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Husserl's Notion of the Natural Attitude and the Shift to Transcendental Phenomenology

By Sebastian Luft

Husserl introduced phenomenology as transcendental philosophy in his ground-breaking work *Ideas I*.¹ In this work Husserl took his starting point from what he called the *Natural Attitude* (NA), though he was not aware of the central role this phenomenon was to play in his late philosophy. In *Ideas I*, the NA was a mere transitory phase from which one could begin with the philosophical project laid out in this work. This was a shift from a purely descriptive method for analyzing conscious phenomena (marked in a first phase by *Logical Investigations*, 1900/01) to a form of transcendental philosophy which must not only give an account of that being which we presuppose in phenomenological description but, more precisely, must also account for how this being has come to be experienced in our conscious life. This form of transcendental philosophy—regarding the problem of giving an account for its own doings—can be seen as Husserl's particular way of dealing with the question of conditions of possibilities. Husserl's intention in all of this was to characterize philosophy as "rigorous science."

At this level, thematizing the NA belongs to the problem of discovering the beginnings of philosophy. Although this parallel might seem a bit far-fetched for Husserl, given that he never read Hegel thoroughly, it is still possible to compare this approach to Hegel's famous words in his *Wissenschaft der Logik: Womit ist in der Wissenschaft der Anfang zu machen?* With what are we to begin in (philosophical) science? The answer Hegel gives is: *Sein, reines Sein*: being, *pure being*. Given that for Husserl, the NA is that state of affairs in which we live before we have engaged in philosophy, the NA is characterized by the fact that we take the being of the totality of the world for granted. In other words, the NA posits being: *'The world is.'* This is the content of what Husserl calls the "general thesis of the NA."² The NA can thus be compared to Hegel's natural consciousness (*natürliches Bewusstsein*) as that stage of conscious life which has not yet discovered philosophy as its possibility (or one of its possibilities, though for Husserl, e.g., *art* never comes into serious consideration as pursuing an equal or comparable task to philosophy).

However, employing the NA as the starting point for Husserl's own project is directly linked to introducing phenomenology as transcendental philosophy. Thus, there must be a somewhat negative aspect or element within the NA which makes it necessary to make one's way from the NA into phenomenology. The NA is something which emphatically has to be

overcome. One can formulate this negative or flip side by accentuating the aspect of "taking being for *granted*," instead of just "positing" it. Taking being for granted means accepting or taking it as it is. This means, correlatively, believing it to be independent of us, as the ones who experience it. However, this belief turns out to be a mere presupposition. Radicalizing the "metaphysical" implications of the theory of intentionality, one can say that when the following statement is valid: "experience is always experience-of something," this means, correlatively, that this something, being of any sort, is always and only *given-to* an experiencing subject. Experience-of and being-for are two sides of the same coin. This is Husserl's version of transcendental idealism.

Being can only be spoken of as objectivity for an experiencing subjectivity. The task of phenomenology is to describe how objectivity manifests itself for subjectivity, not factually however, but eidetically (within the register of rigorous science). Describing this complex structure of experiencing-something/something-given to- somebody reveals that experience is a multi-layered process which we can *dis-cover* by a methodical unbuilding (*Ab-bau*). In all of this we adhere to the general structure of "objectivity-for-a-subjectivity," and this universal structure Husserl terms the *correlational a-priori*. The fact of experiencing something thus can be described as the *process* in which being manifests itself in consciousness, or, according to the correlational a-priori in which consciousness "accomplishes" (*leisten*) the experiencing of that which is given to it.

Hence, Husserl's operative term for this process is *constitution*: "consciousness constitutes the world." This can be seen as the general statement which frames Husserl's phenomenology as transcendental philosophy. Since this discipline apparently has to be carried out within a transcendental register, a reduction is required, namely, that of natural consciousness to consciousness *as such*. In short, Husserl, in the famous "Fundamental Reflection" of *Ideas I*, performs a phenomenological reduction in which the world is reduced to a phenomenon for experiencing subjectivity, thereby reducing the worldly subject to transcendental subjectivity. For the subject who experiences, and by this experience constitutes the world, cannot itself be a worldly entity. This project is carried out under the general title of a transcendental theory of constitution and it describes the general structures of consciousness in its layerdness. Since this consciousness is conceived of as being parallel or analogous to psychic consciousness, the only difference being that the phenomenologist brackets the general thesis of the NA by the exercise of *epoché*, this transcendental consciousness is not an empty ego pole or a pure ego, but rather a field of experience that the phenomenologist describes in

introspective inquiry. Thus, Husserl can speak of phenomenological activity as having or being *transcendental experience*—a notion that would be a *contradictio in adiecto* for Kantians.

