The Transcendental Reaction: Husserl's Science of the Ego

Phenomenology is as it were the secret longing of the whole philosophy of modern times. The fundamental thought of Descartes is already pressing toward it. Hume almost enters its domain, but his eyes are dazzled. The first to perceive it truly is Kant, whose greatest intuitions first become quite clear to us after we have brought the distinctive features of the phenomenological field into the focus of full consciousness.¹

Husserl

Twentieth-century continental philosophy begins with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who in 1900-1 published a series of Logical Investigations, setting the stage—along with his colleague Gottlob Frege—for the technical inventiveness and intense interest in logic and mathematics of the coming decades. He was an influential leader in the concern with 'method' that marks so much of contemporary philosophy, and his 'phenomenology' was the chosen method, or at least the starting point, for many of the main figures of recent European philosophy including Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Derrida. On the other hand, Husserl might with some justification be viewed as one of the last strongholds of the nineteenth century, a reactionary who was dismayed by the historicist and relativist direction of Nietzsche and Dilthey, and longed to turn philosophy back to the Absolute.

That Absolute, for Husserl, had to be found in consciousness. He is thus the heir of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, but also looks back to Descartes as his ultimate philosophical predecessor. Although Husserl had little interest in the history of philosophy, he openly longed for the days when scepticism was not taken so seriously,
when philosophy could call itself a ‘science’ without qualification, and could declare itself a search for certainty and absolute truth without embarrassment. Husserl perceived the loss of absolutes as a genuine ‘crisis’, not only in the philosophical sciences but in civilization as well. Scepticism was like a disease, an admission of failure, and Nietzsche's relativism and Dilthey's historicism were tantamount to scepticism. The simple rejection of philosophy and its foundations among scientists and empiricists was no better, for their taking the ‘natural standpoint’ for granted, without any attempt to show its validity, was also a virtual admission of failure. Phenomenology had as its aim nothing less than the return of philosophy to scientific status, and of European thought to the road of rationality.

Husserl's starting-point, following the model of Descartes, was the ‘self-evidence’ of one's own consciousness. Phenomenology, despite Husserl's sometimes radical pronouncements about starting philosophy anew and without presuppositions, was very much a part of the mainstream tradition of modern philosophy, a turn to objectivity with the intention of arriving at objective truth. The grand presumption, never sufficiently questioned by Husserl, is that the truth is to be found in consciousness, in the ego, and nowhere else. Sometimes this claim is just the reasonable demand that experience counts for something, as in *Ideas* where he writes, ‘... if we ascribe no value to the reply, “I see that it is so”, we fall into absurdity,’ but it does not follow that this is absolute evidence rather than, at best, one possible piece of evidence. It also leaves the status of what is seen quite undetermined. In *Cartesian Meditations*, on the other hand, Husserl proclaims that: 'The monadically concrete ego includes also the whole of actual and potential conscious life.... Consequently the phenomenology of this self-constitution coincides with phenomenology as a whole (including objects).' In one's own experience one can discover the world, and realize the nature of everyone else's experience as well.

Phenomenology is the close examination of the essential structures of consciousness, with an eye to deriving (describing) necessary and universal truths of experience. With Husserl's phenomenology philosophy was finally to become a science, but not an empirical science. The object of phenomenological description was to get to the essences or ideas (*eidos*) that presented themselves in experience, to go beyond the various 'facts' of experience and the relativity of theories and practices to those features of experience which are 'absolutely given in immediate intuition'. As opposed to Descartes and Kant (as well as Picht and Hegel), Husserl's phenomenology is an appeal not to deduction or dialectic but directly to 'evidence', not the evidence of the senses but of the consciousness as such, 'apodictic' evidence that can be directly intuited, with a specially trained method of philosophical investigation. To recover philosophy as a science meant to discover a body of indubitable necessary truths with this new method.

Phenomenology is typically presented as a method rather than as a philosophical stance, but this is misleading. Philosophy, the one discipline that is forever picking itself up by its own bootstraps, is never merely methodological; it always involves some substantial, metaphysical position, a set of doctrines about the world, the self, and where the truth is to be found. It is often said, against Husserl, that he spent so much effort tinkering with his method that he never had time to actually work out philosophical problems, but every one of his reformulations of the phenomenological method—and there were many—was at the same time a revision in philosophy, a different view of the nature of the world's existence and our knowledge of it, a different theory about the self and its extent.

