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Phenomenology and metaphysics

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What is the relation between phenomenology and metaphysics? Is phenomenology metaphysical neutral, is it without metaphysical bearings, is it a kind of propaedeutics to metaphysics, or is phenomenology on the contrary a form of metaphysics, perhaps even the culmination of a particular kind of metaphysics (of presence)? What should be made clear from the outset is that there is no easy and straightforward answer to the question concerning the relation between phenomenology and metaphysics. The term 'metaphysics' is simply too ambiguous. Even among phenomenologists the term is used and understood in quite different ways, and the answer to the question has consequently varied accordingly. Let me briefly illustrate this with a few examples:

- Many of Heidegger's writings in the decade after *Sein und Zeit* carries the word 'Metaphysics' in their title; just think of *Was ist Metaphysik*, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, and *Einführung in die Metaphysik*. Some have even dubbed this period Heidegger's 'Metaphysical decade', and suggested that Heidegger turned to the language of metaphysics in order to complete the phenomenological project of *Sein und Zeit* (Crowell 2001, 225, 229). Later on, of course, Heidegger became far more critical towards metaphysics, and conceived of it as being characterized by a forgetfulness of Being. Metaphysics investigates beings, it does not concern itself with Being qua Being (Heidegger 1978, 362). To put it differently, metaphysics consistently thinks Being as a kind of ontic entity. This is why Heidegger eventually described metaphysics as a thinking of identity, that is as a thinking which seeks to annul the *ontological difference* between Being and beings. Either metaphysics understands Being as the totality of beings, or (and more frequently) Being is thought as the ground of beings (be it in the form of *logos*, *idea*, *energeia*, substantiality, subjectivity, will, etc.). But to think Being as the ground of beings is, according to Heidegger, still to think

of it as something ontic, namely as the highest (or most fundamental) being. The clearest example of this can be found in the classical proofs of the existence of God, which is one of the reasons why Heidegger characterized metaphysics as *onto-theo-logical*. Ultimately, Heidegger would emphasize the need for substituting the conceptual apparatus of metaphysics for a more authentic type of thinking (Heidegger 1978, 312, 315, 363).

- In *Totalité et infini* Lévinas criticizes Heideggerian phenomenology for remaining too subservient to ontology. For Lévinas ontology is a totalizing enterprise. It is a philosophy of power characterized by a relentless movement of absorption and reduction. It absorbs the foreign and different into the familiar and identical. It reduces the Other to the Same (Lévinas 1990, 33, 38). In contrast, metaphysics is defined as an openness to Otherness, as an acknowledgment of the infinite. In fact, metaphysics is nothing but a movement of transcendence, namely the very relation to the absolute Other (Lévinas 1990, 32, 44). Given this alternative between ontology and metaphysics the question then arises, what has priority? Is, as Heidegger claims, the relation to the Other relative to an understanding of Being, or is it rather the relation to the Other which conditions the understanding of Being. In *Totalité et infini*, Lévinas's answer is unequivocal: "Ontology presupposes metaphysics" (Lévinas 1990, 39).
- In the conclusion of *L'être et le néant*, Sartre discusses the metaphysical implications of his preceding analyses and defines metaphysics as "the study of individual processes which have given birth to *this* world as a concrete and particular totality. In this sense metaphysics is to ontology as history is to sociology" (Sartre 1943, 683). Whereas ontology describes the structure of a being, metaphysics seeks to explain an event, namely the upsurge of the for-itself (Sartre 1943, 685).
- As for Derrida, he, of course, is known for having argued that phenomenology, in spite of itself, remains a kind of metaphysics (Derrida 1972, 187). Despite its attempt at a new beginning, phenomenology uncritically took over a series of metaphysical core concepts and categories, and thereby remained caught in the very frame of thought that it sought to overcome. Among these concepts, the notion of presence looms large. Traditional metaphysics defined Being as identity in presence. But although Husserlian phenomenology attempted to move beyond this framework it never really succeeded, but remained convinced that identity is more basic than difference, proximity more original than distance, and presence prior to every

kind of absence and negativity (Derrida 1972, 36-37). This is not only clear from its use of the notion of evidence—the measure of truth and validity—which is defined as intuitive self-givenness, but also from its understanding of transcendental subjectivity, which (according to Derrida) is conceived as pure self-presence, as a self-sufficient immanence, purified from all types of exteriority (Derrida 1972, 187, 207, 1967a, 9).¹ As for the Heideggerian destruction of metaphysics, Derrida also has his doubts: “But all these destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a kind of circle. This circle is unique. It describes the form of the relation between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics. There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest” (Derrida 1967b, 412). Ultimately, we will have to content ourselves with a perpetual problematisation. A new beginning is not possible.

