GENERAL INTRODUCTION
WHAT IS PHENOMENOLOGY?

Phenomenology is a philosophical movement that has received its most persuasive impetus, formulation, and defense from the German philosopher Edmund Husserl during the first three decades of this century. Husserl views Descartes and Kant as his most important philosophical predecessors, and his phenomenology takes the Cartesian attention to the primacy of first-person experience and the Kantian search for basic "a priori" principles as its modus operandi. Phenomenology begins with the study of human consciousness; it is an attempt to define the "structures" that are essential to any and every possible experience. Phenomenology is ultimately a search for "foundations." Husserl's own interest in philosophy began with an attempt to explain the validity of the fundamental laws and concepts of arithmetic. As his interests developed he came to seek not only the foundations of arithmetic but the "a priori" principles of all human "cognition" (i.e. all knowledge and belief). Ultimately Husserl's phenomenology took the ambitious range of concerns that occupied Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason—the identification and defense of the basic a priori principles of all human experience and understanding. (1)

The existential phenomenologists also begin from Descartes and his "first-person standpoint," but they shift their attention away from the foundations of knowledge to the foundations of human action. According to the variations of phenomenology

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1 Numbers in parentheses refer to selection numbers in the text.
advanced by Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, “consciousness” is not to be interpreted primarily as a knowing consciousness but as an acting, ‘willing’, deciding consciousness. It is not those experiences relating to knowing and reasoning that are the paradigm to be examined but rather the experiences of doing, participating, and choosing. For the existentialists, it is the Kant model, for it is the nature of human freedom and not the nature of human knowledge that poses the fundamental problem. (32–34, 40–44). For Husserl, the study of consciousness is essentially an epistemological study; for the existentialists, it is a means to understanding what it is to be a person. Of course, there are very important disagreements among the existentialists as they carry this analysis through, but their heretical deviation from Husserl can best be appreciated by understanding that Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty are only tangentially interested in the foundations of mathematics and science but fundamentally interested in the universal (“a priori,” “essential,” “existential,” “ontological”) presuppositions of human action.  

Although phenomenology, both Husserlian and existential, has a Cartesian starting point, there is no easy way to define this general philosophical approach. The details of method employed by Descartes himself—a rigid distinction between mind and body coupled with the presumption that we know the mind better than the body, and the tentative methodological supposition that everything we believe is false—these are all repudiated by every phenomenologist. Husserl characterized his phenomenology as a “return to the things themselves,” where the things in question are phenomena or intuitions. But it is not immediately clear how “phenomena” or “intuition” are to be analyzed. Phenomena are not to be identified with natural phenomena, and intuitions are not to be identified (in general) as “experiences.” Husserl insists that phenomenology begins with a “suspension of the natural (everyday) standpoint.” We must begin with the ego cogito instead of nature and take up the standpoint of “transcendental subjectivity.” (45) But not only do all of these technical phrases need accounting for, some of them would be rejected as a fair characterization of phenomenology by a great many phenomenologists. Perhaps the most general characterization possible is the thesis that the phenomenologists begin with an analysis of “one’s own consciousness of the world”; (13–18) but the complex concept “consciousness of the world” is analyzed in radically different ways by different phenomenologists. (cf. 13–18 and 32–44) One is rightly warned by practicing phenomenologists that one needs to develop a taste for phenomenology and some feeling for its workings before one is in a position to say what it is. This is not meant to make phenomenology sound mysterious; it is simply to remind us that phenomenology is a very loose-knit system of problems, philosophers, and philosophies, all of which are brought together only by the slack and ultimately vacuous insistence that a first-person description, without theoretical bias, of one’s own consciousness of the world must precede all philosophical theorizing. Although we may expect phenomenology to emerge from our readings in a more or less distinct approach to philosophy, we must not demand too rigid a summary or definition of the phenomenological approach.

THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF PHENOMENOLOGY

Among the strongest claims for phenomenology made by Husserl and his followers is that phenomenology is “presuppositionless” and without theoretical bias—that the results of phenomenology, if properly attained, are unconditionally or absolutely” true. But Husserl characterized himself as a “per-
petual beginner,” by which he means that no concept in his philosophy was immune to further criticism. He insisted that phenomenology consists solely of descriptions, and that it neither presupposes nor advances any philosophical theories (a claim made more recently by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his later work). Husserl denied that a philosophical theory is possible: theories always assert more than their data, and this something ‘more’ has no place in philosophy. (As with Wittgenstein, it is some of Husserl’s closest followers who ignore this basic denial.)

Phenomenology is said to be presuppositionless and theory-free. Here we may distinguish two separate claims: phenomenology is presuppositionless because it demands that any concept and any proposition can be reassessed at any point; phenomenology may also be said to be presuppositionless in the much stronger sense that its descriptions neither presuppose nor involve any philosophical theory.

