

II. Husserl and Phenomenology.

Clarification of the meaning of phenomenology requires knowledge of the phenomenological movement itself. The available studies of this movement are as enormous, as they are complex, and the debate on the issues has at times become emotional. The point of departure, nevertheless, has always remained the thought of Edmund Husserl, and my attempt to clarify the meaning of phenomenology will, therefore, be based on his work.⁸ This approach follows the practice of leading phenomenologists in philosophy and the human sciences.

Within the limits of this initial analysis, two points must be emphasized from the beginning. First, phenomenology is neither a neutral method nor a pure description of phenomena. It is a transcendental philosophy. Second, the denial of this assertion, as we shall see, is a rejection of the aims of phenomenology itself.

The notion that phenomenology is only a method for pure description is based on an influential interpretation of Husserl set forth in an article by Eugene Fink in 1933.⁹ Ironically, Husserl endorsed this article! One of Fink's main assertions concerning Husserl's work and the meaning of phenomenology is that Husserl moved from a method of "eidetic analysis" to an idealistic philosophy. This interpretation of Husserl splits the development of his thought into two parts. The first involves an eidetic or essential analysis of the mundane world, or the real world, of everyday phenomena. The second moves to an idealistic analysis of subjectivity, of the pure ego. The first generation of phenomenologists which Husserl fathered accepted this interpretation as involving two "reductions" or stages in Husserl's phenomenology.

This interpretation of Husserl's phenomenology as "early" and "later" led to the repudiation of the "later Husserl" as a return to metaphysical-idealism. Phenomenologists on the Kantian side accepted the eidetic, mundane reduction as good phenomenology but concluded that the transcendental reduction was a return to ontologism. It was, therefore, not just unnecessary but impossible for the construction of a genuine phenomenological method. Philosophers influenced by the Marxist tradition repudiated Husserl as the last of the bourgeois idealists. And the British analytic tradition viewed his later thought as intuitional mysticism.¹⁰

Why Husserl sanctioned Fink's article remains a mystery.¹¹ Given the evidence of his own publications Husserl did not think of phenomenology as two methods of reduction, the eidetic and the transcendental, the second of which could be eliminated. The judgement that the transcendental reduction commits him to an idealistic metaphysics must be reconciled with his own denial of this judgement as a misunderstanding of his thought.¹² An adequate account of phenomenology will someday have to come to terms with the fact that Husserl made a distinction between "idealistic epistemology" and "idealistic metaphysics."¹³

The generation of scholars who split Husserl's work into a phenomenology (i.e. an intuitive description of the mundane world) and an idealistic metaphysics (i.e. taking the pure ego as an absolute entity or being) produced a phenomenology that has been suspect of mystical vision, traditional introspectionism or intuitionism.¹⁴

The central problem Husserl attempted to solve was epistemological or cognitional. In the preface to the Logische Untersuchungen, Husserl states that he continuously saw himself pushed to higher levels of reflection "concerning the relation between the subjectivity of cognition and the objectivity of the content of cognition."¹⁵ Or, as he says in the introduction to the first investigation, the question that is always raised is, "how to understand that the 'in itself of objectivity comes to 'presentation,' grasped by cognition; in the end becoming again subjective."¹⁶ This problem is highlighted again in the Cartesian Meditations, where the problem is exhibited in reflection. Reflection on self always manifests the self as a subject for the world, but at the same time as an object to be grasped as a part of the world. In Krisis the problem is raised in his discussion of the relation between the lived-world and subjectivity. In Ideen II the problem is raised in relation to the natural and human sciences.¹⁷

This problem, or paradox, is not the result of phenomenology; on the contrary, the various phenomenological reflections specify the problem and seek to overcome it. The solution to the riddle is one more attempt to overcome the dualism of subject and object which has vexed our philosophical tradition and scientific disciplines. Husserl saw this problem as the root of philosophical and theoretical skepticism.