We might note that, compared to Kant, Hegel, or Nietzsche, Husserl's interests in philosophy were extremely narrow. He came into it from mathematics, and he remained exclusively interested in epistemological questions concerning necessary truth (at the end of his life he made an enormous concession when he suggested—but did not pursue—the importance of the 'life-world' (*Lebenswelt*) as the foundation of scientific thinking). It might be argued that every domain has its necessary truths, and consequently phenomenology has since been applied to virtually every realm of human experience. But we do not find this range of interest in Husserl, and most of the questions that have accounted for the popular appeal and persistence of philosophy...
through the ages found no place in his voluminous writings. The problem that brought Husserl from mathematics into philosophy was the nature of arithmetic, and though this broadened as the years went by into a more general interest in necessary truth, Husserl’s discussions of human experience always stay at a considerable distance from concrete daily life, even when he discusses such topics as the essential structure of perception. Despite his heavy emphasis on the self as the source of experience there is not even a hint of the moral self-engagement of Fichte, or the cosmic enthusiasm of Kant, Schelling, or Hegel, much less the striving willfulness of Schopenhauer or Nietzsche. Husserl’s self is a knowing self, with only occasional comments to the effect that it might also have such attributes as ‘Affectivity and Volition’. It is as if Husserl is squarely in the middle of this grand tradition without in some important sense having any awareness of its dramatic nature.

And yet there are good reasons why Husserl had such a great influence on philosophers whose interests were much wider than his own. What influenced so many scholars and thinkers was not so much the substantive content of his philosophy as his integrity and conscientiousness. He provided more a model of how to do philosophy than a method as such. He insisted on a ‘presuppositionless philosophy’, and was always worried that there might be some unquestioned element in our thinking which was taken for granted. He called himself a ‘perpetual beginner’, and was continually rethinking his entire project, sometimes lapsing into despair that he never would, after all, find the certainty for which he was searching.

Thus, when he was doing mathematics he became concerned about the justification for the basic concepts of arithmetic, and was not willing to take them for granted. His first book, *The Philosophy of Arithmetic*, was an attempt to show that these concepts could be accounted for by a number of psychological observations about the nature of counting (a thesis similarly defended by John Stuart Mill in his *System of Logic* of 1872). It was a straightforward empiricist thesis, and ultimately denied the necessity of arithmetic and, by implication, necessary truth in general. Frege reviewed the book and convinced Husserl that he had confused logic and psychology, and had neglected the unique status of a priori as opposed to empirical knowledge. Husserl did a complete turn-around, and from then on vigorously rejected the reduction of logic and necessary truth to psychology (a thesis that he retrospectively called ‘psychologism’). Beginning with a quote from Goethe, ‘one is opposed to nothing more than one’s own previous errors’, Husserl’s two-volume *Logical Investigations* is a thorough rejection of psychologism.

One of the considerations that led Husserl to reject psychologism was its affinity with scepticism. He became convinced that, if the truths of arithmetic were nothing more than empirical generalizations about the psychological processes of counting, it might well be that such processes would be different in different creatures or cultures. In any case they could be different, and even the possibility of different truths for different folks would undermine any sense in the idea that the statements of mathematics are necessarily true. If such statements were not true then the foundations of all of our knowledge would be nothing more than a tentative consensus of psychology or, perhaps, of anthropology (a thesis that Husserl similarly rejects as ‘anthropologism’). As Descartes and Kant had argued before him, he insists that if any of our beliefs do deserve to be called ‘knowledge’, then some of them must be not only true but necessarily true, as the foundation for all of the others. So Husserl attacks psychologism, Dilthey’s historicism, and all forms of naturalism—the reduction of necessary truth to any empirical science. Naturalism leads to relativism, for if necessary truths are empirical observations about the way we happen to think, then they may (and probably will) vary from creature to creature, and from culture to culture. Such relativism, Husserl insists, is an ‘absurd’ doctrine (inaccurately he blamed Hegel and the ‘romantics’ for relativism, with their ‘doctrine of the relative justification of every philosophy for its own time’. He saw Dilthey’s philosophy as the result of the transformation of Hegel’s metaphysical philosophy of history into a sceptical historicism).