The demand that philosophy be without presuppositions (in both senses) is an attempt to guarantee that a philosophy will not be one more system of dogmatic assertions without ultimate philosophical support. Husserl is suspicious of the axiomatic philosophical systems of Descartes and Spinoza, and at the same time he is intolerant of the relativist claims of philosophers like Dilthey and Marx, who would deny any philosophy the claim of being absolutely true outside of a particular socio-intellectual context. Against the temptation to be dogmatic, Husserl demands that every philosophical proposition be constantly open to question. Against the temptation to give up the demand for absolute truth, Husserl insists that a presuppositionless philosophy will admit only those propositions which will be true and acceptable in any intellectual environment. Wary of having his philosophical vision distorted by preconceptions, Husserl devises a series of disciplines to assure that phenomenological descriptions are not philosophical theories in disguise. (His famous _epoché_ is one of these disciplinary techniques.) For example, a description of consciousness is constantly endangered by the many metaphors and traditional philosophical theories that present an image of the mind as a mysterious container or stream (“all in your mind,” “introspect,” “stream of consciousness”). A philosophy that begins by taking these metaphors and theories seriously has, according to Husserl, based itself on presuppositions instead of pure description. Phenomenology must limit itself to recon- firmable descriptions of experience.

These good intentions give rise to problems and paradoxes. The two senses of “presuppositionless” which have been praised as the greatest merit of phenomenology have been roughly paralleled by two widespread and often persuasive criticisms of phenomenology. First, the demand that phenomenology continuously reassess all of its own concepts and propositions leads to the objection that the phenomenological enterprise is unavoidably circular. The concepts and claims of phenomenology can only be criticized and evaluated in terms of the concepts and claims of phenomenology. Second, the demand that phenomenology undergo constant reexamination leads to the objection that phenomenology will always be so obsessed with itself as method that it can never be productive. Hence a frequent challenge from both critics and proponents of phenomenology is to stop _talking about_ phenomenology and to start _doing_ phenomenology.

If we are to understand Husserl’s phenomenology, we must first understand what is so very wrong with these objections. We must appreciate both the extent to which the demand is valid that phenomenology be presuppositionless and the extent to which it is hopelessly extravagant. The weaker demand for presuppositionless philosophy (that every concept and proposition is always open to reassessment) lies at the very heart of Husserl’s philosophizing. This is not only evident in what Husserl says about his work; it is more persuasively obvious in what he did. His writings are a remarkable model of philosophical integrity, whatever else one might say about them. Every idea worked and reworked, altered and even rejected as his style develops. If phenomenology appears to be presented initially in Husserl’s formidable writings, that is surely not mere either of the discipline itself or of Husserl as philos-
But to defend Husserl's phenomenology as presuppositionless philosophy entails a restatement of the argument that phenomenology is a distinctive form of philosophy. This is because the concept of presuppositionlessness is central to Husserl's phenomenology, and to argue against it is to criticize the very foundations of phenomenology. However, it is important to note that phenomenology is not a self-contained system; it is always open to questioning and critique. Thus, to claim that phenomenology is presuppositionless is to assert that it is not subject to any prior assumptions or preconceptions. This is a strong claim, and it is one that Husserl himself made in his work. But the question remains: is it possible to defend Husserl's phenomenology as presuppositionless philosophy?
sights can be obtained through an investigation of language, but
the very notions central to the development of this claim, "mean-
ing," "synonymy," "convention," "statement," and so on, have
become central to their investigations. Yet it is not the case that
these philosophers have become obsessed with their method. In-
stead, certain important initial insights generated a family of
new philosophical problems, and not surprisingly, these problems
turned out to be inseparably interrelated. Similarly, pheno-
menology has no alternative but to defend its claims and analyze
its concepts in its own terms. It is in no worse and no better
a position in this regard than any other philosophy.

Does this "turning back on itself" reduce phenomenology
(or any other philosophy) to triviality? We might briefly answer
this by appealing to a metaphor used by W. V. O. Quine. What
does one do in philosophy is like repairing a boat on the high seas.
It is not a matter of formulating a method with clear concepts
and then applying it, but a matter of keeping afloat. We may
build and tear apart, but we must always keep the entire struc-
ture sufficiently intact. Phenomenology starts with the crude
insight that philosophy must examine consciousness. Slowly it
builds a theory of consciousness, all the while keeping the initial
insight as its framework. When the theory is sufficiently de-
veloped, even the initial insight can be reworked, torn apart, and
possibly even rejected. This is the course of Husserl's philosophy.
It is ever self-contained and self-referencing and yet it is neither
trivial nor dogmatic. There are doctrines in Husserl's thought
that remain more or less invariant throughout, e.g. the demand
that philosophy pay attention to "phenomena." But his analysis
of "phenomenon" changes continuously, as do his analyses of the
central concepts of "intentionality," "constitution," "conscious-
ness," and his theories of the role of the ego in consciousness.

What distinguishes phenomenology from alternative philos-
ophies, e.g. from traditional empiricism or from linguistic phi-
losophy, is its use of this family of concepts, its general insistence
on the role of intuition—special kinds of intuition—in knowing.
At the same time, it neglects or denies a similar role to (empi-
cial) experience and to language. There are no clear head-on con-

What Is Phenomenology? frontations between phenomenology and other philosophies, but
neither do they differ only in vocabulary and learned societies.

