
From David Woodruff Smith and Ronald McIntyre, *Husserl and Intentionality: A Study of Mind, Meaning, and Language* (Dordrecht and Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1982), Chapter III, §1.2, pp. 93-104. Original page numbers are in \diamond.

1.2. *Husserlian Phenomenology And Phenomenological Method*

We characterized Husserl's approach to intentionality as "phenomenological" because it attempts to explain intentionality exclusively in terms of the contents of intentional experiences as opposed to their objects. Broadly defined, phenomenology is simply a study of the intrinsic structures of consciousness, or contents of experiences. Now, while this definition captures <94> Husserl's general conception of phenomenology, there emerges in his writings a more restrictive and more sophisticated conception of phenomenology as a distinctively philosophical discipline. *Transcendental, or pure, phenomenology* Husserl conceives as a special kind of study of the structures of consciousness, a study whose results are to be completely independent of – and so "purified" of – all empirical or naturalistic assumptions. Although, like psychology, it is a study of mental phenomena, transcendental phenomenology is to be sharply distinguished from empirical psychology, which is enmeshed with naturalistic assumptions. Indeed, Husserl holds, it must proceed by a distinctive methodology, called *transcendental-phenomenological reduction*, which involves a special kind of inner reflection. This program of transcendental phenomenology develops out of philosophical concerns that include not only intentionality but also fundamental problems of ontology, epistemology, and philosophic methodology generally. Its larger motivations lie with matters of epistemology and methodology. . . . Accordingly, in this section we turn briefly to Husserl's specific version of phenomenology as it emerges in the context of these larger themes. In this way we mark out the place and the motivations of Husserl's theory of intentionality in his overall philosophy of transcendental phenomenology.

The epistemological motivations of his philosophy Husserl himself often characterizes as Cartesian. The basic task of philosophy, he believes, is to discover the ultimate foundations of our beliefs about the world and about our place in it, and to justify – or at least to effect an understanding of – the framework within which all our thinking about the world takes place, both our everyday, common-sense thinking and our theoretical, scientific reasoning (cf. *CM*, §§1-3). Like Descartes, Husserl thinks these foundations lie with an understanding of the nature of the experiencing subject and his consciousness. Husserl's

phenomenology takes the form it does largely because of the role he sees for it in this larger philosophical enterprise. For, he thinks, only a phenomenology purified of the assumptions that underlie our naturalistic thinking can hope to clarify or to justify the foundations of that thinking.

Transcendental-phenomenological reduction is Husserl's method for attaining a phenomenology appropriate to these ultimate philosophical goals. In *Ideas* and *Cartesian Meditations* he characterizes this reduction as most naturally proceeding in three steps, each of which is itself characterized as a kind of "reduction". A "reduction" in Husserl's sense is a *methodological* device for "reducing", or narrowing down, the scope of one's inquiry. Importantly, then, Husserl's reductions are not *ontological* reductions, whereby entities of one category are defined or eliminated in terms of entities of some other category (as some have sought to reduce physical objects to sense-data, or minds to bodies, or values to facts, and so on). Rather, the purpose of Husserl's reductions is that of successively delimiting the subject matter of phenomenology. Accordingly, the purpose of the first reduction – sometimes called the "psychological", or "phenomenological-psychological", reduction – is to focus our attention on consciousness and its experiences, rather than on the various external objects with which consciousness is more typically occupied. But this reduction achieves only the broad, rudimentary form of phenomenology we first described, a phenomenology that is not yet distinguished from psychology. The purpose of the second step – called the "transcendental" reduction – is to eliminate from this study of consciousness all empirical or naturalistic considerations. Accordingly, it is the transcendental reduction that yields the "pure" version of phenomenology suitable to Husserl's philosophical tasks. The purpose of the third step – an instance of what Husserl calls "eidetic" reduction – is to generalize the results attained through a transcendental study of consciousness. The phenomenology finally attained, Husserl believes, will then not be merely an account of the phenomenologist's own consciousness, or his own experiences, but will have the status of a general "science" of consciousness. Let us take a closer look at these three methodological steps and what they are supposed to achieve.