To avoid relativism it would be necessary to identify the essential foundations of experience within consciousness. To go outside of consciousness would be to invite scepticism once again,
for any distinction between things 'in themselves' and the objects of experience introduces just that gap which makes scepticism possible. On the other hand, to look at consciousness in the ordinary way, seeking out 'associations of ideas' or various 'ways of thinking' would be to retreat to psychologism and, again, invite in the sceptic. What is necessary, Husserl concludes, is a new kind of description of experience which is valid regardless of whether or not the object is 'real' apart from our consciousness of it, and which does not vary no matter what the details of psychology might be. To make such a description possible Husserl formulates a series of methodological 'reductions', by which he does not mean to 'reduce' consciousness to anything else (as in psychologism), but rather to reduce our experience to the 'field of pure consciousness'. To do this requires a technique of 'transcendental reflection' in which one does not examine the objects of experience but rather the entire complex of our experience of objects, without regard to the actual existence of the objects themselves. Thus one would describe a perception, a hallucination, and a dream of the same object without allowing oneself to mention the fact that in the first case the object is real, in the second not, and in the third ambiguous; the difference between perception, hallucination, and dream would have to be discerned within the experiences themselves, and not by means of external reference. This intentional neglect of the existence of objects (and the causes of our experience) leads Husserl to describe phenomenology as 'the suspension of the natural standpoint'. Unlike the ordinary scientist, the phenomenologist is not concerned with objects except as they appear to consciousness, and unlike the psychologist he is not concerned with the cause of an object's conscious appearance but only the essential content of that experience. For Husserl consciousness thus appears as a separate realm of 'pure meanings', which is not available in the natural standpoint (the view of everyday life and ordinary empirical science) but only within the 'phenomenological standpoint'.

What is wrong, one might ask, with the natural standpoint? Nothing at all Husserl would reply, so long as one does not pretend to be doing philosophy, but in philosophy this ordinary way of thinking produces 'demonstrable absurdities'. For instance, philosophers often talk about consciousness in terms that are suited to material objects; they discuss ideas as being 'in' the mind, as if the mind were a physical container of some sort, and they talk about physical events causing mental events, as if the two sorts of events were comparable, and a causal connection between them were no more problematic than the effect of the motion of one billiard ball on another. But such talk has led to an entire history of absurdities; indeed, one might suggest that the history of Western philosophy since Descartes has been the history of just these absurdities. To deny that the mind is 'extended', as Descartes does, just exaggerates the problem, for what does it mean to say that the mind is not in space? To talk about the bodily cause of mental events seems to make sense until we realize that we know about bodily events only through our experience of them, and to say that those experiences are themselves caused by the same bodily events leads to troublesome paradoxes. But the most serious flaw in the natural standpoint (for philosophy) is its uncritical acceptance of the notion that objects are simply 'given' to us. We might doubt an occasional experience (an optical illusion, for example) but 'all doubting and rejecting of the data of the natural world leaves standing the general thesis of the natural standpoint'. And this standpoint inescapably treats 'cognition as a fact of nature', and so as merely contingent—dependent upon our make-up as a particular kind of being. It assumes that all knowledge comes from experience, and tacitly denies, in Kant's words, that there must also be knowledge a priori which does not arise from experience. The natural standpoint takes its own validity for granted, but it cannot, without becoming 'involved in a vicious circle', testify on its own behalf.

To free us from and allow us to legitimate the natural standpoint, and to introduce us to the phenomenological standpoint, Husserl formulates what he calls the 'epoché', the phenomenological reduction by which we 'suspend judgement' about the existence of the natural world and the causes of our experiences. Unlike Descartes, we do not actually doubt the existence of everything; we simply 'brace' existence as inessential to experience as such. We describe our experience of things without worrying about the status of the things.
What we discover, having performed the *epoche*, is that consciousness is no poorer for this reduction; indeed it is every bit as rich—or even richer—than it was in the natural standpoint, for now we are in a position to appreciate it in full without the distorting judgements about the reality or the importance of things. We discover that, far from 'losing' the objects of experience, all consciousness is intrinsically and necessarily tied to objects, a feature of our every experience which Husserl calls 'intentionality', following his teacher Brentano. 'All consciousness is consciousness *of* something', he insists, and it does not matter, for the purposes of intentionality, whether this something is real or not. What we also discover, consequent to the *epoche*, is the self itself, the necessity—as Kant put it—of the 'I think' being able to accompany all of my representations, a transcendental ego which is quite different to, and independent of, the empirical self that in the natural standpoint each of us identifies as 'me'. In *Cartesian Meditations* Husserl goes so far as to suggest that the transcendental ego would remain in existence even if the entire universe was destroyed. But this bit of excess excised, it is clear that he is urging us to enter into and appreciate what is in one sense an entirely new realm of experience—the realm of experience as such.

What is the purpose of this novel experience? What phenomenology gives us, according to Husserl, is not just a new way of viewing things; it is the only true way. His rallying cry, 'to the things themselves (*zu den Sachen selbst*), emphasizes phenomenology as a way of seeing the world without the distortions of philosophical theories which have infiltrated our perception and our conceptions of the world. It is, in other words, a description of experience and a philosophy that is without presuppositions, an experience of experience as such, an opportunity to see clearly and without doubts the essential structures of not only one's own consciousness but of every possible consciousness.