THE "FOUNDATIONS"
OF KNOWLEDGE

Phenomenology has been referred to as both a "rational-
ism" and a "radical empiricism." Husserl's philosophy is ra-
tionalistic in that he believes there are a priori principles or
"truths of reason"; but he does not agree with traditional ra-
tionalists that there is a faculty or special power of reason that
will identify these truths. Rather, these a priori truths are to be
located and defended in terms of a special sort of "seeing," and
it is in this sense that Husserl claims to be a sort of empiricist.
But his empiricism is not the traditional empiricism of Locke,
Berkeley, Hume, and Mill. He maintains what they would never
allow: that there are necessary truths which can be established
through intuition. The fundamental doctrine of Husserl's pheno-
menology is the doctrine that he summarizes in the phrase,"intuition of essences." With the rationalists, he maintains that
we can and do have knowledge which is neither empirical nor
trivial; with the empiricists, he maintains that all knowledge
comes from intuition. But contrary to both traditional move-
ments, he insists that intuition itself gives us necessary truths,
that the empiricist notion of "experience" must be supplanted
with a more general notion of "intuition," such that it is possible
not only to have intuition of empirical facts ("the cat is on the
mat") but also have intuition of necessary truths ("2 + 3 = 5").

The "foundations" of knowledge are those necessary and
a priori principles which constitute the presuppositions of any
knowledge whatever. For example, the existence of the ("ex-
ternal") world is a presupposition of every law, theory, and
hypothesis of every natural science. Similarly, a naturalized
version of the principle of sufficient reason ("there is a suf-
cient natural explanation in terms of antecedent conditions
and natural laws for everything that happens") is a presupposi-
truths are not necessary at all, but merely well-confirmed psychological truths, principles governing the way in which we do, as a matter of fact, think. The naturalist presses allegedly a priori principles into one or the other of these two categories: either they are abstract and very general empirical truths or subtle linguistic or logical conventions. Modern empiricists tend to push most of the problematic a priori principles, including all of mathematics, logic, and geometry, as well as the basic principles of natural science, into the class of conventions and linguistic truths. But the naturalist-psychologists of Husserl's time (including Husserl himself in his earliest works), tended to defend most of these a priori principles, including all of mathematics, logic, geometry, and most philosophical principles, as well-confirmed empirical generalizations. Thus the psychologist would argue that the laws of elementary arithmetic are empirical laws formulated on the basis of our experience of counting, and that the principle that every event has sufficient natural cause is an empirical law different only in its level of abstraction from "bronze statues turn green because copper is oxidized in the open air." The psychologist would explain the apparent necessity of mathematical proof and logical validity solely by appeal to psychological laws: The proof of the Pythagorean theorem would be translated from a list of axioms, postulates, previously proven theorems, and intermediate steps into a series of psychological laws to the effect that "if someone believes these axioms and postulates, then he will accept these intermediate steps and accept the Pythagorean theorem." Similarly, the logical law that states "if if P then Q, is true and P is true, then Q is true" would be "justified" psychologically by establishing that if anyone believes both "if P then Q" and that P is true, then he will believe that Q is true.

As a student of Franz Brentano and an enthusiast for John Stuart Mill, Husserl had endorsed psychology and written his dissertation and a book (Philosophy of Arithmetic) applying psychology to the foundations of arithmetic. But Husserl's enthusiasm for psychology was utterly destroyed by a review
of his book by the great German mathematician Gottlob Frege.

(5) Frege argued that mathematical concepts are not abstractions and mathematical laws are not generalizations. Psychological laws say what people in fact do think; mathematical laws state what is necessarily true whether or not anyone happens to think it. Psychological laws are at best probable; they are revisable every time we find someone who happens not to believe the law. But mathematical laws are necessarily true: a proof of a theorem by one person is a proof of that theorem for all persons. What is established in a mathematical proof is not a truth about people's having certain thoughts, but a truth about the thoughts themselves. (3, 4, 5, 6, 7)

Husserl's reaction to this onslaught was admirable. He was so impressed with Frege's critique that he altered the entire direction of his philosophy and tried to understand how a priori principles could be possible. (3)

The attack on psychologism and naturalism is the best known of Husserl's attacks against alternative philosophies, but it must be seen as one aspect of his general concern to understand necessary truth. It is not sufficient for him to argue that necessary truths are not psychological or empirical truths. Frege also asserted this, but went on to insist that necessary truths are conventional truths. There were other mathematicians too, who agreed with the attack on psychologism, but they went on to insist that mathematical truths were merely formal truths—truths concerning the manipulation of signs. Husserl rejected these two alternatives marked his most important deviation from the linguistic direction of philosophy influenced by Frege. Husserl rejected "linguisticism" and "formalism" along with psychologism, and in place of these current alternatives he suggested a thesis reminiscent of scholastic philosophy. What makes necessary truths true, he said, is the very structure of human consciousness and a peculiar class of objects called essences, which are not to be discovered in a study of psychology or in a study of the syntax and semantics of the language of necessary truth. The discovery of essences would demand a new and special discipline, and this discipline is, of course, phenomenology.