The first step – psychological reduction – yields a study of the ego and its acts that proceeds by means of "natural", or "psychological", reflection (*CM*, §15; *Ideas*, §34), a reflection that takes place within what Husserl calls the "natural attitude". This natural attitude is the everyday, pre-philosophical attitude that pervades our ordinary conscious life. Basic to this attitude is our simply taking it for granted that the natural world exists, that the objects we intend are, for the most part, real entities within that world, and that we ourselves and our experiences are also parts of that world and in causal interaction with its other parts. These presuppositions of our everyday life make up what Husserl calls the "general thesis" of the natural attitude (*Ideas*, §§27-30). Now, it is precisely the legitimacy of this natural

attitude and its general thesis that is called into question by Descartes' philosophical program. For nothing short of a philosophical grounding of the presuppositions underlying our ordinary beliefs about the world will suffice as an ultimate grounding of those beliefs themselves. Consequently, a philosophy that sets this Cartesian <96> task for itself cannot assume or make use of the presuppositions of the natural attitude, on pain of begging the very questions it seeks to answer. For these philosophical purposes, then, all such presuppositions must be suspended, or set aside. The suspension of these presuppositions is what Husserl calls "epoché", or "bracketing" the thesis of the natural attitude: to "bracket" this thesis is to refuse to make or to use the assumption that there is a real, natural world to which our intentions relate. And bracketing this general assumption entails making no use of the more particular beliefs that presuppose it; beliefs about particular objects and all the theories of natural science are thereby bracketed as well, Husserl says. (See *Ideas*, §§31-32.)

The purpose of bracketing, or epoché, is to turn our attention away from the objects of the natural world so that our inquiry may focus instead on the most fundamental evidences on which our naturalistic beliefs about these objects are based. And for Husserl, as for Descartes, this turn to evidences is a turn toward the conscious subject and his experiences. (Cf.. *CM*, §§5-8.) Whether the natural world exists or not, Husserl believes, it is self-evident to the experiencing subject that he undergoes experiences, experiences that at least purport to be of or about external objects, and that he himself exists as the subject, or ego, having these experiences. Setting aside his ordinary concern with the natural world, the subject can explicitly direct his attention to these experiences, and to himself as their subject, in what Husserl calls acts of "reflection" (*Ideas*, §§38, 77, 78; *CM*, §15). Consequently, by bracketing the thesis of the natural attitude as it applies to the objects of our ordinary intentions, we effect a first "reduction" of the field of philosophical inquiry: the search for evidences now centers, not on the objects that we ordinarily intend, but on the intentions themselves and the ego who undergoes them, as revealed in reflection.

We noted that Husserl calls this reduction "psychological" and that it takes place within the natural attitude. This means that the reflection involved here is not something unusual or unfamiliar to us in our everyday life (although its Cartesian motivation may be). Rather, it is simply the kind of reflection we engage in whenever we attend to our own conscious life and so make explicit our awareness of ourselves as thinking, experiencing conscious beings. But it also means that, although we have bracketed the natural attitude as it applies to the objects of our everyday intentions, we have not bracketed this attitude as it applies to ourselves and our experiences. We continue to affirm our belief in the existence of ourselves as natural persons, at least insofar as we are psychologically functioning conscious egos. And our intentions, likewise, we continue to treat as natural events making up this ego's <97> psychological reality. (See *Ideas*, §§39, 53.) Thus, this first reduction is

“psychological” inasmuch as it lays before us the kind of data that would be subject matter for a psychology of inner experiences, i.e., a natural science whose goal is to articulate and to understand the psychological reality of a person independent of whether that inner reality corresponds to the external world. A psychology that proceeds from this data would be appropriately characterized as “phenomenological” in the broad sense we earlier defined; Husserl calls it “phenomenological psychology”. (See *Crisis*, §69; §72, p. 263; *CM*, §§16, 35; also cf. *PP*, §4.)

In *Cartesian Meditations* Husserl criticizes Descartes for having failed “to make the transcendental turn” (§10, p. 23). Although we can reflect on the ego and its experiences, Husserl says,

. . . It must by no means be accepted as a matter of course that, with our apodictic pure ego, we have rescued a little tag-end of the world, as the sole unquestionable part of it for the philosophizing Ego, and that now the problem is to infer the rest of the world by rightly conducted arguments, according to principles innate in the ego. (*CM*, §10, p. 24.)

