

*c. partendo dall'ebraismo*

AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROPOSAL FOR APPLYING  
PHENOMENOLOGY TO CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
STUDIES: INVESTIGATING THE UNIVERSAL PROCESSING  
UNDERLYING JEWISH RITUALS

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the necessity of proposing an epistemological approach that focuses on both essential and empirical features of culture. Phenomenology, as we find in Edmund Husserl, is introduced as the main methodology enabling us to establish invariant or essential principles of human culture. We explain how phenomenology analyzes consciousness and its structures, showing a different approach from empirical studies of culture, such as cultural anthropology. Despite these epistemological divergencies, we argue that phenomenology and anthropology should collaborate, and we illustrate this through an analysis of particular Jewish rituals, as an instance of anthropological descriptions and phenomenological analysis. In the first part of the paper, we provide a brief introduction to phenomenology, by outlining the most important concepts to understand this methodology, such as intentionality, constitution, and experiential layers. In the second part, we will use the previous essential analysis of culture as guidelines to analyze a concrete culture, like Judaism, with a focus on specific rituals. While analyzing Judaism unavoidably requires empirical observations in their various forms, phenomenology provides us with a method through which enucleating universal principles underlying contextual and historical elements, which need to be considered as invariant in each human group.

**Keywords:** *Phenomenology; Culture; Cultural anthropology; Husserl; Judaism.*

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Each time we investigate culture in different fields and topics, empirical studies inevitably collect data from specific groups, dealing with distinct cultural, ecological, and social contexts, coinciding with the traditional approach that encompasses both humanistic and scientific studies.

To this extent, we recall an “old” philosophical topic, that is the existence of essences, universals, or invariant structures, which are to be found in our cultural experience<sup>1</sup>.

We contextualize this debate with the Husserlian phenomenology, which we present as a philosophical method that offers us the possibility to work simultaneously at the psychological and anthropological levels. This method is recognized to offer the study of consciousness or experiential structures, which is the epistemological ground where essences can be enucleated.

Outside of any kind of metaphysical conceptions, the concept of essence in phenomenology has an epistemological meaning, and it is the means through which it becomes possible to describe universal structures of the human experience. The essence of culture lies in the general structures that enable each kind of culture to be defined as such, while each concrete culture is a fulfillment of pre-existing structures, by the means of concrete historical contexts. We introduce such an approach by defending its importance in studying different cultures, with the aim of looking for general processing within different contexts.

In the first part of the paper, we introduce details about the phenomenological method, aiming to propose an alternative, but also complementary, approach in cultural studies. Subsequently, we elucidate how it is possible to identify essential structures of our experience by introducing various concepts of the phenomenological method. The second part provides more details about applying phenomenology to discover an ontology of culture. To exemplify how essential investigations and empirical anthropological analyses can work together, we will apply the phenomenological method to analyze the Jewish culture, with a focus on a

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<sup>1</sup> Such a debate can be referred both to traditional epistemological and metaphysical debates in the history of philosophy as well as to cultural anthropology. Cfr. T. H. Eriksen, F. S. Nielsen, *A history of anthropology*, Pluto Press, London 2013; C. P. Kottak, *Cultural anthropology: Appreciating cultural diversity* (Eighteenth edition), McGraw-Hill, New York 2019.

specific ritual: Pessa'h (Passover). In our opinion, the nexus between the first and the second part of the paper tries to respond to the complexity of applying phenomenology to empirical social sciences<sup>2</sup>, proposing a balance between eidetic and empirical analysis.

Although it appears to be an isolated attempt of philosophical investigation, pure phenomenological research enables us to deeply investigate specific cultures, by enucleating general principles (essences) of cultural phenomena and, at the same time, recognizing their empirical occurrences (fulfillments).

At this stage, we are introducing a typical humanistic approach, such as ethnographies or religious studies, which focus on specific cultural contents along with their historical genesis. Of course, in cultural anthropology, we also encounter a theoretical approach, which could appear as an attempt to achieve universal conceptions of culture. Many authors are renowned for their theoretical conceptions about culture and society<sup>3</sup>. We argue that such an approach differs from phenomenology in several ways, albeit an exhaustive explanation of this difference would require another work. For this reason, we do not focus on these classical approaches but instead on ethnographies and all other methods that consist of collections of data, like historical documents or field observations. Each kind of collection of empirical data is distinct from phenomenology, since essences are a priori condition to experience any kind of contingent event, as we will explain in the next sections. This second feature of cultural anthropology is very common in contemporary studies<sup>4</sup>, since the majority of contemporary cultural studies focus on divergencies between different cultures.

Our introduction of Jewish rituals starts with an empirical study of them, by emphasizing the singularity or unicity of specific rituals, but their analysis will be led through phenomenology, focusing on consciousness processes that are universal in each cultural group, despite the difference in their contents.

Despite such an epistemological divergence, we discuss how both the approaches should work together: looking for universal principles of human

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. B. Pula, *What Does a Phenomenological Theory of Social Objects Mean?*, in «Human Studies», 45(3), 2022, pp. 509-528; C. Ferencz-Flatz, *The Eidetics of the Unimaginable. What a Phenomenologist can Learn from Ethnomethodology*, in «Human Studies», pp. 1-19.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. J. G. Frazer, *The golden bough*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK 1922; C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural anthropology*, Basic books, New York 2008; Id., *Myth and meaning*, Routledge, London 2013; É. Durkheim, *The division of labor in society*, Simon and Schuster, New York 2014.

<sup>4</sup> C. Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures* (Vol. 5019), Basic books, New York 1973.

culture but, at the same time, recognizing these principles within specific cultural traditions.

Phenomenology provides guidelines for enucleating universal processing within specific cultures. However, empirical-qualitative studies are also recognized as crucial in this regard, as the phenomenological method is applied in these descriptions.