This is a brief account of how Husserl conceives of his phenomenology as transcendental philosophy after introducing the reduction. However, the question arises as to where we have left the NA? Would it not seem that it might be something to be overcome by phenomenology? More radically speaking, is it something the phenomenologist must precisely *disregard* in order to even grasp his or her subjectivity as transcendental? The rhetorical character of these questions implies a "no." One main characteristic of the NA, which makes it so difficult to overcome in the first place, is that it is hidden to itself. Were the NA clear about its own status-as taking the existence of the world for granted, whereas in fact it is a constituted phenomenon-it would no longer do precisely this: take the world for granted. Correlatively speaking, from the perspective of the one who has already performed the reduction, leaving the NA is in itself a problem with its own serious difficulties. It is not at all easy to make the NA explicit, precisely for the reason just stated: The general thesis or the pervasive characteristic of the NA is that of "taking being for granted."

Thus, in order to begin with phenomenology, one has to reflect upon how to leave the NA, how this leaving is possible in the first place. This means at the same time: one must give an account of what the NA is, i.e., what it is in its own "right" without simultaneously peeking at the phenomenological attitude. Only then can the NA become explicit with its *own* characteristics. However, having made the NA explicit as a philosopher means no longer adhering or belonging to it because one has given up "taking for granted." This "taking for granted" is thus equivalent to *not* thematizing the NA, which one has just done by attempting to leave it. Although Husserl never reverted to this argument or explicitly knew of it, one can again employ the Hegelian image of the horizon, which is superseded at the exact moment of seeing it. The NA can thus be compared to a certain field (of everyday life) whose "spell," as it were, in the moment of seeing its limits, has been broken. This means that in order to reach its limits, one has to at least give a rudimentary analysis of what it actually means to live in the NA.³

In the "Fundamental Reflection," Husserl gives a brief (or more precisely, *very* brief) account of the NA. As already mentioned, the NA is, in principle, nothing but everyday life prior to doing philosophy—that is, the NA can be characterized as prescientific and prephilosophical. The account that Husserl gives here is limited, however, to a mere description of encountering a world with entities in it: other humans, animals, plants, objects. This account has been rightfully criticized as not doing justice to the complex structure of prephilosophical life. Furthermore, this account conceives of the world as merely a "big box" with objects in it. To be just to Husserl at

this stage of his philosophical development, one has to add that he was not interested in the NA in itself but that he, rather reluctantly, *had* to thematize it as a contrast in order to come to grips with the radically new character of the life of the phenomenologist after having performed *epoché*. However, as Husserl came to realize, this turns out to be a highly deficient account of how we live in the world in pursuing our everyday business in a social and cultural world, with our friends, family, job, leisure activities, etc.

However, before one can start to give a richer account of the NA as Husserl intended in his later philosophy, one has to name motives as to why this became an important task for his enterprise. So far, all that has been shown is that the NA is a basic phenomenon which marks the starting point from which phenomenology as transcendental philosophy must begin. From this perspective, it does not make sense why one should turn attention again to the state of affairs that one has just left precisely so one can perform constitutive analysis in the phenomenological attitude. In fact, it will turn out that the radical consequence of this very analysis is a return back to the NA. The key to this can be seen in Husserl's shift from a static to a genetic analysis, a shift made approximately a decade after the publication of *Ideas I*. Husserl gives the first account of this new development in his famous lecture course entitled "Transcendental Logic," presented several times in the first half of the 1920s.⁴