It is of course impossible to discuss and analyze all of these different phenomenological proposals in the following. What I instead intend to do is to backtrack a bit and investigate some of the very first phenomenological reflections on the matter. To be more specific, I wish to compare Husserl’s view on the relation between phenomenology and metaphysics as it is articulated in his pre-transcendental descriptive phenomenology and in his later transcendental phenomenological account, respectively. I believe such a comparison will prove fruitful and allow for a fundamental insight into the relation between phenomenology and metaphysics; an insight which remains valid even for post-Husserlian phenomenology.

1. Metaphysics in *Logische Untersuchungen*

In the preface to *Logische Untersuchungen*, Husserl argues that the cardinal question for a theory of knowledge is to establish how objective knowledge is possible, i.e., to spell out the conditions of possibility for knowledge. The task is not to examine whether (and how) consciousness can attain knowledge of a mind-independent reality. These very types of questions, as well as all questions as to whether or not there is at all an external reality, are rejected by Husserl as being *metaphysical questions*, which have no place in phenomenological epistemology (Hua XIX, 26).

By metaphysics Husserl understands a narrow discipline which investigates

and assesses the metaphysical presuppositions of those sciences which deal with *reality*. More specifically, its main task is to answer questions concerning the nature and existence of external reality. In contrast, the scope of a theory of science (*Wissenschaftslehre*) is much broader. It is concerned with the conditions of possibility for all types of sciences, including ideal sciences such as mathematics, which are completely disinterested in questions concerning existence (Hua XVIII, 27). It is in light of this distinction that Husserl can claim that a theory of science constitutes the real foundational discipline, and that it has a clear priority over metaphysics (Hua XVIII, 226).

If we leaf through *Logische Untersuchungen*, we will find numerous passages affirming this rejection of metaphysics. In the introduction to the second part, Husserl describes phenomenology as a *neutral* investigation (Hua XIX, 6), and claims that epistemological concerns precede every metaphysics (Hua XIX, 27). Husserl then goes on to emphasize that all of the six ensuing investigations are distinguished by their metaphysical presuppositionlessness, for, as he writes, the aim of phenomenology is exactly to *describe* and *understand* the ideal structures of knowledge, not to *explain* how knowledge comes about (Hua XIX, 27-28).

In the Second Investigation Husserl brusquely rejects the metaphysical definition of the being-in-itself as something which is transcendent to and independent of consciousness, and argues that all metaphysical definitions of reality (*Realität*) should be set aside (Hua XIX, 129, cf. Hua XIX, 201). Later, in the Fifth Investigation, he explicitly stresses the difference between the metaphysical and the phenomenological endeavor, and goes on to say that the descriptive difference between experience and object is valid regardless of one's take on the question concerning the nature of the being-in-itself. In fact, it is a difference that precedes every metaphysics (Hua XIX, 401, 413). Finally, in the Sixth Investigation, Husserl criticizes Kant for not having managed to stay clear of a metaphysically contaminated epistemology, and then claims that metaphysical theories are uncalled for when it comes to an understanding of the relation between the laws of nature and the laws of reason. What are needed are not *explanations*, but phenomenological *clarifications* of meaning, thinking, and knowing (Hua XIX, 729, 732).

In light of these statements, it is not difficult to establish a solid link between the descriptive nature of phenomenology and its metaphysical neutrality. The task of phenomenology is to describe that which is given, exactly as it is given, rather than to get lost in metaphysical constructions.

Husserl advocates a metaphysical neutrality in *Logische Untersuchungen*. But what exactly does this imply? What kinds of questions or problems are suspended or overcome due to this neutrality? Given that Husserl regards the question concerning the existence of an external reality as a metaphysical

question which is irrelevant to phenomenology, it is not difficult to pinpoint the crucial issue, which is Husserl's stance towards *metaphysical realism* and *metaphysical idealism*. Both positions are exactly metaphysical and consequently to be shunned. (However, this neutrality does not prevent Husserl from criticizing certain metaphysical positions, such as a subjective idealism, which claims that the intentional object is a part of consciousness, or a naturalism, which claims that everything that exists—including intentionality itself—can and should be explained with the use of those principles and methods that are acknowledged by the natural sciences).

It is in part this metaphysical neutrality that is behind Husserl's repeated claim that the difference between a veridical perception and a non-veridical perception (say, an illusion or a hallucination) is irrelevant to phenomenology. As Husserl even says—with a formulation that has subsequently been much misunderstood—the very *existence* of the intentional object is phenomenologically irrelevant, since the intrinsic nature of the act is supposed to remain the same regardless of whether or not its object exists (Hua XIX, 358, 360, 387, 396). Thus, an implication of Husserl's position in *Logische Untersuchungen* is that there are no phenomenologically relevant differences between a perception and a hallucination of a blue book, for in both cases we are dealing with a situation where the intentional object is *presented* in an intuitive mode of givenness. Whether or not this object also exists objectively is a question that is methodologically suspended.