### *1. The need for a science of culture: a brief introduction to the phenomenological method*

Investigating culture in its essential form allows us to develop a science (*Wissenschaft*) of culture, in the philosophical sense, as an investigation of the experiential dimension that characterizes the human being as such. If we are capable of enucleating essential descriptions of our experience, we can also analyze the essence of culture, by looking for common principles that characterize the human group in general.

Every time we discuss culture, a weak relativism is inevitably implied, as cultural anthropology and empirical studies show<sup>5</sup>. Cultures are different because each group lives in its own context and history in different ways, which refers to empirical components or historical facts. Despite these divergences among cultures, each group shares the properties of having a

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<sup>5</sup> Talking about cultural studies can refer to both the traditional humanistic approach (e.g. cultural anthropological or historical studies) and the empirical ones (e.g. cultural psychology and cultural neuroscience). Recent scientific debates are also exploring how cultural anthropology can be applied in empirical sciences, which, in our opinion, demonstrate a clear interest in our topic. Cfr. A. Norenzayan, S. J. Heine, *Psychological universals: What are they and how can we know?*, in «Psychological Bulletin», 131(5), 2005, p. 763; M. J. Kral, *Psychology and anthropology: Intersubjectivity and epistemology in an interpretive cultural science*, in «Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology», 27(2-1), 2007, p. 257; J. Y. Chiao, A. R. Hariri, T. Harada, Y. Mano, N. Sadato, T. B. Parrish, T. Iidaka, *Theory and methods in cultural neuroscience*, in «Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience», 5(2-3), 2010, pp. 356-361; H. S. Kim, J. Y. Sasaki, *Cultural neuroscience: Biology of the mind in cultural contexts*, in «Annual Review of Psychology», 65, 2014, pp. 487-514; Q. Wang, *Why should we all be cultural psychologists? Lessons from the study of social cognition*, in «Perspectives on Psychological Science», 11(5), 2016, pp. 583-596; O. Lizardo, B. Sepulvado, D. S. Stoltz, D. S., M. A. Taylor, *What can cognitive neuroscience do for cultural sociology?*, in «American Journal of Cultural Sociology», 8, 2020, pp. 3-28; T. Gao, X. Han, D. Bang, S. Han, *Cultural differences in neurocognitive mechanisms underlying believing*, in «Neuroimage», 250, 2022, p. 118954.

“culture”. If we recognize that something like a culture exists in every human group, we need to ask how this is possible, and this opens up investigations of the pure or phenomenological dimensions.

The universal existence of culture within each specific group suggests to us that this cannot merely be an empirical or contingent principle. Not coincidentally, such a feature can be explained through the phenomenological method, with its focus on the concept of consciousness as the primary epistemological ground<sup>6</sup>.

The search for universal principles, or essences, could appear as a position facing cultural relativism. Of course, we claim that the defense of a strong cultural relativism is an enormous issue not only in philosophical arguments, like ethical and political ones but in science as well. Relativism is inevitably implied in cultural science, but if we mean to deeply analyze culture, we cannot reduce general principles on empirical contingencies<sup>7</sup>, since this would result in a return on radical empiricism.

## 2. *Pure consciousness as the primary epistemological ground*

In order to understand how a phenomenological analysis of culture, in its essential form, can be developed, it is necessary to discuss many details of the phenomenological method. In this first part of the paper, we introduce the prerequisites that we consider necessary to explain our example of the Jewish culture, recognizing that we need to propose some simplifications.

It should be noted that the most important concept in phenomenology is consciousness, phenomenology being a science of the essence of consciousness. In any case, to explain what we mean by “consciousness”, it is very important to specify that we are not dealing with concepts like the Self, the psychological I, the real person, or any kind of individuality in the first place: consciousness is our center of functions and elaborations of the world, with its own universal structures. For this reason, before becoming a psychology or an anthropology (which are empirical or “objective sciences”<sup>8</sup>, phenomenology is engaged in “transcendental” research, which can also be understood as a theory of knowledge (*Erkenntnistheorie*).

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<sup>6</sup> E. Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, First Book, Trans. F. Kersten, Springer, Dordrecht 1982, pp. 171-173.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, Trans. Dorion Cairns, M. Nijhoff, The Hague 1960, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ivi*, p. 49.

When we talk about anthropology the concept of knowledge is more appropriate compared to others with psychological connotations, such as psychical adjustment or development. Culture clearly plays a major role in shaping the psychological or personal dimensions but, in order to exert such effects, a specific culture needs to exist as a shared product, a collective knowledge (or “Geist”)<sup>9</sup>. In other words, consciousness allows us to develop, or constitute, knowledge about our social world, that is our culture.

From now on, whenever we speak about consciousness, we mean pure consciousness: the field of research within which it is possible to describe the human experience in general, since this dimension cannot be reduced to the subjective experience of a specific individual. On the contrary, phenomenology uses other terms to denote the individual, like the real psychic subject, the real person, the psychological I<sup>10</sup>, or the Self in contemporary terms<sup>11</sup>.

Consciousness is the center from which the human being is correlated with the world, and this correlation must be analyzed in terms of different cognitive and psychical processes (Erlebnisse) with their different modalities, references to different kinds of objects (intentionality), experiential structures and eidetic laws. It follows, that consciousness is to be understood as the epistemological ground through which we discover essential descriptions of our experience, but, at the same time, it is the general center of processing that belongs to each human being.

Our consciousness is related to the world, but the world is not just a general category. Indeed, it is made up of different categories or kinds of objects<sup>12</sup>, that are organized in layers, or experiential strata<sup>13</sup>. Each of these definitions is not personal, or existential, as they are universal in each individual and group. The ability to seize essential descriptions by focusing on pure consciousness, meant as a general center of elaborations of the world, implies

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. *Id.*, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, Second book, Trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*; A. Ales Bello, *The sense of things: Toward a phenomenological realism* (Vol. 118), Springer, Dordrecht 2015, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. D. Perrotta, *Consciousness and brain mechanisms: Epistemological investigations between phenomenology and clinical neuroscience*, in «Rivista Internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia», 12(1), 2021, pp. 31-43.