Now, it is not clear that Descartes did think of the ego as a “little tag-end of the world”, the world whose existence he had placed in question (though it is true, as Husserl says (p. 24), that Descartes in the final analysis conceived the ego as causally related to that world). But however that may be, Husserl’s point is simply that the psychological reduction alone is not sufficient for Descartes’ philosophical purposes. Insofar as the ego and its acts are conceived in naturalistic terms, even if we think of the ego as an essentially nonphysical entity causally interacting with the physical, talk of the ego and its experiences already presupposes the truth of at least part of the general thesis of the natural attitude and so cannot establish the foundations of that thesis. Consequently, Husserl says, the method of epoché, or bracketing, must be extended even to my own ego and to its intentions. We cannot then affirm the existence of the ego as a psychological reality – what Husserl calls the “empirical”, or “psychological”, ego – nor can we affirm the existence of our acts as constituents of this psychological reality. Nonetheless, Husserl holds, there still remains an inner life of consciousness that can be described independently of even these naturalistic affirmations. Our intentions so described Husserl calls “pure”, or “transcendental”, acts of the ego; and the ego that undergoes these acts he calls the “pure”, or “transcendental”, ego (*Ich*). The epoché that brackets the empirical elements in consciousness, thus leaving only the transcendental ego and its pure acts, is what he calls the <98> “transcendental reduction”. And reflection on these transcendental elements of consciousness he calls “pure”, or “transcendental”, reflection. (See *Ideas*, §§33, 51, 54, 57, 80; *CM*, §§ 10-11, 14-15.)

The transcendental reduction is at once the most important and the most problematic of Husserl’s methodological devices. It is crucially important because the transcendental reduction is what explicitly reveals the structures of consciousness that are the subject matter of Husserl’s phenomenology. But many of Husserl’s followers and interpreters have

questioned its fruitfulness and even its possibility. Although we shall not enter fully into these controversies concerning the transcendental reduction, we should like to argue that Husserl's distinction between the empirical and the transcendental ego has a considerable degree of plausibility.

Questions about the empirical nature of the ego, what the ego is really like, are a commonplace in science and philosophy. What is the true theory of the ego? Can consciousness or the ego be completely explained in purely physical terms? Is the ego a structure of innate behavioral tendencies genetically inherited from a long line of human and pre-human ancestors? Is the mind a Turing machine? Does Freud's theory of ego, id, and superego have psychological reality? These questions, and hundreds more like them, have not been answered with any degree of finality. Yet, with what confidence we all speak about many of our thoughts and experiences! It seems, then, that Husserl is right in his belief that we can describe the ego and its acts without presupposing the truth of any particular theory about the ego. And this is at least part of what lies behind his notion of epoché as it applies to the empirical ego: even if we "bracket" all empirical theories about the ego and so make no assumptions about the truth of any of these theories – even if we make no assumptions about what the ego is in fact like as a natural, an empirical, reality – we can yet describe our experiences as we live them.

Furthermore, Husserl is also right in seeing that Descartes' skeptical questions extend in a certain way to the ego itself. For our experiences, even if their occurrence is in some sense indubitable for us, give us little immediate knowledge of the true empirical nature of ourselves. Simply in virtue of having experiences, we know something about them and about ourselves. But does this knowledge tell us whether these experiences are or are not identical with certain brain processes? Can we know that the ego who undergoes these experiences inhabits a physical body? Could our experiences not be just as they are even though we were merely brains in vats (appropriately stimulated, or even unconsciously self-stimulated)? All these questions suggest that there is a knowledge of our experiences gained in reflection that is independent of the actual facts about the empirical reality of our consciousness. If so, there does indeed seem to be a level of description of the ego and its acts that makes no ontological commitments about the ultimate *de facto* reality and nature of the ego. To describe the ego and its acts in this ontologically neutral way, just as they appear in reflection, is to describe just those features of the ego that remain when we "bracket" our empirical, or psychological, beliefs about the ego as an empirical reality. But this epoché, along with the reflection that sets before us the requisite features of the ego, is just Husserl's "transcendental turn"; and the ego so described is just the ego in its transcendental aspect, i.e., the transcendental ego.

