8] Recently, the holistic approach underlying reciprocal and circular causality has been critiqued within evolutionary biology by Baedke et al., (2021). The main tenet of the critique is that both seminal and more recent accounts of reciprocal causation would neglect "on what grounds meaningful boundaries between organisms and environments can be maintained and exploited for research purposes" and do not provide any "guidance for how to integrate experiential and physical forms of reciprocal causation" (Baedke et al., 2021, 9/29). Considered in the light of the ontological discussions underlying the holistic position, however, the two critiques are misplaced, insofar as the holistic approach does not deny the distinction between organism and environment and precisely focus on the integration of different kinds of causal, conditional, and motivational relation. Appreciating this kind of integration however requires the reassessment of circular causality on the basis of the above-mentioned ontological considerations.

considered above. In fact, the counterpart of the claim that alterations in the region of physical/material nature—including my own material body—condition my sensible experiences and my ways of perceiving and acting is that sensible experiencing, perceiving, and acting also affect my body. Merleau-Ponty addresses circular causality in relation to the study of behavior, arguing that behavioral responses, starting with reflexes, are not univocally caused by stimuli in a linear sequence. In fact, even the concept of stimulus cannot be taken as merely designating an object or a natural phenomenon. Rather, the concept presupposes a situational *understanding* or *grasping* of the surrounding world. "Being a stimulus" is not an objective or natural qualification pertaining to certain things: something can become a stimulus insofar as the organism recognizes it as such and insofar as it triggers a certain response by the organism. Moreover, such responses do not occur in isolation or in an artificially controlled experimental setting. Instead, they occur in a meaningful context or situation, which conditions the living organism and is conversely conditioned by the responsive behavior of the organism (see Summa & Mertens 2018; Waldenfels, 1980). If behavior is a responsive relation between the organism and its milieu, then causality is also to be understood as interaction or as *circular* causality, that is, as a dialectical relation between organisms and their milieu. This dialectical relation enables development in natural history: namely, it enables the emergence of new structurations through the reestablishment of already established ones in a process of refoundation (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, 15–32, 46–51).

Expanding on the seminal insights in phenomenological research and integrating them with the results of recent research in psychology, psychopathology, and the neuroscience, as well as with the theoretical framework of enactivism (see Thompson, 2007, 66–88), Thomas Fuchs recognizes in processes of circularity the mark of the dynamics of the living, embodied being (for example, see Fuchs 2007, 121–131; 2020; 2021, 213–232). Fuchs identifies three levels of circularity, which underlie the ontology of the living being: (i) the circular structure of embodiment; (ii) the circular causality characterizing the relation between the organism and the environment; and (iii) the circularity of process and structure.

The "circular structure of embodiment" refers to both cycles of organismic self-regulation and sensorimotor circles. Regarding self-regulation processes, taking up Antonio Damasio's approach to research in the neurosciences, Fuchs emphasizes the circular feedback between the brain and the body. On the one hand, different centers in the brain "process the proprioceptive, visceral, vasomotor, endocrine, and other afferences from the internal body and integrate them into a 'body landscape' that is constantly changing" (Fuchs, 2020, 4); on the other hand, descending innervation and hormone secretion contribute to the regulation of the organism's homeostasis. We can consider this kind of circular causality as a dynamic that involves both the center and the periphery of the nervous system.

From a holistic perspective, however, this is still a partial view on circularity, which needs to be extended to include the circular feedback-loops that concern the relation between the organism and its environment. In this respect, as already noticed in seminal studies on the relation between affection and movement in organisms (Weizsäcker, 1986; Goldstein, 1934; Straus, 1956; Gibson, 1979; Merleau-Ponty, 1967), one should consider the different processes that make up the unity of sens-

ing—being affected and afforded by the environment—and moving. What represents an affordance for the individual elicits movements, which again configure future possibilities for acting or perceiving and future grasping of new affordances (see Di Paolo et al., 2017; Noë, 2004; Thompson, 2007; Varela et al., 2017).[9]