<sup>12</sup> D. Zahavi, *Phenomenology: The basics*, Routledge, London 2019, p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> D. Perrotta, *Coscienza e ragione: dalla fenomenologia descrittiva alla fenomenologia normativa*, Tab edizioni, Roma 2021.

that each human being is capable to carry out the same operation and obtain identical outcomes.

The field of phenomenological correlations, between consciousness and the world, is primarily analyzed with regard to psychical and cognitive functions, but this functioning should not be meant as conventional psychology. Functions are not momentary mental operations in phenomenology, but they are constitutive processes that give form to the objects or entities that characterize our entire world<sup>14</sup>.

To understand consciousness, specific functions (*Erlebnisse*) must be examined, each of them with their unique structural features, like perceptions, beliefs, judgments, desires, and hopes. The correlation between conscious acts and related objects is a main methodological feature of phenomenology<sup>15</sup>. In simpler words, each function, like perceiving or representing, engages us with the world in a different manner, with different modalities that demand essential descriptions.

### 3. *Experiential layers and phenomenological constitution*

One of the main features of phenomenological analysis regards the concept of phenomenological constitution, through which we can explain the constitutive role of functions (*Erlebnisse*). With this approach we investigate how our consciousness gives form to the external world and, at the same time, explain how things manifest to our consciousness.

Not coincidentally, pure phenomenology refrains from asserting theses about concrete experiences, but rather concentrates on their essences. By discussing kinds of objects, categories, species, or types, as customary in this approach, it becomes evident that we are not discussing the psychological dimensions or concrete historical events: instead, this approach is related to ontological definitions. In phenomenology, ontology is strongly related to the way we experience different things or entities, but the concept of experience inherently involves cognition and similar processes to be explained.

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<sup>14</sup> D. Zahavi, *Husserl's legacy: Phenomenology, metaphysics, and transcendental philosophy*, Oxford University Press, D. Perrotta, *Coscienza e ragione: dalla fenomenologia descrittiva alla fenomenologia normativa*, Tab edizioni, Roma 2021.

<sup>15</sup> D. Moran, *Edmund Husserl: Founder of phenomenology*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 35; D. Zahavi, *Husserl's legacy: Phenomenology, metaphysics, and transcendental philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, pp. 83-84; D. Perrotta, *Coscienza e ragione: dalla fenomenologia descrittiva alla fenomenologia normativa*, Tab edizioni, Roma 2021.

If we define culture (Geist) as a general region of our experience, then we are delineating ontological definitions, since they are grounded on specific consciousnesses acts or processes. Indeed, cultural phenomena cannot be experienced or manifested in the same way we perceive a material object or reflect on our personal history. There are specific eidetic or essential laws that need to be analyzed. The concept of constitution enables us to understand how culture is formed through consciousness elaborations and experiential interactions with the world, that are universal in each human being.

Phenomenological constitutions refer to laws of manifestations, or eidetic laws<sup>16</sup>, that are necessary conditions without which we cannot experience specific classes of objects. In other words, investigating how cultural objects, such as rituals, are experienced, in terms of functions, layers, and components, leads to descriptions of essential or eidetic laws that cannot be confuted by any empirical observations, since they are necessary conditions to experience these “genus and species”<sup>17</sup>. Thus, the analysis of phenomenological constitution cannot be accomplished by observing specific individuals or groups. Indeed, eidetic laws can also be meant as necessary conditions, and we describe them by analyzing their features in general concepts (i.e. categories, classes, species, types, etc.) that, in philosophical terms are universals. Conversely, examining specific individuals or historical groups involves an inductive analysis of singulars. As a result, analyzing singulars does not allow us to enucleate essences or universal, instead we need to consider the latter as fulfillment of pre-existing structures.

In other words, if we study millions of different cultures inductively, as cultural anthropology does, we cannot find evidence that contradicts phenomenological descriptions, since the essences of our experience are conditions of possibilities within each culture. However, such a claim does not deny the application of these approaches in investigating real cultures, as we propose in the second part of the paper.

Now, if we want to understand how a cultural object, as a general category or species, can be experienced, we need to engage in several phenomenological research, starting from the lowest level, that is the perceptive and sensorimotor layer, where a cultural object or entity cannot be experienced yet.

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<sup>16</sup> E. Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, First Book, Trans. F. Kersten, Springer, Dordrecht 1982, p. 138.

<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, p. 24.

This kind of investigation is developed by the means of the epoché or the phenomenological reduction, through which it is possible to “bracket” the information we already have about the world<sup>18</sup>. In simpler words, in our daily life (the natural attitude) each experience, such as personal or collective, is combined with different functions, layers, psychical or cognitive products, like thoughts, feelings, and ideas, which acquire sense through combinations of several components and their reciprocal influence. By joining in the phenomenological approach, we become able to “bracket”, suspend or inhibit certain components of our experience, so as to describe their essential laws of organization and combination.

If we want to begin our analyses at the simplest level of our experience, we need to methodically exclude from our investigation the higher-level layers, or upper strata, such as culture.

#### *4. Perceptive and sensorimotor interactions with the world*

To clarify this methodological point, we start by analyzing it from the most basic level. Investigating perceptions in their essence, it is revealed that they are related to perceptive objects, and every instance of this type is experience follows universal properties.

Perceptive objects, like an apple or a table, possess specific properties and modalities of manifestation, that are mediated by our consciousness operations, or acts. To comprehend and analyze how a particular typology of an object can be experienced, we need to determine which type of function is a necessary condition to reveal it. For instance, experiencing a material object requires perception, but this process alone is not sufficient. A series of perceptions are necessary, and they interact with each other to organize this experience<sup>19</sup>, along with other functions, especially representing and anticipating. Indeed, if I want to interact with a material object, like an apple, sensorial information about its color, taste, and morphology must be collected.

This experiential layer, where perceptions are organized, is also a prerequisite (a condition of possibility or a necessary condition) to experience

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<sup>18</sup> A. Ales Bello, *The sense of things: Toward a phenomenological realism* (Vol. 118), Springer, Dordrecht 2015, pp. 6-7.

