

A Tale of Estrangement. Husserl and Contemporary Philosophy.

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I. Husserl's story.

Husserl's last work¹ is the only one he himself called, in sub-title, an "Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy."² Already in 1913, he distinguished between "pure phenomenology" and "phenomenological philosophy."³ The book he published then was called only "A General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology."⁴ It presents "pure phenomenology" merely as a *possible* new approach to "the given." In order to give this phenomenological approach a philosophical meaning, it remained to be shown that this approach was *necessary*. Husserl intended to do this in the "Third Book" of a greater work which is announced in the "Introduction" to the "First Book" published in 1913. This "Third Book," he never wrote. In 1923/24, he tried to fill up this gap by elaborating his lectures on "First Philosophy."⁵ By way of a "Critical History of Ideas," the first part of the lectures, he sets out to demonstrate that the classical ideal of European philosophy, due to Plato and Aristotle, cannot be finally realized without putting to work the two main methods of pure phenomenology: the eidetic and the specifically phenomenological reduction. Traditional philosophy, Husserl wants to point out, could never realize this classical ideal, partly because of its omission of the eidetic reduction and mainly because of its omission of an *ἐποχή* by means of the specifically phenomenological reduction. Phenomenological philosophy or the philosophical meaning of pure phenomenology is thus founded on a sketch of the history of Western philosophy.

Husserl did more or less the same in the only work published (partly) by himself that he called explicitly "An Introduction to Phenomenological

Philosophy." Again, what he does, in order to point out the philosophical meaning or the necessity of pure phenomenology, is telling a story, this time including elements of a history of European science and some considerations on Western civilization or "European mankind" generally.

What is his story as he told it last? European civilization, we are told, is mainly founded on the classical Greek ideal of purely theoretical knowledge. Modern Western civilization is founded on a renewal of this ancient ideal. But in this renewal, something went wrong. The classical ideal of pure theory degenerated into modern scientific "objectivism." Accordingly, the growing success of modern objective science led also to a growing estrangement of this science from our "subjective-relative" life-world. Modern objective science cannot tell us how to behave and what to do in our actual everyday life-world. This in itself is the main cause of the present distress of European mankind. Yet, scientific objectivity has become the only kind of rationality we can rely on. So European man in his distress is looking out more and more for irrational ways to understand himself and his world, which can make things only worse.

This story would not be complete and would not be of much help unless it tells us also what exactly went wrong with the original ideal of purely theoretical knowledge and why exactly it should have degenerated into modern objectivism and its estrangement from our life-world. Husserl's answer to this is somewhat intricate and surprising. Modern science, he says, was doomed to overlook the realities of our subjective-relative life-world *because* this kind of science was rooted itself in this life-world and never left this ground. The ideal of purely theoretical knowledge cannot be realized as long as we do not succeed to elevate ourselves above the soil of our subjective-relative life-world.⁶ This is the true purport of the *ἐποχή*, to be implemented by the specifically phenomenological reduction. And that is why pure (or transcendental) phenomenology is necessary in order to overcome the crisis of the European sciences and of European mankind generally. And that again is the philosophical meaning of phenomenology as Husserl conceived it in his last work.

II. Husserl's program and contemporary philosophy

Husserl's last program for phenomenological research results out of this story. By means of an *ἐποχή*, we should conquer a point of view from where we can look on our subjective-relative life-world, including what has grown out of its soil, especially the objectivism of modern science

itself, and on the founding relationship relating all objectivity to the subjectivity constitutive of the life-world. Instead of remaining rooted subjectively in the soil of the life-world and looking out naively for the abstract objects of modern science, we should endeavour to get a look from above on this naive relationship and consider all objects concretely, i.e., within the framework of their constitutive subjective implications.