Finally, if one also considers the diachronic perspective in the genesis and development of the living subject, one should factor in the processes of learning in a meaningful social milieu, importantly based on habit formation and body memory (Fuchs, 2012, 2020; Summa, 2011; Summa et al., 2012). All these are motivational structures. In particular, body memory is important in relation to the processes of circular causality as it sheds light on how the structures of habitualization, adaptation, and modification of behaviors correlate with changes that occur at the neurobiological level, thanks to neuroplasticity. In this respect, Fuchs speaks of a "continuous circularity between experiential processes and organic structure, or in other words, between lived body and physical body" (Fuchs, 2020, 9). As we can see, causality is here not only understood as *causa efficiens*. Instead, causality here presupposes the acknowledgment of subjective authorship, as grounding the spontaneity of embodied and personal agency. Subjective authorship represents the superior, final as well as formal, cause for the physical processes (muscular, neuronal, etc.) through which the movements of the organism are realized (see Fuchs 2021, 179–201, 202–232).

Consistent with what we have seen in Husserl, underlying the idea of circular causality is a stratified and holistic conception of the living subject, in which one should consider how being part of the experience of the organism as a unitary whole modifies the very nature and significance of the basic layers. In general terms, both the seminal and more recent analyses in the phenomenology of causal relations show how phenomenology aims to be a theory of science capable of identifying the different levels of causal explication of reality and investigating their interconnections in a non-dichotomous way. This emphasizes the need of methodological integration and mutual enlightenment between the different scientific approaches to human experience (Gallagher, 1997; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012; Fuchs, 2007; Zahavi, 2004).

4 *Causa exemplaris* in phenomenological psychopathology

Explanatory models tend to be understood as deductive-nomological models, according to which explanation is a "sound deductive argument in which the explanandum follows as a conclusion from the premises of the explanans" (Woodward & Ross, 2021).[10] This presupposes that the explanans is a general law that is to be applied to the explanandum, representing a singular instance. Such an understanding evocates the problem of top-down lawfulness and generalization mentioned above. This problem is significant for phenomenological psychopathology, for classifying the experi-

[9] Researchers in enactivism use the concept of sense-making to refer to these processes, thereby assuming a restricted meaning of 'sense', which is precisely understood as the grasping of affordances in a surrounding world that cannot be neutral, rather being populated by entities the organism experiences as something to approach or rather to avoid.

[10] Accessed on September 12, 2021.

ence of an individual as a pathological experience of a certain sort implies a kind of labeling that does not properly do justice to the singularity of this experience.

Emphasis on the dichotomy between explaining and understanding—and its application in phenomenological psychopathology, notably in the work of Jaspers (1990, 1997)—has its roots in this concern about generalization. A specific kind of hermeneutic understanding (*Verstehen*) is required to grasp the meaningfulness of each individual's experience as embedded in a particular social, cultural, and historical context or horizon of meaning. The insistence on hermeneutic understanding motivates the quest for a science that is capable of capturing the singularity of each individual's experience without illegitimate generalizations (Hoerl, 2013). Yet, there remains a question about whether this form of understanding should be considered in opposition to explanation. Jaspers connects explaining with causation and, in the context of psychology, with a kind of causation whereby the causes are non-psychic, but rather natural (material or biological) phenomena. One of his aims when resorting to understanding is thus to criticize the one-sidedness of reductionist explanatory models like the ones discussed in the previous section (Jaspers, 1990). With this aim in mind, he considers it necessary to take a static-phenomenological stance. However, he also expresses some concerns regarding the genetic/motivational approach, which may well extend the boundaries of what we can understand without providing causal explanation.

Against this background, it seems legitimate to ask whether the only answer to the concerns regarding generalization and top-down lawfulness consists in endorsing the mutual exclusiveness of understanding and explaining. If one accepts this view, one should also consider whether resorting to explanation is necessary when the method of understanding reaches its limit, that is, when it is faced with phenomena that are not comprehensible. Alternatively, one can ask whether we can have a science of the individual based on understanding that *also* has in and for itself an explanatory power. There is research in psychopathology which shows that the latter answer is possible, but only granted that explanation is not reduced to a nomothetic-deductive model appealing to a given general law. In my view, the key concept to consider in order to understand the revised view on explanation based on the individual is "exemplarity". While general, nomothetic-deductive explanatory models can be considered as top-down models applying a general law to the singular case, exemplarity underlies a bottom-up model of explanation, which moves from the singularity in the search of a general rule.