<sup>19</sup> Consciousness also comprehends temporal and associative structures that should be introduced to completely explain this point (E. Husserl, *Analyses concerning passive and active synthesis: Lectures on transcendental logic* (Vol. 9), Springer Science & Business Media, Dordrecht 2001).

affective states. If I intend to consume some fruit, I already hold a representation of this species that enables me to anticipate its features, such as its flavor, which elicits a desire to feel it. To put it simply, a perception of this material object is organized through other perceptions, as well as representations, anticipations, and other processes<sup>20</sup>.

This level of description is not strongly related to personal or existential dimensions: we can “bracketing” our personal experience and again experiencing these types of objects in this manner, as these are essential descriptions of our perceptive interactions with the world. Moreover, it should be noted that this kind of manifestation of material objects is insufficient to describe our own experience of culture, since both the Self and culture are something of more complex. We cannot properly perceive our personal memories, instead we perceive our body visually from our retinal coordinates, or directly via tactile information. Although simplified, this example already demonstrates different laws of manifestation in distinct experiential layers, which would require several descriptions.

The perceptive dimension is recognized as the main layer of interaction with the world, where the “things themselves” are manifested. However, interacting with the world makes us aware of several other layers to analyze. Every experiential layer, or “constitutive strata”<sup>21</sup>, results from the stratification and sedimentation of cognitive and psychical operations<sup>22</sup>. It was pointed out that lower-level layers are necessary but not sufficient conditions to experience the higher-level ones. This claim should clarify that culture cannot be experienced without understanding how the lower-level layers are organized by our consciousness, but, at the same time, how this material (Hyletic) level is constituted by other (noetic) processes or moments<sup>23</sup>. If we now join in details of the affective sphere of our experience, we discover other complex functions that need to be examined in their potential expression, and we exemplify the case of desires. When we speak about desires, it is typical to mean them in the existential sense. Despite their importance in constituting the Self, this function operates on different

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<sup>20</sup> E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, Second book, Trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1989, pp. 46-50.

<sup>21</sup> *Ivi*, p.15.

<sup>22</sup> D. Moran, *What is the phenomenological approach? Revisiting intentional explication*, in «Phenomenology and Mind», (15), 2018, pp. 72-90.

<sup>23</sup> A. Ales Bello, *The divine in Husserl and other explorations* (Vol. 98), Springer Science & Business Media, Dordrecht 2008, pp. 46-49.

levels of complexity that possess essential features. These features become apparent by analyzing the intentionality of the process, or its directness. Prior to investigating an empirical desire, such as a specific personal or collective occurrence, we analyze how the desire is related, directed, to various kinds of objects, which allows us to analyze its different modalities, as “predelineated potentialities”<sup>24</sup>. If we are desiring a sensorial-perceptive object, we are again interacting within the sensorial-perceptive environment that recalls what we have said about perceptions and formation of sensorial representations. In order to desire something, such as food or a place to relax, we anticipate bodily sensations, representing the conditions that can fulfill this desire, as well as planning a strategy to achieve this goal, and so on. To describe this engagement between emotions and cognition there is still no need to talk about identity or the Self. If our desire is related to sensorial-perceptive objects (its intentionality), we are still talking of environmental interactions, as they do not need a personal experience to acquire sense, since they are analyzed in their possibilities rather than real existences.

Fulfillments of desire can be analyzed in terms of rewards by following this level of sensorial interactions. Additionally, the desire can also be analyzed following its directness to more complex objects or entities, such as existential or cultural desires, which leads the research to a greater complexity. The function, or noesis, is the same, but its relation to different kinds of objects gives rise to further modalities that require further essential descriptions.

In simpler terms: desiring is a common psychical function, but desiring to taste a meal has different properties compared to desiring to earn money. While taste has a direct sensorial effect on our body, as we expect to experience pleasure, earning money is an indirect source of pleasure, since we need to use this social institution to buy some rewards. This example demonstrates how the same process, a desire, acquires vastly different properties when directed toward different layers or entities (intentionality), like the interpersonal and cultural ones.

##### *5. Intellectual interactions with the world*

So far, we have not yet identified a level that enables us to explain culture. The perceptive, emotional, and sensorimotor layers are prerequisites to

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<sup>24</sup> E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, Trans. Dorion Cairns, M. Nijhoff, The Hague 1960, p. 45.

acquiring knowledge about the world (as sources of Hyletic or material data), but this form of knowledge remains at a pre-categorical level that we share with animals.

To comprehend how culture is formed, we must introduce additional functions and entities that enable us to conceptualize, categorize, make inferences, and so on. By introducing intellectual functions or acts, such as judgments, beliefs, doubts, and opinions, we enrich our experience, but we also constitute new kinds of entities that make the world a human world. “We know that objects, *no matter how constituted* (objects of any region whatever, objects of any species, genus) can be *substrates for certain categorial synthesis* and can, as constitutive *elements*, enter into the ‘*categorial formations of objects of higher level*’<sup>25</sup>.

By introducing more complex experiential layers in our analysis, we are not eliminating the lower ones. On the contrary, the perceptive, material (or Hyletic), data becomes the ground on which we direct our consciousness operations, so as to constitute new meaning and forms.

Introducing logical-linguistic processes in our experience results in gaining new essential features of our experience that need to be investigated in order to understand how we share a culture.

Even in this case, this level remains a prerequisite, a condition of possibility, to share a culture. To share knowledge about the world we need to possess concepts, and combine them in propositions and utterances, that are clearly operations that the perceptive interaction with the world cannot explain. We become able to categorize events, and these events are also elaborated in more complex forms, that become cultural components, such as collective beliefs and values.

Indeed, by considering the logical-linguistic level, we also acquire the ability to express more complex forms of beliefs and anticipations, as well as express judgments or inferences. Recognizing our ability to create ideal entities (or spiritual), this level allows us to understand how we share knowledge about the world and create a culture as a collective dimension that introduces new experiential properties or “spiritual predicates”<sup>26</sup>.