With this account of transcendental reduction we see that Husserl's doctrine of the transcendental ego is not a doctrine of a *second* ego, a transcendental puppeteer standing behind the empirical ego and manipulating its activities. Rather, it is the doctrine that there is a level of description of oneself that is *methodologically* independent of, and indeed prior to, any further description of one's ego, one's experiences, and their relationship to each other and to the world. "As transcendental ego, after all, I am the same ego that in the worldly sphere is a human ego," Husserl says (*Crisis*, §72, p. 264; cf. *CM*, §15, p. 37). But transcendental-phenomenological description of this ego and its consciousness makes no commitments about its status as "human ego" in the "worldly sphere" – no commitments as to whether the ego and its acts reside ultimately in soul or body, in ghost or machine, in a person in a social milieu or merely in a brain in a vat.

What, then, can we say about the ego on this transcendental level of description? Primarily, says Husserl, the ego is the *subject* of experiences – indeed, the common subject of all the experiences that make up a single stream of consciousness (*Ideas*, §§57, 80; *CM*, §31). And to describe the ego in more specific terms, he says, is just to describe the particular experiences, especially the intentional experiences, that the ego undergoes and how it undergoes them.

. . . The experiencing ego [*erlebende Ich*] is nothing that could be laid hold of in itself and made into an object of investigation in its own right. Apart from its "ways of relating" or "ways of comporting" [*Verhaltensweisen*], it is completely empty of essential components, it has absolutely no explicable content, it is in itself indescribable: pure ego and nothing further. (*Ideas*, §80, p. 195.)

Thus, the properties of the ego that are captured in phenomenological description are its properties of having, or undergoing, these and those particular experiences and, derivatively, whatever more enduring traits of the ego are <100> made manifest therein. Unlike David Hume or Jean-Paul Sartre, however, Husserl thinks it proper to speak of the ego as an entity and so to ascribe these properties of experiencing to a subject *per se*. And further, he believes, the experiences undergone by the ego carve out more abiding dispositional properties that remain with the ego and so affect the ego's further acts (though not unalterably). Each ego, accordingly, manifests in the inner history of its experiences a distinct "style", or "personal character", that helps define its personal identity (*CM*, §32). Nonetheless, it is not the personal character of the ego that Husserl's phenomenology is designed to capture. In addition to its "personal style" of experiencing, he believes, each ego manifests in its experiences certain universal, or essential, features. These characterize not just *this* ego but *any* ego, actual or possible, insofar as an ego is a possible subject of intentional experiences at all or, only somewhat less generally, a possible subject of intentional experiences of various kinds. A phenomenological theory of the ego is concerned only with these transcendental features of the ego that are essential to it as subject of intentional experiences. And

similarly, a phenomenological theory of experiences is concerned only with the essential, and not the idiosyncratic, transcendental features of the ego's acts. (See *Ideas*, §75; *CM*, §34.) These essential features of the ego and its intentional experiences are isolated by means of what Husserl calls "eidetic reduction" applied to the ego and its acts as described after transcendental reduction.

Eidetic reduction, then, is the third step in Husserl's method for securing the subject matter of transcendental phenomenology. Yet, this reduction can be defined independently of phenomenology, and its use here should not be confused with its applications in other areas of study. Eidetic reduction in general is Husserl's method for turning the focus of any study from the concrete to the general, from individuals to their essences, yielding *a priori* essential generalities concerning things of a given type. By "essences", or "eidos", Husserl means properties, kinds, or types – "ideal species" – that entities may exemplify. With respect to entities of a given type, or essence, eidetic reduction is the methodological procedure of "bracketing" the particular individuals that exemplify the essence and so ignoring or passing over their individual peculiarities. We thereby turn our attention instead to the type, or essence, itself and to what is necessarily true of all individuals insofar as they have that essence. Unlike induction, or empirical generalization, eidetic reduction has the goal of ascertaining for a given domain universal truths that are not merely probable but certain, not empirical but *a priori*, and not merely "factual" or contingent but essential or necessary. And its way of proceeding also differs from that of induction: eidetic generalization proceeds by imagination of possible cases rather than observation of actual cases. This Husserl calls "eidetic variation". One considers in imagination possible changes an individual can undergo while remaining an instance of the given type or essence. Only properties of the individual that cannot be so "varied" belong to that essence. Thus, in eidetic variation one grasps essential generalities about individuals of a given type or essence, and thereby one grasps the essence. The apprehension of essences that so results from eidetic reduction Husserl calls "essential insight", "eidetic intuition", or "ideation". Importantly, such apprehension of an essence is usually incomplete, inasmuch as one usually cannot grasp all the essential generalities relevant to a given essence. (See *Ideas*, §§2-26, 69-70; *PP*, §§9-10.)