The shift from a static to a genetic method has often been described as introducing the dimension of *history* into the realm of transcendental phenomenology. In its first sense, the history Husserl talks about is that of consciousness. Husserl increasingly realizes that in its first presentation, constitutive analysis has only been studying "static" constitution: That is to say, the analysis of types of acts and their fulfillments, their noetic-noematic structures etc., have thus far been carried out without regard to their temporal structure. Of course, Husserl had earlier already described the structure of inner time consciousness (cf. the famous time diagram in the lectures on time from 1905).⁵ But this path had only been pursued to the margins of immediate consciousness of the living present (*lebendige Gegenwart*)—as Husserl later calls it—with its structure of primal impression, protention and retention. Yet, the history of this conscious life itself, up to this point, had not been thematized. In other words, if one can acknowledge that, over the course of time, acts "sediment" themselves and become part of the "stock" of the mental past (as memory, habitualization), then it turns out that the first step in constitutive analysis is only "static," i.e., it thematizes only the *top stratum* of what is in fact a multi-layered structure of conscious life. The shift from static to genetic can thus be compared to adding a third (depth) dimension to the previously known two (plane) dimensions. Genetic analysis thus devotes itself to this history itself as the transcendental genesis of transcendental subjectivity.

As mentioned, Husserl termed this genetic method "unbuilding" (*Abbau*). As such, it follows the opposite direction from that of the teleological movement of intentionality which is always directed at something and in this at the fulfilment of a goal. In other words, unbuilding breaks down its directed "compact" structure into primitive elements which have contributed to the fully developed act, but which have sedimented into the history of conscious life. These primitive elements on the passive level of consciousness are to Husserl ultimately located in the pre-predicative stratum of our conscious life. In other words, the first pieces of what becomes the full constitution of the world, with us as scientists in it, are located in what Husserl comes to call prescientific life in its "pure" prepredicative experience. And this prescientific life is nothing but the life of/in the NA. So the very process of genetic analysis returns us to the NA as the "primal situation" (*Ursituation*) of any (higher) life. Thus, seen from the perspective of shifting from static to genetic analysis, the life of the NA forces itself into view as that state from which every higher activity ascends.

Now Husserl is in a position to actually give an account of how this prescientific and prephilosophical life is carried out. It should be mentioned that Husserl had never worked out a systematics of the NA, although his rich analyses on this topic, especially in the last decade of his life, can be pieced together for a fairly consistent account. It is also noteworthy that Husserl's social philosophy has been of great influence within the phenomenological movement (cf. Schutz, Patocka), as well as without (Habermas among others). Although Husserl's approach has oftentimes been taken up and modified to be a purely "mundane," positive science, one has to insist on the fact that to Husserl this was and necessarily had to be an element of transcendental phenomenology and would not make sense outside of its framework.

Husserl's analyses always take place within the framework of intentionality. More than merely the experience of something, intentionality can be expanded in two directions: to the noetic and to the noematic. On the side of the intending subject, the intending always has the structure of intending-as-something. The intention is always carried out with a certain interest. This is what Husserl calls the teleology of intentionality. Activity is always carried out with a goal, for the sake of something: I eat because I am hungry and in order to satisfy my appetite; I go to the bank in order to get money, etc. These interests which determine the direction of my intentionality Husserl calls *attitudes*. I always live in a certain attitude which determines my acting and living. The "business attitude" is the one I occupy (or rather, which occupies me) during my business hours. I am concentrating on my work and do not attend to the flowers outside of my office. If I shift to an "aesthetic attitude," I do attend to and contemplate the beauty

of the flowers, but I no longer attend to my work. I would be "unconcentrated," which would mean exactly that I have "fallen out" of my business attitude.