From this perspective, perceptive or material data can now be shaped by other functions, like beliefs, judgments, doubt, opinions, or cognitions in

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<sup>25</sup> E. Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, Second book, Trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1989, pp. 19-20.

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*.

general, that can now be defined as intellectual processes or acts. Reflecting on the interrelated processes of specific categories of objects, we develop or constitute a new sense of each of these kinds. These processes are not just momentary expressions: they become sedimented thoughts that create stratifications of knowledge, which is the level where we find cultural meanings.

This preliminary analysis is important to understand the noetic, or cognitive, components of cultural entities, since they are strongly enriched by intellectual functions that delineate their sense, modify their contents, and so on. This level also enriches our affective experience, as our objects of interactions are no longer just directly perceived sensorial information, but rather meaningful entities that also motivate new affective states. In this manner, it becomes possible to understand how cultural feelings and values arise.

#### *6. An ontology of culture*

The concept of ontology has a specific and detailed meaning in phenomenology that differs from its contemporary usage. Speaking of an ontology of culture, indeed, does not refer to an abstraction of empirical data as observed in real culture or empirical studies. On the contrary, starting from the epistemological ground of pure consciousness, we enucleate the a priori conditions, or eidetic laws, that make each occurrence of culture possible<sup>27</sup>. If we mean culture as one of the most complex layers of human experience, we need to analyze how our consciousness organizes its structures and contents, in a universal or invariant sense.

To clarify, we encompass customs, values, norms, rituals, deities, and so on, within the stratifications of cultural contents. Every content (Noema) possesses an essence that demands descriptions and relates to different

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<sup>27</sup> The concept of social ontology is also often used to describe this phenomenological level (cfr. P. Meindl, D. Zahavi, *From communication to communalization: a Husserlian account*. In «*Continental Philosophy Review*», 2023, pp. 1-17). However, for the purpose of this paper, we prefer to use the concept of ontology of culture as we are not focusing on the intersubjectivity, with the meaning of dynamic shared interactions that involves processes like collective intentionality, empathy (Einfühlung) and communication. Culture is meant as a shared knowledge (Geist) that encompasses specific entities, like rituals, they possess their essence. Yet, this definition is coherent with the Husserl's notion of "cultural sedimentations" (A. Ales Bello, *The sense of things: Toward a phenomenological realism* (Vol. 118), Springer, Dordrecht 2015, p. 49; Ead. *Il senso del sacro: dall'arcaicità alla desacralizzazione*, Castelvecchi, Roma 2014).

experiential layers and entities, with their proper laws of combinations, or “series of lawfully related noemata”<sup>28</sup> .

A clear understanding of how to develop an ontology of culture entails exploring how each class of cultural objects can be experienced, what their condition of possibilities of manifestation are, and how they relate to one another to form culture as a whole. A cultural object needs to be mainly meant as a collective product of our thoughts, feelings, ideas, and so on. These collective properties denote these levels as the enabling condition of collective consciousness (or “social consciousness”)<sup>29</sup> which is characterized by the sharing of knowledge about the world.

Moreover, it is also worth specifying that culture is not just another experiential layer, but we propose that it opens a lot of different levels of analysis, given its multidimensional form, which can be analyzed in detail.

The cultural context is a broad category that does not facilitate us to discriminate detailed analysis, since it is composed of various levels, or layers, that can also be defined as structures. Up to this point, this claim is consistent with anthropological conceptions, when family or kinship, morality, law, and others are conceived as structures of culture<sup>30</sup>. Culture is clearly constituted by all of these factors, as the analysis of each of these levels leads to different phenomenological descriptions, but they can also be investigated in a concrete culture, where they are observed as intertwined and combined. In simpler words, rituality has its structural properties in each culture, but each culture has its own form of rituality with unique contents.

Essential descriptions are relevant in identifying invariant principles in concrete cultural experiences, whereas detailed phenomenological investigations are required to better explain each layer and guide us to grasp universal structures in specific cultures.

Now it should be clearer that similar investigations do not confuse the cultural level with the personal one, as we suggest it is implicit in contemporary empirical studies. For instance, morality is a cultural layer if it is understood as composed of shared moral precepts or values, knowledge of

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<sup>28</sup> D. Moran, *What is the phenomenological approach? Revisiting intentional explication*, in «Phenomenology and Mind», (15), 2018, pp. 72-90.

<sup>29</sup> E. Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, Second book, cit., p. 194.

<sup>30</sup> D. Perrotta, E. A. Meloni, *Natura e cultura nella genesi della coscienza collettiva*. Mimesis, Milano 2022.

customs, and so on<sup>31</sup>, but it becomes a personal factor if we analyze how an individual lives these very same moral conceptions, and this latter point would open another topic, that is more related to psychical adjustment or psychological traits, as commonly analyzed in empirical psychology<sup>32</sup>

With this distinction in mind, we could proceed with a amount of different phenomenological research, that explains how each cultural component, like collective values or moral precepts are experienced and, as a consequence, what ontology they have, and how they are elaborated through different functions (Noesis).

Indeed, if we maintain a pure phenomenological approach, it is possible to enucleate evidence about each of these layers, or experiential structures, since they are characterized by specific functions and contents.

For instance, the function of believing cannot have a content like morality in general, since morality is a composed structure, thus it is made of several entities with their own laws of organization or composition. On the contrary, believing can be generally defined as directed to a belief, but the belief can be characterized in a large amount of different senses<sup>33</sup>. There are beliefs about a specific sensorial or affective representation that are prerequisites for interacting with the natural environment, which are not properly cultural. Beliefs about collective values, conceptions about our society, and so on, are cultural components that introduce more complex essential descriptions, and they acquire this meaning because they are directed to more complex entities, or noemata, that are shared objectivities.

If we analyze cultural values and feelings, we find the same peculiarity. Before investigating historical existent values, for instance, they need to be analyzed in their intellectual and affective coordinates, components and relations with other entities, constitution through different layers, and so on. These are topics that remain pure phenomenology, as we are describing essences of cultural components.