The reduction of experience to an intuition of pure consciousness allows us to recognize that, quite apart from the spatio-temporal 'natural' existence of objects, there are the objects of consciousness itself—intentional objects; and while we would not want to talk about their independent existence ('existence' belonging to descriptions from the natural standpoint) we do want to recognize their special status, and appreciate the fact that, whatever we know about objects in the 'outside world', we know them and about them only through the intentional objects of consciousness (thus Husserl adds that any sceptical claim that the objects themselves are different from objects as we know them is a 'logical absurdity'). The supposition of such 'third realm' entities is not unique to Husserl of course. Frege had argued an elaborate analysis of what he called 'the thought', and developed a complex ontology of meanings (*Sinn*) which he clearly distinguished from both psychological states and the objects to which they (usually) refer. Husserl's predecessor Meinong had suggested that we recognize a realm of objects that had *substance* rather than existence (see Chapter 7), though he did not particularly insist that these were to be found in consciousness. But Meinong, like Husserl, recognized that the meaning of experience could not be located outside of experience. Traditional empiricists had distinguished between sensations within consciousness and the objects outside which cause these and to which they correspond or refer, but they had ignored the need for meanings within experience and confused the mere sensory matter of experience with the experience of objects as such. What Husserl means by 'meaning' is a complex study of its own, but at the basis of his theory is the view that the completeness of intentional objects is within our experience (as opposed to the view that experience has meaning only by reference to the material world outside of consciousness) and, second, to the constitution of objects through consciousness, the Kantian view that the structures of the world we experience are contributed by consciousness itself: 'What things are... they are as things of experience.' But whereas Kant insisted that these basic categories had to be 'deduced' from the facts of experience, Husserl insists that they are 'intuited' directly, quite apart from the facts. Phenomenology thus takes the transcendental viewpoint one step further than the older idealists, for Husserl insists not only that the truth must be found in the self, but that it is the self itself that must find it there. Thus he assigns a double role to subjectivity—as both the locus of truth and as its discoverer—and a double...
source of objectivity—to be identified both in the essential structures of consciousness and in the essential features of the acts of intuition that the phenomenologist performs in order to intuit them.

In his early works Husserl emphasizes the importance of the necessary, or of the structures of transcendental consciousness, but with minimal dependency on a theory of the transcendental ego as such. In his later works he becomes more and more engaged in the importance of the ego, and at about the time of the *Cartesian Meditations* re-describes phenomenology as an ‘egology’, the study of the essential structures of the ego. But the transcendental ego, like the essential categories of consciousness, is not a logical inference or deduction as in Kant, but a discovery, something intuited directly. In *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (1929), Husserl further insists that the transcendental ego exists ‘absolutely’, and everything else is relative to it. In his last book, *The Crisis of European Philosophy* (1936), he considerably weakens such opinions, and insists only that the transcendental ego is ‘correlative’ to the world, and he shifts from his extraordinarily individualistic view of the transcendental individual ego to the intersubjective community of individuals. In that same book he makes one of his very few acknowledgements of the importance of history, and the dependency of rationality and scientific knowledge on community practices and the unarticulated principles of daily life (the *Lebenswelten*). But he never pulled away from his central theses, that the truth was to be found in the self, and that this truth was universal and necessary. In Husserl’s philosophy the transcendental pretence found one of its greatest modern defenders.

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Two Discontents and their Civilization: Freud and Wittgenstein

When I was young, the only thing I longed for was philosophical knowledge, and now that I am going over from medicine to psychology I am in process of attaining it.1

Freud

I used to think that there was a direct link between Language and Reality.2

Wittgenstein

Nietzsche's indictment of the age as 'decadent' applied to nowhere better than to Vienna at the turn of the century, in the last days of the seemingly eternal Habsburg Empire, a time to which Karl Kraus sarcastically referred as 'the last days of humanity'. Under the reign of Mayor 'Handsome Karl' Lueger and the Emperor Franz Josef, anti-Semitism, universal hypocrisy, and conservative conformism, coupled with the revolt of ethnic and moral minorities, financial crises, and internal instability imposed an inescapable prognosis of doom. The metaphor of the age was that of the 'dark side' of brilliance, the golden surface ornament as a façade for anguish, alienation, neurosis, and despair. It was a period and a place that has come to define what we now identify as decadence, a way of life that was effete, elegant, lavish, fanciful, and on the brink of total disaster.

It was also a period of genius. Vienna in 1900 was the city of Mahler, Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, of Kokoschka and Klimt, of Ernst Mach and Robert Musil. It was also the city of Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The founder of psychoanalysis and the inspirational figure of logical positivism may never have met but they shared a cultural heritage, a national neurosis, and,