Insofar as Husserl refrains from making any claims about whether or not the intentional object has any mind-independent reality, and insofar as he seems to think that this is a question which phenomenology is incapable of answering, his initial concept of phenomenology must be considered a very narrow one. The question is whether this restriction is legitimate, or whether it ultimately threatens to reduce phenomenology to some kind of descriptive psychology.² Basically, one can appraise Husserl's metaphysical neutrality in three different ways:

- One can say that the rejection of metaphysics and metaphysical issues is a liberating move, for the simple reason that these traditional questions are pseudo-problems that have already spellbound philosophers for far too long.
- One can claim that it becomes phenomenology to acknowledge that it is merely a descriptive enterprise, and not the universal answer to all questions. In other words, there is a difference between phenomenology and metaphysics, and although the first might prepare the way for the latter, it does not in itself contain the resources to tackle metaphysical issues, and should therefore keep silent about that which it cannot speak.

- In contrast to these first two reactions that for quite different reasons welcome Husserl's metaphysical neutrality, the third option regrets it. It concedes that metaphysical problems are real problems, but since it also thinks that phenomenology has an important contribution to make in this area, it deplores Husserl's metaphysical neutrality as a self-imposed and unnecessary straitjacket.

2. Interlude

The lecture course *Einleitung in die Logik und Erkenntnistheorie* contains some of Husserl's first reflections on phenomenology as a transcendental enterprise. Husserl's very first use of the notion of phenomenological reduction can be found in the famous Seefelder Blätter from 1905, but his earliest attempt to employ the method of reduction in order to establish a radical presuppositionless phenomenology is found in these lectures from 1906-07 (cf. Hua XXIV, xxii, xxxiii, 212). However, the lectures also contain some lengthy reflections on the status of metaphysics; reflections which can be said to represent a refinement and elaboration in comparison with the rather brief analysis found in *Logische Untersuchungen*.

Husserl still operates with a distinction between metaphysics (which is concerned with reality, i.e., with spatio-temporal being), and theory of science (or formal ontology) which covers a much vaster area, since it deals with every type of being, not only real being, but ideal being as well, i.e., basically everything that can be the subject of a predication, including numbers, concepts, propositions, theories, aesthetic ideas, etc. But Husserl also employs a distinction between two different types of metaphysics. On the one hand, we have an empirically founded, a posteriori, material metaphysics, and on the other, an a priori, formal metaphysics. According to Husserl, it is the first type of metaphysics, which he also calls the radical science of being or the science of ultimate being, which constitutes metaphysics in the proper sense of the word, whereas the second type could just as well (or even better) be called an a priori ontology. Thus, properly speaking metaphysics is the ultimate science of being whose task is to clarify what is to count as real in the most fundamental sense of the word (Hua XXIV, 99-102). However, according to Husserl, this ultimate science does not only presuppose the work of the empirical sciences, it also presupposes a phenomenologically clarified epistemology:

If metaphysics is the science of the real in the true and ultimate sense, then epistemology is the precondition for metaphysics.

Epistemology is a formal science of being, insofar as it ignores being as it presents itself factually, and investigates being in general according to its essential meaning. We can designate the critique of knowledge that is close to pure logic as a formal metaphysics (ontology), whereas metaphysics in the proper sense of the word on the basis of this formal metaphysics determines what in a categorical sense factually exists, that is what is due to real being, not only as such and in general, but *de facto* according to the results of the particular sciences of being (Hua XXIV, 380).

Husserl even argues that the deepest problems of knowledge are inextricably linked to the transcendental philosophical problems, which are the most difficult and important problems of all. And as he then adds: only a solution to these problems will make a scientific metaphysics possible (Hua XXIV, 139, 178, 191). Why is this statement significant? Because whereas Husserl in (the first edition of) *Logische Untersuchungen* might be taken to think that metaphysics is something that is independent of and unrelated to phenomenology, he now explicitly argues that it presupposes a transcendental clarification. But, of course, to say that phenomenology might pave the way for a metaphysics, is still different from saying that phenomenology and phenomenological analyses have direct metaphysical implications or that they are *per se* metaphysical in nature.

3. Carr and Crowell

We have seen that Husserl's pre-transcendental phenomenology is metaphysically neutral, but what about his later work? In the past couple of years, two distinguished Husserl-scholars, David Carr and Steven Crowell, have argued that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is non-metaphysical as well.

In *The Paradox of Subjectivity* from 1999, Carr defends Husserl against the common accusation of being simply yet another subject metaphysician by arguing that Husserl was not engaged in a metaphysical project at all. Husserl was not making any substantial metaphysical claims about the world, but was instead inquiring into the very condition of possibility for metaphysics (Carr 1999, 134).