Wolfgang Blankenburg's work is particularly remarkable insofar as it shows operatively how such an explanatory theory based on the exemplarity of the individual is possible, but also insofar as it methodologically reflects on the outcomes of his research. In his seminal book *The Loss of the Natural Self-Evidence*, Blankenburg (1971) develops an account of schizophrenia based on the close description of the everyday disturbances of a young patient. This research is characterized as exemplary in that Blankenburg does not begin with a general or standardized account of the schizophrenic disease, which he then applies to the case in question. Rather, he observes the singular activities of the patient—her concerns and deep questionings and perplexed attitudes—and elaborates on the family resemblances among them, eventually settling on a typological account of the illness.

Expanding his research on the basis of such exemplary description, Blankenburg criticizes Jaspers' endorsement of the dichotomic view concerning the relation between explaining and understanding. Specifically, he criticizes the controversial conclusion that certain pathologies or certain aspects of a pathology (e.g., delusion in schizophrenia) are incomprehensible and can therefore only be causally explained (Blankenburg, 1984, 1991). Moreover, he departs from Jaspers's objections to Husserl's eidetics, instead re-evaluating eidetic description as an exemplary description. Blankenburg's criticism of Jaspers's methodological reflections is also related to his critique of the distinction between nomothetical and idiographic sciences proposed by Windelband (2021). According to Windelband, the historical and cultural sciences are idiographic insofar as they are only concerned with the particular or the individual. The natural sciences are instead nomothetic, insofar as they are concerned with general laws and not with individual facts. Windelband's claim, however, is based on a fallacy which gives reason to doubt crucial aspects of the methodological reflections on the divide between natural sciences and human sciences. The opposition between *nomos* and *idios* is in fact an opposition between two categorically distinct concepts—one referring to normativity and one referring to particularity—and thus implies the fallacious equivalence between the general with the normative and the particular with the factual (Borutti, 2022). The critique of this fallacy is also implicit in Blankenburg's claim that we cannot consider idiographic and nomothetic methods as mutually exclusive (Summa, 2014a). Instead, he makes a plea for a methodological integration that should recognize that there is a specific and irreducible normativity in the individual itself. This normativity should be considered as *exemplary*.

Blankenburg's methodological position, indeed, is based on the pivotal idea that the aim of phenomenological description and hermeneutic understanding cannot be limited to grasping the meaning of individual experiences. Instead, the description of the individual case should be taken as a guide for addressing other cases and for finding structural similarities and differences among them. Precisely this guiding function finds expression in the epistemological appraisal of the concept of exemplarity (see Summa & Mertens 2022). Based on such appraisal, also central to psychopathology (Van Duppen 2022), the *example* is not merely *an exemplar*, a single case that illustrates or particularizes a generality. Instead, the example has a function that is both heuristic and normative, insofar as it embodies a structural lawfulness and guides in the search for a more general lawfulness or structure. This search, which moves from the individual to the individual, is based on the logic of analogy. In this sense, claiming that motivation defines an individual lawfulness is not to deprive it of explanatory potential. The concrete reasons or motives why Ann rejoices in seeing a sunset after a long run, or why Paul falls into severe depression after having lost his job, are certainly individual. But that in both cases responsivity with respect to the present event is based on motivational and meaningful connections, and, notwithstanding their diversity, one can find family resemblances between such singular cases and others. The exemplary function of such cases comes close to the one Husserl attributes to the experience of singularities as "guiding-thread" (*Leitfaden*):[11] we

[11] Husserl takes intentional objects as guiding thread for transcendental and eidetic analyses. I will leave aside questions pertaining to the transcendental here, and only use the metaphor of a guiding-thread as an

take individual descriptions of singular phenomena as guiding us in the search for structures that may be recognizable, even in a totally different guise, as pertaining to other phenomena. Precisely the recognition of motivational and meaning connections opens up explanatory possibilities on the basis of exemplary cases, which can also be implemented in a pragmatic and therapeutic sense.