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<sup>31</sup> D. Perrotta, *Coscienza e ragione: dalla fenomenologia descrittiva alla fenomenologia normativa*, Tab edizioni, Roma 2021.

<sup>32</sup> N. Ellemers, J. Van Der Toorn, Y. Paunov & T. Van Leeuwen, *The psychology of morality: A review and analysis of empirical studies published from 1940 through 2017*, in «Personality and Social Psychology Review», 23(4), 2019, pp. 332-366.

<sup>33</sup> E. Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, First Book, Trans. F. Kersten, Springer, Dordrecht 1982, pp. 251-255.

### *7. Phenomenological analyses of the essence of the ritual*

Next, we exemplify the previously stated epistemological premises, by investigating the ritual as a cultural object (Noema), analyzing its underlying constitutive functions (Erlebnisse or Noesis), different layers of organizations, and whole-part relations.

We will provide an example that maintains the phenomenological attitude, aimed to enucleate essences, but, at the same time, we will also introduce historical factors (or empirical fulfillments), explaining how these two approaches can work together.

First, let us recall that an investigation of the “ritual” can be approached as an interest in the essence that belongs to each occurrence of it (phenomenology), and as a specific ritual (cultural anthropology).

Each ritual necessarily shares specific properties to define it essentially: at the same time, not every ritual is identical to others. In simpler words, each ritual possesses its necessary laws of appearance, and within this regularity a specific ritual can be recognized.

To understand the essence of the ritual, as an experiential content, we need to investigate how a ritual is experienced or manifested in our consciousness. In any case, these general features of the ritual cannot be determined through induction; otherwise they would not be considered necessary for all human cultures. This is the primary distinction between phenomenology and cultural anthropology. Our aim is to discover universal processes that are shared across all cultures.

Every human group shares these regularities because they elaborate a ritual with the very same processes, albeit in very different contexts. Our consciousness or experiential structures are the source of this universal processing. Understanding how a ritual is experienced requires referring to constitutive functions, both in general terms and in their historical occurrences.

The first universal statement is that a ritual cannot exist without a group that recognizes its meaning. In other words, a ritual cannot be understood solely by examining the personal experience, being this entity a collective product.

Culture introduces several intertwined experiential layers to be explained, albeit each cultural component maintains distinct properties. In other words, a ritual is a highly complex intellectual and affective product that requires to be analyzed at various levels to comprehend its sense. It encompasses semantic, emotional, and moral connotations, as well as values, practices, and so on.

In simpler words, through phenomenology, it is possible to investigate the most important cultural components within their correlation to psychological, cognitive, and logical processing, as well as their compositions in terms of different parts or moments, such as representations, propositions, values, and so on. To this extent, we are not investigating the individual in relation to his culture, but the group in processing and constituting their own worldview (*Weltanschauung*), or culture.

This paper provides an example of Pessa'h, which is a Jewish festival characterized by a plethora of very complex rituals, which are composed of the sharing of thoughts, feelings, ideas, and values, that belong to the entire group. While each of the former concepts possess their own essence, along with different relations with specific functions, within a specific culture they are already interconnected, being the reciprocal causation among these entities that give sense to a specific content<sup>34</sup>, like a ritual.

This multi-dimensional definition implies that a ritual cannot be defined just as an intellectual or affective entity, as it simultaneously possesses peculiarities of both. Furthermore, the necessary relation between Pessa'h, as a festivity, and its several rituals, already gives us to idea of a very sophisticated conceptual architecture, where each of these rituals would have no meaning outside this specific temporal context.

For instance, examining perceptive or sensorimotor interactions with the world (Section 4) does not allow us to completely grasp the sense of cultural entities. Every ritual can be completely explained neither by sensorial features nor by motor ones. Of course, each ritual involves movements and practices, but these are effects of the meaning that a ritual possesses, as a shared ideal entity. During the ritual, there are material objects with which the bodies interact, but the sensorial touch has a symbolic meaning that cannot be explained by the sensorial information alone, it means something else, and this can only be understood in cognitive (Noetic) terms. For instance, although visual information is necessary to interact with cultural artifacts, it is not a sufficient condition to explain the sense of these cultural products.

The sense of the ritual is not confined to physical space as it is not solely made of material objects, indeed it is created by the exchange of thoughts, memories, and so on, distributed in a shared temporality, that ascribe sense to

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<sup>34</sup> This peculiar form of causality is defined by Husserl as “motivation” (E. Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, Second book, cit.).

these sensorial interactions. All these statements are to be meant as universals, they belong to the essence of the ritual and this essence encompasses all the specific instances of rituals.

Indeed, to create and share the meaning of the ritual, abstractive processes, such as categorization, concept formations, as well as inferences or syllogisms, or generally intellective acts (Section 5), are necessary. It is important to specify that once expressed, these functions remain as a historical substrate of meaning: they are not just momentary processes as they constitute cultural stratifications that characterize the ritual.

To understand this interpretation in cognitive terms, a ritual is analyzed as experienced through complex functions: beliefs about the social contexts, judgments about shared knowledge of the group tradition, which are made of complex semantic nets, as well as inferences and syllogisms, faith that make this ritual open to theological and religious meaning, and so on.

These functions and contents should not be considered merely as momentary processes or cognitive dispositions of individuals, but they possess essential features that collectively constitute shared contents over time. Constitutive functions are expressed not only in specific temporal moments, but they persist or be sedimented over time, so as to develop a historical and cultural context, through shared ideas, thoughts, feelings, and so on.

#### *8. Diving deeper: phenomenological analysis of Jewish rituals*

Up to this point, we have analyzed ritual in its universality, through descriptions that are to be understood as universal in any empirical occurrence. However, cultural anthropologists are correct in asserting that even very small groups are in some ways different and unique. According to these perspectives, phenomenological descriptions remain valid and apodictic since there is no way to experience culture outside of these eidetic laws, but we also recognize that each group is unique in some way. Nevertheless, pure or eidetic analysis supplies us with very sophisticated tools to analyze specific cultures, in order to identify convergencies and divergencies in cognitive elaborations.