One key-element in Carr's interpretation is his understanding of Husserl's epoché. As Carr writes, the purpose of the epoché is to exclude the actual existence of the world from consideration (Carr 1999, 74). That is, all reference to the being of transcendent reality is dropped in order to focus instead on its sense or meaning (Carr 1999, 80). Thus, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is concerned with meaning rather than with being. For the very same reason,

Husserl's idealism is of a methodological kind rather than of a substantial or metaphysical kind. Its aim, according to Carr, is to make us consider the world *as if* it was nothing but sense (Carr 1999, 110). Thus, transcendental idealism is not at all a metaphysical doctrine, but must on the contrary simply be understood as a critical reflection on the conditions of possibility for experience. To put it differently, Husserl's transcendental investigation is carried out under metaphysical suspension. It is metaphysically neutral. When Husserl speaks of constitution, it is according to Carr crucial not to conflate being and meaning. The two must be kept apart, and all that transcendental subjectivity can be said to be constituting is the meaning of the world, not its being (Carr 1999, 108).

Many interpreters, not only Carr, but also Fink and Gadamer (cf. Gadamer 1972, 178, Fink 1988, 179), have claimed that Husserl's transcendental idealism is beyond a traditional metaphysical idealism and realism. But there are several ways to interpret this claim:

- One interpretation argues that transcendental idealism is beyond this traditional alternative insofar as it actually seeks to combine elements from both positions.
- Another interpretation argues that transcendental idealism transcends both positions insofar as it shows that both metaphysical realism and idealism, together with a lot of traditional metaphysical heritage, are strictly speaking nonsensical.
- A third interpretation argues that transcendental idealism is beyond both positions in the sense that it strictly speaking is concerned with quite different matters altogether, that is, transcendental idealism simply lacks metaphysical impact. It might constitute a kind of propaedeutics to a future metaphysics, but in and of itself it is not concerned with the sphere of reality.

If I understand Carr correctly, he opts for the third interpretation. As he writes near the end of his book: "both philosophers [Kant and Husserl] recognized, I think, that their transcendental procedure did not authorize the transition to metaphysical claims" (Carr 1999, 137). This phrasing seems to indicate that Carr takes transcendental phenomenology to simply lack the resources to tackle metaphysical issues.

Some of Carr's concerns are shared by Steven Crowell in his *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning* from 2001. Crowell is anxious to emphasize the non-metaphysical dimension and direction of transcendental thought. Transcendental phenomenology must be viewed as a metaphilosophical

or methodological endeavor rather than as a straightforwardly metaphysical doctrine about the nature and ontological status of worldly objects (Crowell 2001, 237). Husserl's epoché and reduction are methodological tools permitting us to gain a distance from the natural attitude, thereby making a philosophical reflection possible that allows us to analyze something which we are surrounded by, but which we seldom thematize, namely *givenness*. One encounters objects as given, but does not reflect upon what givenness means, nor how it is possible. Every positive science (be it empirical or metaphysical) rests upon a field of givenness or evidence that is presupposed but not investigated by the sciences themselves. In order to make this dimension accessible, a new type of inquiry is called for, a type of inquiry that "lies before all ordinary knowledge and science, and lies in a quite different direction than ordinary science" (Hua XXIV, 176). The task of phenomenology is not to describe the objects as precisely and meticulously as possible, nor should it concern itself with an investigation of the phenomena in all their ontic diversity. No, its true task is to examine the very dimension of appearance or givenness, and to disclose its inner structure and condition of possibility. Transcendental phenomenology thematizes objects in terms of their givenness, validity, and intelligibility, and such an investigation calls for a reflective stance quite unlike the one needed in the positive sciences. As Crowell puts it, the space of meaning cannot be approached using the resources of traditional metaphysics (Crowell 2001, 182).

From this point of view, a metaphysical interpretation of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology entails a dramatic misunderstanding of what phenomenology is all about. It misunderstands the notion of reduction, and it overlooks the decisive difference between the natural attitude and the phenomenological attitude. Using Heideggerian terms, one might even say that a metaphysical interpretation of phenomenology entails a disregard of the ontological difference. Metaphysics remains to some extent a pre-critical or naive enterprise. In its attempt to map out the building stones of reality, it never leaves the natural attitude. It doesn't partake in the reflective move that is the defining moment of transcendental thought.

To some extent, I agree with both Carr and Crowell, particularly when it comes to their emphasis on the difference between the object-oriented nature of metaphysics and the reflective orientation of transcendental phenomenology. It is true that transcendental phenomenology is not engaged in straightforward metaphysics. But it is one thing to make that point and something quite different to claim that phenomenology has no metaphysical implications. This latter claim might itself give rise to a serious misconstrual of what phenomenology is all about.

4. Metaphysics and Transcendental Phenomenology

The epoché and the reduction are crucial elements in Husserl's transcendental methodology, and a correct understanding of these concepts is indispensable if one is to appraise the relation between metaphysics and transcendental phenomenology correctly.

Is it really true that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology excludes the actual existing world from consideration, and that it is concerned with meaning rather than with being? Here two closely related claims must be distinguished: 1. That transcendental phenomenology operates with a sharp distinction between meaning and being, and 2. that being, existence, and even reality itself, is lost from sight as a consequence of the transcendental turn. In my view, both claims are wrong.