According to Husserl, any domain of entities whatsoever can be subjected to an eidetic reduction, which will uncover essential truths about things of that domain (including, apparently, what Kant called "synthetic *a priori*" truths – cf. *Ideas*, §20, p. 46). Applied to the domain of physical nature, for example, it yields the most general truths about physical things, truths concerning what properties things must necessarily have in order to count as physical at all. These truths make up what Husserl calls "eidetic sciences" or "ontologies" of nature: "sciences that ontologically investigate what essentially belongs to physical nature-objectivity

as such” (*Ideas*, §60, p. 144). Similarly, applied to the domains of social behavior or psychological activity, it yields “ontological-eidetic sciences” corresponding to the observational, or empirical, sciences of sociology or psychology (*ibid.*). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Husserl’s method of eidetic reduction has received considerable attention in disciplines outside philosophy proper and that some may even have seen it as potentially Husserl’s most important methodological contribution to the natural and human sciences. Nonetheless, Husserl himself cautions against simply equating phenomenology with the use of this method and so identifying phenomenology and the study of essences. “If the phenomenological domain . . . would surrender itself by mere transition from [the natural observational attitude] to the eidetic attitude”, Husserl says, “then it would need no elaborate reductions . . .” (*Ideas*, §16, p. 145). The transcendental reduction is what lays open to reflection the basic data of phenomenology – the ego and its acts, “purified” of naturalistic assumptions. And this reduction, Husserl says, brackets not only the individuals of the natural world but also their essences: phenomenology then makes no use of the empirical natural sciences or of their corresponding eidetic ontologies (*Ideas*, §60, pp. 143-44). Thus, phenomenology is not eidetic science in <102> general. Rather, it is the eidetic science of one very special domain: the domain of consciousness and its experiences as revealed by the transcendental reduction. “Phenomenology . . . as *eidetic* science [is the] theory of essences of transcendentially purified consciousness . . .” (*Ideas*, §60, p. 142).

Eidetic reduction is part of *phenomenological* method for Husserl, then, only when it is the final step in his three-part transcendental-phenomenological reduction. First, one reflects on consciousness: whatever act is under consideration, one ceases to be concerned with its *object* (whether this object be an individual, an essence, a state of affairs, or some other kind of entity) and turns one’s attention instead to the *act* in which the object is intended and to the *ego* as subject of this act. Second, one disregards the naturalistic aspects of consciousness through transcendental reduction of the ego and its acts: this reduction isolates the “pure” data of consciousness from their presumed naturalistic environment. Third, the data that remain over after transcendental reduction are then studied eidetically by applying to them the method of eidetic variation. The result is *phenomenology* as an “eidetic science” of transcendental consciousness, a study of those transcendental features of the ego and its acts that are universal and necessary.

Applied to the reflecting phenomenologist’s *ego*, the eidetic reduction disregards what is merely idiosyncratic, focusing instead on the transcendental features essential to it as ego and so necessarily shared by any other ego, actual or possible. Thus, the “science” of phenomenology includes what Husserl calls “transcendental egology”: a theory of the characteristics necessary to any possible ego, not as empirical ego of any presumed natural kind, but purely as ego – whatever its actual, empirical nature might be. Similarly, applied

to the transcendently reduced *acts* of the ego, eidetic reduction yields the features of these acts that are necessarily shared with any ego's acts of the same kind. Thus, phenomenology also includes accounts of the general features that are necessary for the possibility of various kinds of experiences: these accounts constitute phenomenological, or transcendental, theories of perception, of logical and mathematical thinking, of our experiences of other persons, of aesthetic experience, and so on. (See *CM*, §34; *Ideas*, §75.)