Blankenburg's studies on schizophrenia and Hubertus Tellenbach's studies on *typus melancholicus* stand out as representatives of this line of research in psychopathology and this method is recognizable also in the recent works in phenomenological psychopathology. Both authors propose a methodological integration based on the idea that the consideration of singularities and their accurate description allows us to recognize gestalt-like, typological structures of experience, and of pathological experience in particular, which can be used to understand other individual cases. For instance, Blankenburg describes how the young patient A reports her difficulties in choosing clothes to wear. This seems to be a rather ordinary phenomenon—something that can happen to anyone and which is not pathological in and for itself. Indeed, it is not the occurrence itself, but rather the way A experiences and describes her loss of reference points in such an ordinary phenomenon that hints at a more basic existential disorientation. This manifests as deep difficulties in coping with novelty and the unexpected, and ultimately at a basic loss of trust and self-confidence. There is "always a setback when something new comes," says the patient, and the patient is not able to integrate this novelty in the flow of lived time. As Blankenburg comments: "For every action, for every experience, A. requires a separate run-up; a run-up which we have always already taken and which therefore never becomes a task for us, indeed is hardly conscious, but in which she gets stuck continuously" (Blankenburg, 1971, 90). Being completely bewildered when faced with the choice of an outfit has apparently nothing in common with the questioning concerning sense of ownership or self-confidence (nothing, at least, that can be univocally brought under a general law). Nonetheless, the description of similar experiences, which Blankenburg (1971) connects to the core of the schizophrenic disturbance, exemplarily guides us to identify these phenomena as ways in which a loss of the basic trust, and of the unquestioned self-evidence characterizing our everyday life, manifests itself in schizophrenic disease. Thereby, the "loss of the natural self-evidence" is not a generality that lies beyond these experiences: it is neither a general law of which individual cases are instances, nor a definition of a disease of which singular phenomena would be symptoms. Instead, the "loss of the natural self-evidence" *is* the disease itself, or a characteristic feature (*Merkmal*) thereof, insofar as it exemplarily manifests or expresses itself in manifold ways (Micali, 2018, 85).

Blankenburg does not merely take these descriptions of the disorientation of young patient A in performing basic everyday activities as relevant for this singular case or for the understanding of the meaningfulness of A's disturbance. The discussion of A's case is intended to *show* some typological features of schizophrenic disease, as exemplified in the singular pattern of behavior of this patient. In his description of the case, Blankenburg aims to show how the difficulties in performing an everyday

individual that allows us to disclose a typology. Also, I will translate '*Leitfaden*' as 'guiding-thread' rather than as 'clue' (Husserl, 1960, 50–53).

activity (such as choosing clothes to wear) expresses a deeper loss of familiarity and orientation regarding temporal experience.

Similarly, when Tellenbach (1974, 63–113) addresses several cases of melancholic patients who, for different reasons, cannot cope with minimal unexpected changes in their family life, he wants to show how each singular case carries something paradigmatic for understanding the core of the melancholic disturbance as such, like the attachment to order in interpersonal relations and the experience of every interruption of such order as a kind of menace (Micali, 2019). The patterns comprising *typus melancholicus*, as well as those that characterize the loss of the natural self-evidence, are not obtained by means of empirical generalization from singular cases. Rather, they are concretely recognized in the diversity of the singular cases themselves. Crucially, the *typus* gained by means of the exemplarity of singular cases does not mean that we build a generality that should entail all the features of the singular cases, or from which we may then be able to deductively recognize singular cases. The specificity of building models of explanation on an exemplary basis is evident here: the concrete and irreducible differences between the singular cases, as much as the similarities, are important to recognize gestalt-like or typological structures. The generality is neither found by means of reducing or neglecting differences, nor can it be applied by univocally following a rule. Following singularities as guiding-threads and then recognizing typological structures is not a *procedure* that may be learned by studying diagnostic manuals or imitating a teacher. It is a skill the acquisition of which requires experience and the capacity to judge. It requires, in other words, cognitive capacities that come close to what Kant designates as reflective judgment, that is, the capacity to search for and discover generality in the individual.