What does Husserl himself have to say on the issue? Husserl is often at pains to emphasize that the epoché is not effectuated in order to deny, doubt, neglect, abandon, or exclude reality from our research, but simply in order to suspend or neutralize a certain dogmatic *attitude* towards reality, thereby allowing us to focus more narrowly and directly on reality just as it is given. In short, the epoché entails a change of attitude towards reality, and not an exclusion of reality. It is only through such a suspension that we will be able to approach reality in a way that will allow for a disclosure of its true sense (Hua VIII, 457, 465, III/1,120). And to speak of the *sense* of reality in this context does not, as Husserl will eventually add, imply that the *being* of reality, i.e., the really existing world, is somehow excluded from the phenomenological sphere of research. As Husserl points out in *Erste Philosophie II*, it is actually better to avoid using the term 'Ausschaltung' altogether, since the use of this term might easily lead to the mistaken view that the being of the world is no longer a phenomenological theme, whereas the truth is that "the theme of a universal transcendental inquiry also includes the world itself, with all its true being" (Hua VIII, 432).³ This line of thought is continued in *Krisis*, where Husserl writes:

What must be shown in particular and above all is that through the epoché a new way of experiencing, of thinking, of theorizing, is opened to the philosopher; here, situated *above* his own natural being and *above* the natural world, he loses nothing of their being and their objective truths [...] (Hua VI, 154-5).

But already in *Ideen I*, Husserl made it clear that phenomenology eventually integrates and includes everything that it had at first parenthesized for methodological reasons:

The excluding has at the same time the characteristic of a revaluing change in sign; and with this change the revalued affair finds a place once again in the phenomenological sphere. Figuratively speaking, that which is parenthesized is not erased from the phenomenological blackboard but only parenthesized, and thereby provided with an index. As having the latter it is, however, part of the major theme of inquiry (Hua III/1, 159. Cf. Hua III/1, 107, 337).

The so-called exclusion of the world is in reality an exclusion of a naive prejudice concerning the metaphysical status of the world: “The real actuality is not ‘reinterpreted,’ to say nothing of its being denied; it is rather that a countersensical interpretation of the real actuality, i.e., an interpretation which contradicts the latter’s *own* sense as clarified by insight, is removed” (Hua III/1, 120).

To perform the epoché and the reduction is not to abstain from an investigation of reality in order to focus on mental content, in fact to perform them does not imply any loss. Quite to the contrary, the fundamental change of attitude involved makes it possible to investigate reality in a new way, namely in its signification and manifestation for subjectivity. This investigation differs from a direct investigation of the real world, but it remains an investigation of reality, it is not an investigation of some otherworldly, mental, realm. Only a mistaken view of the nature of meaning and appearance would lead to such a misunderstanding. To put it differently, to perform the epoché and the reduction makes a decisive discovery possible and should consequently be understood as an *expansion* of our field of research (Hua VI, 154, I, 66).

‘The’ world has not been lost through the epoché—it is not at all an abstaining with respect to the being of the world and with respect to any judgment about it, but rather it is the way of uncovering judgments about correlation, of uncovering the reduction of all unities of sense to me myself and my sense-having and sense-bestowing subjectivity with all its capabilities (Hua XV, 366).

Husserl even compares the performance of the epoché with the transition from a two-dimensional to a three-dimensional life (Hua VI, 120). Suddenly the perpetually functioning but so far hidden transcendental subjectivity is disclosed as the subjective condition of possibility for any manifestation.

In the light of these considerations, it seems rather problematic to claim that Husserl after the effectuation of the epoché was no longer interested in reality, but

only concerned with an analysis of meaning, as if the execution of the epoché demanded abstention from ontological commitment, and neutrality when it came to all questions concerned with being or existence. As already mentioned, this interpretation fits the facts, as long as we speaking of Husserl's pre-transcendental position in *Logische Untersuchungen*, that is as long as Husserl had *not* yet introduced the notions of epoché and reduction. In that early work, Husserl did in fact repeatedly claim that the *existence* of the object was phenomenologically irrelevant. But this understanding of the topic and scope of phenomenology changed the moment Husserl took the step from a descriptive phenomenology to a transcendental phenomenology. This is also why Husserl would eventually reject any non-metaphysical interpretation of phenomenology:

Finally, lest any misunderstanding arise, I would point out that, as already stated, phenomenology indeed *excludes every naïve metaphysics* that operates with absurd things in themselves, but *does not exclude metaphysics as such* (Hua I, 38-39).

Phenomenology is anti-metaphysical insofar as it rejects every metaphysics concerned with the construction of purely formal hypotheses. But like all genuine philosophical problems, all metaphysical problems return to a phenomenological base, where they find their genuine transcendental form and method, fashioned from intuition (Hua IX, 253. Cf. Hua V, 141).

As Landgrebe writes, the transcendental reduction is Husserl's way to the core-problems of metaphysics (1963, 26).