The theme uniting phenomenology as theory of the ego and phenomenology as theory of acts is *intentionality* (*Ideas*, §84; *CM*, §14, pp. 32-33). The most general universal property of acts is their intentionality: to be intentional is an essential, an eidetic, feature of any actual or possible experience *qua* act, any experience of the type "act". And the most general universal property of the ego is that it is a possible subject of such experiences: to be a subject of intentional experiences is an essential, an eidetic, feature of any actual or possible ego, *qua* ego. Accordingly, an eidetic phenomenology is first and foremost a transcendental theory of intentionality, an articulation of those transcendental features of the ego and its acts that are necessary for the possibility of any ego's intentionally relating, through its various more specific types of experiences, to objects of various sorts.

At the eidetic level, then, Husserl's phenomenology is "transcendental" philosophy in the very same sense that Immanuel Kant first introduced: its ultimate concern is with the necessary conditions for the possibility of intentional experiences. What is essential for any kind of intentional experience, Husserl holds, is that the ego be able to structure the items of experience into coherent, meaningful, presentations wherein objects of consciousness can be distinguished from one another and from the experiences in which they are given. The ego so structures its experiences by giving them *meanings* (see *Ideas*, §§85, 90 . . .). And in giving meanings to its experiences, the ego connects its experiences in rule-governed ways with other actual and possible experiences, thus fitting them into patterns, or "syntheses", of actual and possible experiences wherein one and the same object is presented (see *CM*, §§17-20 . . .). Inasmuch as an object's presentation to consciousness is in virtue of such a meaningful structuring of experiences, Husserl says an object is "constituted" in consciousness, presented "as" such-and-such, through the particular meaning given to an experience. For each general type of object – physical objects, mathematical entities, persons, aesthetic objects, and so on – transcendental phenomenology is the study of those meanings and rules universally employed by the ego when it intends objects as being of that type. These studies in intentionality Husserl calls transcendental theories of constitution, since they are theories that articulate the structures of meanings necessary for intending objects as being of various types (*CM*, §§21-22 . . .).

These theories of constitution provide a transcendental-phenomenological foundation, a "rational grounding", for beliefs and judgments about objects of any given type (see *Ideas*,

§§142, 149-53). This notion of “rational grounding” is what finally emerges as Husserl’s version of philosophical “foundationalism”. But it is remarkably different from the Cartesian idea of securing certainty for our beliefs. Indeed, Husserl himself comes to reject the specific goals and methods of Cartesian epistemology:

It is naturally a ludicrous, though unfortunately common misunderstanding, to seek to <104> attack transcendental phenomenology as “Cartesianism”, as if its *ego cogito* were a premise or set of premises from which the rest of knowledge . . . was to be deduced, absolutely ‘secured’. *The point is not to secure objectivity but to understand it.* (*Crisis*, §55, p. 189; our emphasis. Cf. *CM*, §§12, 40, 41.)

And the kind of “understanding” to be gained through phenomenology is an understanding of the structures of our own minds, rather than the absolute certainty of their claims to knowledge. Thus, despite his abiding homage to Descartes, Husserl’s transcendental resolution of Descartes’ epistemological program is not Cartesian but Kantian. Husserl calls it a “transcendental theory of knowledge” (*CM*, §40, p. 81), and, he says, “Phenomenology is *eo ipso* ‘transcendental idealism’ . . .” (*CM*, §41, p. 86). This transcendental idealism is an epistemological rather than a metaphysical doctrine (such as Berkeley’s idealism). Although it is difficult to define, its goal is to clarify the meanings through which the mind can know objects of various sorts:

. . . We have here a transcendental idealism that *is* nothing more than . . . an explication of my ego as subject of every possible cognition, and indeed [explication of it] with respect to every sense of what exists This idealism . . . is *sense-explication* . . . carried out as regards every type of existent ever conceivable by me, the ego. . . . (*CM*, §41, p. 86. See also §§ 11-12 and *Ideas*, §55.)

Phenomenology, then, is a study of the meaning-giving activities of the ego and of the meanings, or senses, that it gives to our experiences. Thus, we arrive at the same conception of Husserl’s phenomenology – that it is an analysis of the meaning-contents of intentional experiences – whether we find its motivations, as here, in the needs of a transcendental theory of knowledge or . . . in the needs of a theory of intentionality *per se*.