Blankenburg's and Tellenbach's phenomenological inquiries into the structural typology of mental illnesses not only have a heuristic function for the diagnostic recognition of an illness: the concept of exemplarity here also has a more substantial, and ontologically relevant, sense.[12] The type itself represents an *Urbild* in which certain possibilities of disruption or modification of basic structures of human experience manifest themselves. Such disruptions or modifications do not properly represent aberrations that cannot be understood or theoretically explained. In fact, they are motivated phenomena deriving from structurations of experience that are in themselves and constitutively precarious and open. That the type does not have a fixed definition, but only a morphological and open structuration, is grounded in different degrees of freedom, which remain preserved for the human being, even in psychic and psychiatric disease (see Fuchs 2021, 202–231).

From these observations, it is clear why we should recognize the explanatory power of exemplary case descriptions, and how this introduces a kind of normativity of the individual itself. As Blankenburg (1981, 15) emphasizes, the reference to a supra-individual and non-modifiable norm or standard simply to be applied to individual behavior would be an abstraction conflicting with reality. Rather, stan-

[12] This is also consistent with Goldstein's approach to the organism and its neurological disturbances. As has been shown, the intellectual reference for this and similar approaches is Goethe, and we can presume that, at least implicitly, Blankenburg's and Tellenbach's analyses are indebted to the same tradition, see Köchy (2022). In another context, this derivation is also recognizable in the notion of structure and its application in an explanatory function to the social and anthropological sciences, see Severi (2022).

dards can only be recognized by appreciating the singularity of each case. Yet, the description of singular cases embodies typological characteristics that entail a cluster of possible variations of a core-structure, and this can be used to explain other behaviors of the same individual or other individuals without tracing them back to general or abstract laws. Importantly, this explanatory process should not be understood as vertically referring to some kind of superordinated law. It should be understood *horizontally* in terms of family-resemblances and differences between singularities (see Borutti 2022; Van Duppen, 2022). Moreover, this does not exclude the possibility of experiences that are not horizontally assimilable to others, that are unprecedented in the sense of *beispiellos* (Waldenfels, 2015). This implies that models based on exemplary descriptions require constant revision and enrichment. Recognizing that individual description also has a specific explanatory power, irreducible to causation and generalization, is certainly crucial when it comes to the therapeutic and rehabilitating aims of psychiatry (Fuchs et al., 2019).

5 Conclusions

This paper was framed by two problems that underlie phenomenological warnings against the idea of explanatory models: the problem of possible reductionism related to the univocity of naturalistic causal models and the problem of generalization, which would lose track of the singularity of the individual highlighted by descriptive inquiries.

I have shown how both concerns are legitimate, given the orientation that the problem of explanation has taken in different research contexts. In particular, discussing causal explanatory models in relation to the foundational and conditional relations between nature and psyche, I have argued that the phenomenological approach to the living subject in relation to its environment strongly contrasts with reductionism. Considering this discussion, one might contend that phenomenology endorses a dichotomous model of the relation between explaining and understanding, thus subscribing to a dualistic approach to nature and psyche. That this is not the case becomes clear if one considers how the critique of reductionism leads to the recognition of circular causality regulating the interactions between the two realms of reality characterizing the living being in its relation to the environment. This already indicates that phenomenology aims at an integrative and holistic explanatory account of the living subject, and of the meaningful kinds of interaction between the living subject and its environment. Such an integrative approach acquires even greater force when considered in relation to exemplarity, especially as it is introduced in phenomenological psychopathology. Exemplarity permits the development of explanatory models based on the typological and normative valence of singularities, as concrete *Urbild*, thus preventing the uniformizing generalization that underlies top-down models of explanation.

Both the elaboration of explanatory accounts based on the reassessment of the interweaving between material reality and psychic reality in the living being and the elaboration of typologies based on individuality as an exemplary guiding-thread ultimately express the quest for a plural approach to explanation. Such an approach

recognizes the complexity of the living being, the variety of its experiences and the disturbances thereof.

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