To avoid misunderstandings, let me emphasize that this attempt to argue for a metaphysical dimension to phenomenology should not be seen as an endorsement of every metaphysical endeavor. As I pointed out in the beginning of the paper, metaphysics is an unusually ambiguous term, which can be understood and defined in a variety of quite different ways, say as

- a speculatively constructed philosophical system dealing with the 'first principles'
- a science of supersensible or transphenomenal entities
- an objectivistic attempt to describe reality from a view from nowhere, i.e., an attempt to provide an absolute non-perspectival account of reality
- an answer to the old question of *why* there is something rather than nothing
- a mode of thinking founded upon the 'logic' of binary oppositions
- an attempt to answer the perennial questions concerning the meaning of

factual human life⁴

- or simply as a systematic reflection on the nature of existing reality

It is only if metaphysics is taken in the last ‘minimal’ sense, that I consider metaphysical neutrality as a questionable transcendental-phenomenological move, a move that threatens to reintroduce some kind of two-world theory—the world as it is for us, and the world as it is in itself. Why should metaphysical neutrality imply such a view, and why is that phenomenologically unacceptable?

It is true that transcendental phenomenology and metaphysics are two very different enterprises, but to interpret transcendental phenomenology as if it has no metaphysical impact, that is, in such a way that it is in principle compatible with a variety of different metaphysical views, including metaphysical (scientific) realism and objectivism is to make transcendental phenomenology indistinguishable from something quite different, namely phenomenological psychology. Phenomenological psychology is a regional ontological enterprise, whose basic task is to investigate the a priori structures that any possible (intentional) subject must be in possession of. But this task, important as it might be, should not, as Husserl himself has persistently emphasized, be confused with the objective of transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology is not merely a theory about the structure of subjectivity, nor is it merely a theory about how we understand and perceive the world. It is not even a theory about how the world appears to us, *if*, that is, such a theory is supposed to be complemented by a further investigation (left to metaphysics) of what the world itself is like. To construe Husserlian phenomenology in such a way would make it vulnerable to the objection that it engages in an unphenomenological abstraction: Something crucial would be missing from its repertoire; being and reality would be topics left for other disciplines. But as we have just seen, this interpretation does neither respect nor reflect Husserl’s own assertions on the matter. In fact, as Fink remarks in an article from 1939, only a fundamental misunderstanding of the aim of phenomenology would lead to the mistaken but often repeated claim that Husserl’s phenomenology is not interested in reality or the question of being, but only in subjective meaning-formations in intentional consciousness (Fink 1939, 257). In addition, however, it would also make Husserl operate with a two-world theory. On the one hand, we would have the world as it is for us, the world of appearance, the world phenomenology is supposed to investigate. On the other hand, we would have the world as it is in itself, the real world, the world metaphysics and positive science are supposed to investigate. But although this way of cutting the cake might make a lot of sense to analytical philosophers, since they typically understand phenomenology to be a first-person description of what the ‘what it is like’ of experience is really like, i.e., since they typically identify phenomenology with some kind of introspectionism, it is absolutely

inimical to the kind of phenomenology that I have so far been discussing, the kind that was inaugurated by Husserl.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is by using the specter of global skepticism as a kind of litmus test. How would phenomenologists like Husserl and Heidegger respond to the ‘evil demon’ or ‘the brain in the vat’ scenario? How would they react to the suggestion that the world we live in might be nothing but a big illusion? Would they reject the hypothesis outright or would they rather concede its possibility and admit that phenomenology (being limited to the world of appearance as it is) had no way of countering it? In my view, the answer is obvious. Neither Husserl nor Heidegger would accept the suggestion (Hua I, 32, 117, Heidegger 1986, 229).⁵ Both would argue that the skeptical scenario presupposes the possibility of distinguishing in principle between the world as it is understood by us and the world as it is in itself, but it is exactly this possibility and this distinction that they reject (Hua VIII, 441, 462). In addition, as Heidegger for instance makes clear in §§ 43-44 of *Sein und Zeit* the skeptical query is self-refuting since it presupposes that which it denies: “The question of whether there is a world at all and whether ist being can be demonstrated, makes no sense at all if it is raised by Da-sein as being-in-the-world—and who else should ask it” (Heidegger 1986, 202).⁶

Just as phenomenology is not *merely* concerned with meaning, it is not *merely* concerned with appearance, or to put it differently, meaning is not *mere* meaning, nor is appearance *mere* appearance. On the contrary, how things appear, what significance they have, is an integral part of what they really are. If we wish to grasp the true nature of the object, we will better pay close attention to how it manifest and reveal itself, be it in sensuous perception or in scientific analyses. The reality of the object is not hidden behind the phenomenon, but unfolds itself in the phenomenon. As Heidegger once put it, it is phenomenologically absurd to say of the phenomenon that it stands in the way of something more fundamental which it merely represents (GA 20: 118). Although the distinction between appearance and reality must be maintained, it is according to transcendental phenomenology not a distinction between two separate realms (falling in the province of phenomenology and metaphysics, respectively), but a distinction internal to the realm of appearances. It is a distinction between how the objects might appear at a casual look, and how they might appear in the best of circumstances. Thus, for Husserl the world that appears to us, be it in perception, in daily concerns, or in scientific analysis, is the only real world. To claim that in addition, there exists a hidden world behind the phenomenal world, a hidden world which transcends every appearance and every experiential and conceptual evidence and that this world is the true reality, is, for Husserl, not only an empty speculative postulate which completely lacks phenomenological credibility. Ultimately, the very idea involves a category mistake.