This paper proposes an analysis of specific rituals of Pessa'h, a notorious festival of the Jewish community.

A specific element of Pessa'h that is particularly noteworthy in this context is the chametz: a Hebrew term referring to various fermenting foods, referring to bread, whereas leaven is related to Aramaic חמץ (Cham'a) which means "to ferment, leaven". Such a definition only applies to products containing one of

the five types of grains (wheat, spelt, oats, barley, and rye) blended with water and allowed to rise beyond eighteen minutes. Without going into details, the key point is to explain the strong symbolic significance of a seemingly simple chemical process; in fact, these foods are prohibited during Pessa'h only after fermentation. In fact, matzah (unleavened bread) is made with flour and water but without a fermentation process given the mandatory requirement that the entire process including baking take place in less than 18 minutes, meaning that the prohibition applies to the process and not to the matter of the food.

In other words, the Chametz is a category of legumes that has a strong symbolic meaning, and it is also foundational to various Pessa'h rituals. Most of the rituals of Pessa'h acquire sense in relation to these legumes, as these legumes introduce the necessity to control or inhibit instinctive actions, through the introduction of structured rules or prohibitions that constitute the sense of several rituals.

To sum up: Chametz is a Jewish term that refers to several foods that ferment. Without introducing details, the key point is to explain the strong symbolical meaning of an apparently simple chemical process, indeed, these foods are prohibited during Pessa'h only after the fermentation, which means that the prohibition applies to the processes and not to the matter of the food. The Jewish community has an attitude that tends to make the past always directed toward the future, and this is also characteristic of the symbology of the Chametz. The fermentation goes beyond its natural meaning by remembering the slavery in Egypt. The Jews had to flee quickly from Egypt, and they did not have time to leave this food leavening. What seems a contingent event has become a thick symbol in the Jewish tradition, by remembering this historical event, and this event itself becomes a memory that symbolizes the physical and temporal liberation, of a time that belonged to Egyptian culture. Consequently, the Chametz is considered the symbols that acquire the meaning of these historical events, and this is the reason why Jews need to eliminate from their houses these foods during Pessa'h. Other than prohibiting eating Chametz, it is also worth mentioning the prohibition of owning it and profiting from it.

So far, it should be clearer why these foods are prohibited, albeit simplified. Another important component of Pessa'h rituality will now be introduced, and then we will conclude by interpreting these anthropological data through phenomenology.

If we want to comprehend why a food should be forbidden, we must analyze a specific semantic net of prohibition to which the kitniyot is added.

Not by chance, the kitniyot is prohibited for the very reason that the chametz is prohibited.

Kitniyot is a Hebrew word meaning legumes. During the Middle Ages, this custom emerged and the following foods were banned: rice, millet, beans, lentils, peas, sesame and mustard seeds, corn, dried green beans, jack beans, dried chickpeas, soybeans, sunflower seeds, and poppy seeds; in contrast, coffee, tea, garlic, walnuts, radishes, and olives are allowed. There are three reasons why the ban on kitniyot developed: (a) kitniyot are harvested and processed in the same way as chametz, (b) they are ground into flour and cooked just like chametz (so people might mistakenly believe that if they can eat kitniyot, they can also eat chametz), (c) it might contain mixed chametz grains (so people who eat kitniyot might inadvertently eat chametz).

Within the relation between the chametz and the kitniyot is possible to observe a strong cognitive connotation. Even though there are several explanations, that also diverge among different Jewish sub-groups, historically, kitniyot and chametz were collected in analogous places and modalities, and such a state of affair led the ancient rabbis to fear a possible contamination, or confusion that could lead Jews to eat chametz, also due to their perceptive similarity. It follows that this first explanation is related to perceptive similarity and the possible mistake is referred to human actions.

Furthermore, there is another symbolic meaning which applies to the concept of contamination. The presence in the same place could lead the kitniyot to be contaminated by the chametz. The concept of contamination is incredibly common in human rituals and, for this reason, there are also various rituals that elaborate its contrary: the purification.

Of course, such an anthropological description is too brief to fully comprehend such a complex ritual. For the aim of this paper, we just introduced some details in order to propose an example of collaborations, as we can now return to the phenomenological analysis.

At the perceptive and sensorimotor levels (Section 4), it is clear that a legume (kitniyot) is just a mere legume that can also be manipulated, and tasted, with its own visual and flavor properties, and so on. If we now introduce the linguistic-conceptual level, we do not find any cultural sense yet. I can reflect on this legume like a general food, combining its general category with perceptual features through concepts in propositions: the kitniyot has this color, this shape, and so on. Even with the introduction of the latter form of abstraction, we are still far from the ritual sense, even though we are already introducing cultural features of the Jewish language. In other words, there is already a cultural feature, since the term kitniyot has clearly

an etymology that refers to the Jewish language and history, but this is not a level that explains the praxis of the rituals and their meaning yet.

As for intellectual functions (Section 5), here we are introducing the level within which the sense of this legume in rituals can be understood. To provide an explanation of the meaning Jews ascribe to the kitniyot, historical knowledge is necessary. These historical descriptions are not just abstract explanations of the Jews's life, but they convey the meaning that made the prohibitions possible, and still exist nowadays. A Jew could be attracted by the kitniyot and feel an impulse to consume it, but such a perceptive scene recalls intellectual meaning that generates the need to prohibit such an impulse, in order to proceed with controlled actions. The history of Judaism is codified in collective judgements, within which inferences that explain the nexus between the chametz and the kitniyot can be found. We define this level as made of judgements because we are talking about thoughts and ideas which refer to real events, that are collectively accepted and recognized, as well as constantly recalled by perceptive presentations of these legumes during Pessa'h.

However, we can also introduce the doxastic level to explain less rigorous thoughts, like beliefs and doubts, which we define as processes that underlie possible events.