To be sure, Husserl's influence on contemporary philosophy was limited. Yet, its extent is sometimes underestimated. In France, for instance, Jacques Derrida made his beginnings as a student of Husserl's works. But also Michel Foucault is patently familiar, probably by way of the work of Merleau-Ponty, with Husserl's idea of an ontology of the life-world. In the United States, the philosophy of science of Thomas Kuhn is partly based on the work of Alexandre Koyré, a disciple of Husserl's, and some pages of his "Structure of Scientific Revolutions" read like a paraphrase of Husserl's late manuscript on the "Origin of Geometry." But apart from all questions of more or less direct influences of Husserl's thought, it seems to me that quite large parts of the main-streams of contemporary philosophy *could* have been inspired by Husserl's last program as it has been outlined above. Nearly everywhere, one distrusts the pretensions to objective knowledge of modern science, including classical psychology, sociology or linguistics, one resents the estrangement of this kind of rationality from the realities of our life-world, and one endeavors to conquer a broader outlook on the rootedness of all objectivity in a subjective-relative life-world. To be sure, Husserl's terminology is not widely used. Especially speaking of the unreflected underground, or background, of all objective knowledge, most philosophers carefully avoid any reference to subjectivity or consciousness. On the contrary, maybe under the influence of learned or popular psycho-analysis, they like to underline that from this underground or background, forces operate quite independently of human subjectivity and consciousness. Thus, it seems as if they want to indicate a new dimension, or even the true dimension, of objectivity.

Nobody (with the exception of Jacques Derrida) seems to mention the role of anything like Husserl's *ἐποχή* in this research. Yet, obviously, such *ἐποχή* must be accomplished in order to conquer a point of view from which one gets an outlook on the dimension contemporary philosophy wants to investigate. And it is precisely from a point of view conquered by *ἐποχή* that the "unconscious" counterparts of all "objective" knowledge *must* appear as constituting the true dimension of objectivity.

But if a great part of contemporary philosophy can be seen as implementing, mostly quite independently, Husserl's last program for phenomenological research, most of the representatives of this philosophy

forget that finally, the meaning of such a program is based on something like the story Husserl tells in order to explain the need of our times, and on the assumption that this story is the true one. But is it?

III. The flaw in Husserl's story

There is something wrong in Husserl's story. This has to do with the relation between the eidetic reduction and the *ἐποχή* to be accomplished by means of the specifically phenomenological reduction. In all his earlier work, Husserl maintained a very strong interrelation between these two operations which he presented as the two basic methods of pure phenomenology. It would be a very strong interrelation indeed if, e.g. neither the *ἐποχή* could be accomplished without eidetic reduction, nor this eidetic reduction without the *ἐποχή*. It is true that as far as I can see, Husserl never explicitly specified the kind of interrelation he had in view. It is also true that while claiming that the *ἐποχή* is for the first time introduced in the history of Western thought by his own idea of pure phenomenology, he states himself that eidetic reduction was the essence of Platonic dialectics and has been applied in multiple ways throughout the rationalistic tradition of philosophy as well as by mathematics and modern mathematical science. This could mean that there is a stronger link between phenomenology and the *ἐποχή* than between phenomenology and eidetics.

But Husserl doesn't even leave it at that in the story he tells in his last work in order to point out the philosophical meaning of pure phenomenology. As it has been retold above, this story is not yet complete. As has been stated, Husserl put down the *last* reason for the estrangement of modern objectivism vis-à-vis our life-world, to the omission of the *ἐποχή*. But he considers as the *immediate* reason for this estrangement the substitution, by modern objective science, of idealized entities for the realities of our life-world. According to this view, then, the omission of the *ἐποχή*, and only this omission, would lead to idealizations alienated to our life-world, whereas formerly, Husserl stressed the interrelation between this *ἐποχή* and eidetic reduction. However, it is very hard to draw a line between Husserl's own idea of eidetic reduction and what he describes as the methods of idealizations of modern science in his last work.⁷

We cannot even put down this discrepancy to a late change of Husserl's opinion. For when he sets out himself, in his last work, to make some first contributions to an "ontology of the life-world," based on the *ἐποχή*, he again proceeds spontaneously by way of eidetic reduction,

thus re-establishing the close connection between these two methods within phenomenology. So on the one hand, he obviously risks to renew the estrangement of modern objective science from our life-world in his own "ontology of the life-world," since it is constructed itself by means of eidetic reduction. At least, then, the operation of the *ἐποχή* doesn't suffice to avoid this estrangement. On the other hand, as a consequence we also have reasons to wonder whether indeed the ultimate cause of the estrangement of modern science from our life-world has been the omission of an *ἐποχή*.