Let me anticipate a critical rejoinder. Perhaps one could grant everything I have said so far, but still object that Husserl does occasionally distinguish between metaphysics and ontology, and that we need to follow him in this. Ontology aims at articulating the essential structures of different ontological regions. Thus, to ask what a material object or a social relation is fundamentally speaking is to pose an ontological question. Given this definition of ontology, it is obvious that it fits parts of Husserl's phenomenology well. Just take his analyses of the part-whole relation for instance. These analyses spell out certain lawful relations that hold for all ontological regions. To suggest that they should only hold for the mental realm would be nothing but a psychologistic misinterpretation. However, ontology does not make any claims about whether or not a certain region or object exist. It is indifferent to that very question. In contrast, metaphysics is concerned with questions of existence; it is concerned with the question of what it means for an object to be real, actual, to exist. And couldn't it be argued that although Husserl's investigations might have an ontological impact, they do not have a metaphysical impact, since he persistently ignore and avoid questions about existence? To reply, the answer is no. First of all, it is incontestable that Husserl did treat and analyze questions concerning reality and existence. In fact, one of his main reasons for taking the problem of intersubjectivity as seriously as he did, was exactly because he took reality and objectivity to be intersubjectively constituted, to be something that depends upon my *factual* encounter with Others.⁷ Moreover, just think of his careful analysis of the different modes of givenness. I can talk about a withering oak which I have never seen, but which I have heard about; I can see a detailed drawing *of* the oak; or I can perceive the oak myself. These different ways to intend an object are not unrelated. On the contrary, there is a strict hierarchical relation between them, in the sense that the modes can be ranked according to their ability to give us the object as directly, originally, and optimally as possible. The object can be given more or less directly, that is, it can be more or less *present*. It is only the actual perception which gives us the object directly. This is the only type of intention which presents us with the object itself in its bodily presence. But to speak of a spatio-temporal object that is given *in propria persona*, that is as bodily present, is exactly to speak of an *existing* object.⁸ Finally, the issue of factual existence is something that even crops up in Husserl's discussion of transcendental subjectivity. As he for instance writes in *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität III*: "But the eidos transcendental I is unthinkable without the transcendental I as factual" (Hua XV, 385).

5. Conclusion

In contrast to descriptive phenomenology (and different forms of psychology), transcendental phenomenology cannot permit itself to remain neutral or indifferent to the question concerning the relationship between the phenomena and reality. But by having to take a stand on this relationship, it also by necessity has metaphysical implications.

Phenomenology investigates the intelligibility, significance, and appearance of the world. To engage in a reflective exploration of the structures and conditions of worldly significance and appearance differs from any direct metaphysical investigation of the real world. But what needs to be stressed is that the significance and appearance being investigated is the significance and appearance of the real world, not of some otherworldly mental realm. Phenomenology has insisted upon this, and rightly so, but by doing that, it can no longer claim metaphysical neutrality.⁹

In the account of Husserl's metaphysical neutrality in *Logische Untersuchungen* given above, I mentioned that one could appraise this neutrality in three different ways. One could argue that metaphysical issues are pseudoproblems and that the rejection of metaphysics is consequently a liberating move. One could argue that metaphysical problems are real problems, but that phenomenology lacks the resources to tackle these problems, for which reason the neutrality is totally appropriate. And finally, one could argue that phenomenology has metaphysical implications and consequently deplore the neutrality as a unnecessary limitation. In the end these three different responses might be less incompatible than one might think at first glance. Thus, it could very well be argued that there is a variety of different metaphysical questions, and that some might fall in the first category, some in the second and some in the third—i.e., there might be metaphysical pseudoproblems which phenomenology is wise to abandon, metaphysical questions which is beyond its reach, and metaphysical questions which it is capable of addressing.

Of course, as already mentioned, metaphysics can mean a lot of different things, and given certain understandings of the term phenomenology is indeed non-metaphysical, or even better anti-metaphysical. Thus if metaphysics for instance is seen as being wedded inseparably to an objectivistic framework, phenomenology is not metaphysical and has no dealing with it, except of course in so far as it criticizes it, and does not simply leave it untouched and unquestioned. To argue that transcendental phenomenology is metaphysical neutral, to argue that it is concerned with meaning rather than being, and that it lacks the resources to tackle metaphysical issues, is not only to make transcendental phenomenology more tame and lame than it really is. The true paradox is that such a view is exactly giving in to a certain kind of traditional metaphysics, accepting as it does the classical distinction between meaning and being, and between appearance and reality.