The prohibition of the kitniyot involves several implicit rules and practices: one that is interesting from this perspective concerns the role of doubts in defining the prohibition. Jewish culture prohibits the interaction with the kitniyot, inasmuch as it can be blended with the chametz.

A doubt can be meant as an intellectual function that gives sense to this ritual but, in this case, we are not speaking of certain events, but of a possibility of contamination. Furthermore, we are not speaking of a mere subjective doubt, a momentary expression, instead of a doubt that becomes a constitutive component of the ritual. We consider such a level of cognition as less restrictive compared to the symbolic relation between the Exodus and the Chametz. Moreover, the prohibition of the kitniyot is only typical of the European Jewish, and this observation allows us to expect more contingent principles underlying this ritual.

In other words, the kitniyot is *forbidden* because of the *doubt* that it may contain chametz, which could result in forbidden actions. It is crucial to note that we are referring to a *risk*, as we have doubts rather than certainties about this event. Even the smallest possibility is not admitted.

We classify such a level as doxastic<sup>35</sup> for two reasons. These processes are defined by their relations to possibilities instead of reality. Thus, the degree and modality of prohibition differ from the prohibition of eating chametz, the latter being constituted by judgments, and expression about the reality (as described in the Torah). In other words: the prohibition of the chametz stems from the recalling of historical explanations and logical inferences, that make this prohibition absolute during Pessa'h. The prohibition of the kitniyot is logically derived from the previous explanation, but a further level is added, since we introduce the role of doubts or the possibility to make a forbidden action. Although these two descriptions may seem very similar, we propose that they are based on two distinct cognitive elaborations, that can be further investigated.

The different cognitive elaborations of the two rituals also lead to different other cultural features.

Notably, while the meaning of the chametz is to be followed by all Jews in the community, being a ritual that is described within the Torah, the prohibition of the kitniyot may also be annulled.

Moreover, the process of annulment does not apply to the entire community, but only applies to the person who mistakenly consumed the kitniyot and needs to perform annulment practices. This variation in annulment practice is, in our opinion, related to the contingent principles underlying this ritual, since, as we said, the prohibition of kitniyot is related to possibility, reflecting a less foundational knowledge about Jewish history.

While the chametz is expressly described in the Torah and considered as the reality of Jewish history, the kitniyot was introduced by the Rabbinic tradition. This is a striking difference: at its core, the historical explanation does not allow for any kind of annulment. Eating chametz is deemed as an absolute transgression, resulting in the person no longer belonging to the Jewish community. Conversely, consuming kitniyot allows for the initiation of annulment practices.

The annulment is a typical anthropological event that often applies to instances of contamination. The conceptual nexus with a very complex collective narrative is apparent in this scenario, even though it would require several other details to be explained, and it should be examined elsewhere.

We conclude this paragraph by acknowledging that numerous analyses to complete such an argument would be required.

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<sup>35</sup> Related to processes like beliefs and doubt and their corresponding epistemic values, that is possibility.

## *Conclusion*

In this paper, we have introduced phenomenology as a means of examining universal principles of culture, inasmuch as it enables us to investigate culture in relation to consciousness processes and experiential structures. We have proposed this approach as an alternative to empirical approaches in cultural studies, both regarding the humanistic and scientific fields. Instead of focusing on differences between cultural groups, we introduced details of Jewish rituals to investigate the universal processing that makes these specific contents possible. In simpler words, we did not only describe a specific ritual, but we investigated the underlying psychological or cognitive processing. The main feature of phenomenology is to seize these universal processing as structural of the human being, without excluding the possibility of finding the very same principles in each context.

Although we can use a classical humanistic approach, such as the cultural anthropological or the historical ones, to delve deeper into the complexity of a specific culture, we can also focus on these singularities to enucleate essential processes that are necessary to experience cultural phenomena, in addition to describing how these very same processes are fulfilled by specific historical details. Despite the incredible divergences among cultures, including subgroups of the same culture, the primary aim of phenomenology is to focus on the universal existence of essential principles of our experience, as well as exploring how they are fulfilled by history and contingencies that make every culture unique.

This study has two major limitations. First, it took several pages for introducing the phenomenological principles necessary to explain the interpretation of Jewish rituals. Such a choice was necessary because of the existence of several different interpretations of phenomenology in the contemporary debates, and we claimed the importance of returning to the traditional Husserlian approach to develop such a topic.

The second point of limitation concerns the necessary exclusion of detailed reviews of cultural studies. There are several disciplines, such as psychology and biology along with their various branches, that focus on cultural processes, and they would require a systematic review to be discussed and compared with phenomenology. In any case, we suggest that these different disciplines focus mainly on divergencies, namely on how the context changes basic psychological or biological functioning. Conversely, we propose that phenomenology works at a level that precedes the former one, since we are

looking for the universal principles in any culture (the condition of possibilities).

The main aim of this article is epistemological, but we have also proposed an example that, in our opinion, can lead to two different paths of research. First, it becomes possible to analyze the universal functioning of cultural experience in any different cultural group, by focusing on common principles instead of differences. In other words, every ritual must follow the processes described above, even if it changes in terms of historical contents.

Second, since we are dealing with very detailed analyses of specific components of culture, meant in their universality, we also suggest that this approach may be applied, in the long run, in empirical studies of culture, by focusing on specific components rather than on an entire context, as well as on psychological or biological principles that are universal in each specific culture.

Such an approach is clearly more important in disciplines that seek to capture universal functioning. Thus, this does not directly criticize those disciplines that, on the contrary, are interested in emphasizing contextual divergences, like empirical studies in cultural anthropology and sociology, history, and others. Moreover, the latter approach remains salient to collect data, that is of main importance to develop each kind of study. It is not possible to proceed with an eidetic analysis of cultural context if we do not know what we are investigating. In conclusion, this paper cannot be exhaustive, since it is a brief introduction of a different approach of cultural studies, but we suggest that this approach can be further develop, in order to propose new philosophical and anthropological analysis of culture that could also communicate with the empirical sciences.