Must we not take account then of the possibility that there is in fact such a strong interrelation between the *ἐποχή* and eidetic reduction, that Husserl should inevitably fall back on the last one, once he had taken recourse to the former? But in this case, though it doesn't strictly follow, there is even a big possibility that neither the estrangement of modern objective science vis-à-vis our life-world is due to its omission of the *ἐποχή* and its rootedness in the soil of the life-world itself, but, quite on the contrary, to its own accomplishment of an *ἐποχή* and its elevation to a "higher" view-point. Then again, if we maintain (as we think we must) with Husserl that the *ἐποχή* is required by the authentic ideal of pure theoretical knowledge, this ideal has truly been realized by modern objectivism, and the ensuing estrangement cannot be undone save by abandoning this ancient ideal itself. First of all, we must then reconsider the paradoxical main thesis of Husserl that we should be doomed to overlook the realities of our own everyday subjective-relative life-world as long as we stay rooted ourselves in its soil. Husserl's story would be wrong.

But as a matter of fact, is it not true that we cannot hold back, by *ἐποχή*, the spontaneous implication (or engagement) of ourselves in the realities of our subjective-relative life-world without reducing them to their objective essence, only "ideally" visible, or to the "primary qualities" or the essential structures only known by (and to) modern science? And is it not also true that inversely, such an *ἐποχή* is necessary in order to get a "view" ("idea") of these "essentials" of classical philosophy as well as modern science?

Furthermore, if there is still a difference between the *ἐποχή* as practiced by classical philosophy and modern science and the one intended by Husserl and implicitly operated by contemporary philosophy, it is to be suspected that it amounts only to this: it is one thing to hold back our spontaneous implication in our life-world so that it no longer influences our view of some essential and objective truth; it's still another thing to curtail this involvement in our life-world by a more radical *ἐποχή* in such a way that it is placed itself alongside of the objects of classical

objectivism in one vast realm of all-embracing objectivity, so that its essentials can now be studied from a new-acquired distance. If this is so, Husserl's last program and contemporary philosophy, as far as it is matched by the description sketched above, far from contributing to overcome the estrangement of modern rationality to our life-world, can only deepen this estrangement in the extreme.

I think that Husserl was right in stating that the classical ideal of purely theoretical knowledge required, from its beginning, the operation of a radical *ἐποχή*. The idealizations required in order to accomplish this *ἐποχή* were primarily experienced, even by Plato and later on, of course, by the British empiricists, as a disturbing need. In our times, we have begun to experience as a disturbing need the *ἐποχή* itself, required in its turn in order to accomplish objective knowledge of essentials. Ultimately, the estrangement, the alienation we are suffering from, is perhaps nothing else than this *ἐποχή* itself.

IV. Husserl's story-telling against his theoretical ideal.

But, with this, everything is not yet said about Husserl. Perhaps, it could be that the flaw in Husserl's story I have pointed out is not more than a mistake. However, there is a contradiction between his story-telling his intention to renew the classical ideal of purely theoretical knowledge. And exactly by contradicting this ideal by his story-telling, albeit without actually meaning to, he points out a different way from one which led to the estrangement he wants to overcome.

Husserl tells his story in order to point out the necessity of a renewal of the classical philosophical ideal of purely theoretical knowledge. And in order to do this, he must not, perhaps, tell the particular story he tells or tell this story in the particular way he does, but he must tell some story which, logically, cannot appeal to any theoretical (or objective) truth. As a matter of fact, at least in Husserl's last work, theory is founded on telling a story without any theoretical foundation for doing so.