Continuing this line of thought some might want to argue that the term metaphysics is so loaded that it might be prudent to simply avoid using it. If one really wants to insist that phenomenology has metaphysical implications, it might be better to specify that the kind of metaphysics at play is a *post-critical* metaphysics. I have no quarrel with this suggestion. In fact, there is no reason to quarrel over terminology. All that is important is to recognize the scope of transcendental phenomenology—transcendental phenomenology does have something to say about existing reality, about being and objectivity—and not to misconstrue it in such a way that it becomes indistinguishable from some kind of descriptive psychology. Such a misconstrual would be particularly harmful these days, given the widespread but misleading use of the term ‘phenomenology’ in analytical philosophy.

Why this conclusion is of pertinence not only for an understanding of Husserlian phenomenology, but also for a correct appreciation of post-Husserlian phenomenology is, I hope, obvious.¹⁰ It hardly needs to be added that this preliminary analysis of the relation between phenomenology and metaphysics doesn’t exhaust the topic, and that much more needs to be said about it.¹¹

NOTES

1. In my view, however, this interpretation is highly problematic. Cf. Zahavi 1999 and 2003.

2. For a more extensive discussion of the metaphysical neutrality in *Logische Untersuchungen*, cf. Zahavi 2002. In this earlier article, I basically discussed and criticized a recent interpretation of Jocelyn Benoist according to which the metaphysical neutrality in *Logische Untersuchungen* should count as one of the decisive virtues of that work (Benoist 1997). The conclusion I eventually reached in that article is identical to the one I will argue for in this, but the manner in which I did so was different.

3. In *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*, Heidegger accounts for the phenomenological methodology that has been developed by Husserl, and at one point he delivers the following surprisingly acute characterization: “This bracketing of the entity takes nothing away from the entity itself, nor does it purport to assume that the entity is not. This reversal of perspective has rather the sense of making the being of the entity present. This phenomenological suspension of the transcendent thesis has but the sole function of making the entity present in regard to its being. The term ‘suspension’ is thus always misunderstood when it is thought that in suspending the thesis of existence and by doing so, phenomenological reflection simply has nothing more to do with the entity. Quite the contrary: in an extreme and unique way, what really is at issue now is the determination of the being of the very entity” (Heidegger 1979, 136).

4. In some of his later works, Husserl does in fact use the term ‘metaphysics’ in this slightly idiosyncratic manner, defining it as the philosophical treatment of the ultimate questions concerning the meaning of factual human life, i.e., as reflections on such issues as facticity, birth, death, fate, history, etc. (Hua I, 182). Ultimately, it is this line of thought, which leads to Husserl’s philosophical theology (cf. Hart 1986). However, this is

not an aspect of Husserl's thinking that I intend to consider in any further detail, and none of my references to 'metaphysics' should be taken as referring to this particular enterprise.

5. A comparable rejection of the skeptic can also be found in both McDowell and Davidson. As McDowell writes in *Mind and World*: "The aim here is not to answer sceptical questions, but to begin to see how it might be intellectually respectable to ignore them, to treat them as unreal, in the way that common sense has always wanted to." (McDowell 1994, 113). As for Davidson, he writes: "I set out not to 'refute' the skeptic, but to give a sketch of what I think to be a correct account of the foundations of linguistic communication and its implication for truth, belief, and knowledge. If one grants the correctness of this account, one can tell the skeptic to get lost." (Davidson 2001, 157).

6. Even if some might object that this rejection of skepticism is overhasty, the fact remains that neither Husserl nor Heidegger had any patience with skepticism's endorsement of a two-world theory. And this is all that matters in this context. To put it differently, what is at stake is only the question of whether Husserl and Heidegger did in fact reject global skepticism, and not whether they were justified in doing so. Should it turn out that they were not justified in this rejection, it would at the same time become difficult to maintain that they were at all engaged in any kind of transcendental enterprise.

7. For an extensive presentation cf. Zahavi 1996.

8. In his article "Husserl's perceptual noema" Dreyfus advocates the same view, namely that an analysis of the perceptual (or bodily) givenness of an object involves taking existence into account. But since Dreyfus takes Husserl's transcendental phenomenology to be a kind of internalism and methodological solipsism that persistently ignores questions of existence, Dreyfus ends up claiming that transcendental phenomenology only aims at accounting for how objects are taken and intended, and not for how they are given or presented (Dreyfus 1982, 108, 119). How Dreyfus manages to make this interpretation fit the fact that Husserl has analysed the givenness of the object countless times, is a separate question.

9. As should be clear from these remarks, I am very critical of the attempt to establish some kind of contrast or opposition between Husserl's 'pure' phenomenology and the later so-called existential phenomenology, as if it were only the later phenomenologists who were interested in describing our actual involvement with existing reality (cf. McIntyre 1982, 231).

10. I am indebted to David Carr and Steven Crowell for comments to earlier versions of this article. I very much doubt that this piece will be the final word in our ongoing discussion.

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