The conclusion of the story as it is told by Husserl amounts to a vindication of the ancient ideal of pure theoretical knowledge to be founded on a radical *ἐποχή*. However, the founding story is told, and necessarily, without any claim that it is based on such an operation. If this story outlines the philosophical road to phenomenology, we cannot even say that it is phenomenological in its own right. According to the story, true knowledge cannot be rooted in the soil of the life-world and therefore requires, to begin with, the operation of the *ἐποχή*. But Husserl

begins his story by stressing the distress of European mankind in its present life-world. Husserl's whole enterprise is founded on this ground, and without this foundation it would be literally bottomless. In order to found the philosophical meaning of phenomenology, i.e., its vocation to implement the ideal of a purely theoretical knowledge as originated by Plato and Aristotle, Husserl has to tell a certain story. However, as has been recalled by Heidegger in "Being and Time," quoting Plato, "the first philosophical step to understand the problem of being is not *μῦθόν τινα διηγείσθαι*, 'not to tell some story'."⁸ Plato, indeed, says so in the *Sophistes*.⁹ And Plato's remark is not directed against "myth" in the 20th century meaning of some invented, fantastical, untrue or at least not provable story, but against any story-telling whatsoever, even if the story told be true.

Husserl himself has clearly felt that here again something goes wrong. On the envelope of one of his manuscripts preparatory to his last work, he notes: "First confuse reflections. The conflicting philosophies. Reflection on 'the need to go back in history'; construction of the 'novel' of history in order to understand ourselves."¹⁰ Indeed, from the point of view of pure phenomenology as Husserl understood it, the story he tells is nothing more than pure "construction," and from the point of view of the theoretical ideal, a myth, a "novel."

However, in view of the foregoing it is clear that, placed before the choice of renewing again and again the ideal of purely theoretical knowledge or of going back to story-telling, philosophy does better to choose deliberately to try again to tell the true story which led, from the ancient theoretical ideal, by way of modern objectivism, to the present critical state of human rationality.

As for Husserl's story, I think that it cannot be true. But through telling it, Husserl joined the line of great philosophers, from Fichte by way of Feuerbach and Marx to Nietzsche, followed up in our century by thinkers as Heidegger, Marcuse and Levinas, all of whom were mainly story-tellers, trying to tell the true story which led up to the present distress of European—and to be sure not only European—mankind. They all told this story in quite different ways. (I have tried myself to tell it again in a somewhat different way.¹¹) The philosophical debate of our time should bear on these different stories and on the question which one of them is true or if, perhaps, still another one is true. Unless we grasp that, we shall not be able to get anywhere. Only by historical experience can we learn what to do in our present situation. There is no other way to see what exactly went wrong, in order to get over it and make a new start.¹²

NOTES

¹*Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* (1936), *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. VI.

²This sub-title was nearly dropped when the Husserl-Archives published the work in 1954, the argument being that there were already enough "introductions" to phenomenology.

³See the title of *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (1913).

⁴Sub-title of the "First Book," the only one which was published by Husserl himself.

⁵*Erste Philosophie* (1923/24), *Gesammelte Werke*, vols. VII–VIII.

⁶Husserl's German expression is "sich dieses Bodens entheben"; see *Cartesische Meditationen*, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. I, p. 72, and *Die Krisis . . .*, vol. VI, p. 155, cf also p. 153.

⁷Robert Sokolowski tried to draw such a line in his intervention at the Homburg Colloquium in 1978; see *Lebenswelt und Wissenschaft in der Philosophie Edmund Husserls* (E. Ströker, editor), Frankfurt, 1979, pp. 92–106. In our discussions, he did not convince me. I could only see a difference between "idealization" as a goal in itself, and some kind of "reasonable" eidetic reduction as a means for the purpose of getting back to the facts.

⁸*Sein und Zeit*, 1927, p. 7.

⁹*Sophistes*, p. 242 c.

¹⁰Part of the manuscript *K III 9*, 1935, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. VI, p. 556.

¹¹*Kritik der Grundlagen des Zeitalters*, Den Haag, 1974. An English translation is being prepared by Fred Kersten.

¹²The phenomenological work Husserl actually *did* links up much better with this historical approach than with the "idea" of phenomenology he tried to put over in view of a re-establishment of the ideal of purely theoretical knowledge. I would call *this* a "construction," not his story-telling.