Hence, on the noetic side, intentional acts are always embedded into an attitude from which they come forth. This can elucidate the expansion of the intentional scheme on the *noematic* side. For within an attitude, I can direct my intentions to any object I like whatsoever. I can, for example, view any object aesthetically. Also, any object I intend within an attitude will refer to (or referentially imply) the next object. In a "meaningful context," say a kitchen, the things therein will be meaningfully connected: the sink refers to the dishes, the pot refers to the stove, the stove to the person cooking, the cook to the hungry guests, etc. So the "object" of an attitude is never single, but is likewise embedded in an open nexus of reference, wherein single objects are meaningfully connected. This "open nexus" or "nexus of referential implications" (*Verweisungszusammenhang*) Husserl also terms *horizon*. That form of intentionality directed to it is not a single intention with its intentional object, but horizontal intentionality (*Horizontintentionalität*), which is the same as what has been called *attitude*. More precisely, an attitude practices horizontal intentionality. Thus, Husserl's first scheme of intentionality (known from the *Logical Investigations*) is expanded into horizontal intentionality, or attitude on the one side, and horizon on the other.

This concept of horizon is what makes up the phenomenological concept of *world*. It is important to see that this is a horizontal phenomenon with a characteristically open structure, and in this sense, it is meant as a correction of Husserl's first account of world in *Ideas I*, as a box with objects in it. The horizon is an open infinity but with a definiteness regarding its style of being carried out: the world of art has its own styles and "rules" as opposed to the world of business, etc. Husserl now attempts to give a richer description of this correlational structure of attitude-world. To say a world has a certain style is equivalent to saying that it is guided by concordance (*Einstimmigkeit*). Certain breaks with the concordance will not destroy the concordance as such, but integrate them into it, thereby modifying the concordance. Husserl uses a simple, recurring example to illuminate this: the back side of an object which turns out to be different than expected. Seeing the back side and experiencing a break in my intention will not "annul" the object, but my knowledge of it will be modified and hence the concordance itself will not suffer breakdowns.

Now if there is a multitude of worlds (that of business, of art, of sports, etc.) the question then is that of how they relate. Of course, a single person can always shift between these worlds, but is there an underlying unity or rather, an overarching horizon? Husserl believes there is such an overarching horizon, and he calls this higher world a *homeworld*. It can begin

with the world of a family, a tribe, etc., but these will be integrated into overarching unities, e.g., the world of the French, the Germans, etc. One can then "extrapolate," as it were, the highest possible worlds which for Husserl are Europe, China, India (as the main world cultures). Regarding the question as to how these worlds relate to each other, it was Husserl's emphatic belief that the horizons can merge. Just as the world of the French and the English will be very different cultures with their own "concordances," but with the possibility of understanding each other after a first phase of being alien to each other, so the higher cultures can also merge and become able to learn from each other. Thus, Husserl envisions the merging of all worlds as the "horizon of all horizons" or as Husserl's "One world." This One world is nothing but the mature concept of the lifeworld as presented in Husserl's *Crisis*.⁶

All of these worlds however are still the worlds of prephilosophical and prescientific life. And as such they have one thing in common: they all are part of "the" world and take its being for granted. In other words, *they all are worlds of the NA*. Thus, the life-world and the NA are correlates. Hence, giving a description of the life-world always includes (*nolens volens, sciens nesciens*) the NA as its noetic correlate. This correlation becomes so close in Husserl's latest years that the lifeworld and the NA become almost indistinguishable from each other. This becomes evident when he speaks of a "natural world life" which has to be understood as an abbreviation of "living in the life-world in the NA." Every type of phenomenology of the life-world therefore includes the NA as its essential correlate and cannot disregard it without losing a necessary element within its account. The concept of the NA, stemming from the theory of intentionality, can also serve to illustrate the consequent unity and coherence in Husserl's philosophical path from its breakthrough in *Logical Investigations* to his last work, *The Crisis of European Sciences*. Husserl has not worked out a consistent, rich theory of the NA, but with the hints that he gives in *Crisis* about an ontology of the life-world one can grasp the importance of this project as completing Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Moreover, with his many implications and analyses, especially in his unpublished material,⁷ Husserl has left us with the methodological tools to carry out this project as an essential element of phenomenology and a task for the future to prove its methodological rigor.

Notes

- * I would like to express my thanks to Michelle Rochard and Claire Hill (Leuven) for her help with grammar and style.
- 1. E. Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phanomenologie und phanomenologische Philosophie* (Hua III), 1976 (2nd ed.). Henceforth cited as *Ideas I*.

2. In this context of *Ideas I*, I refer to Ch. 2 of this work, "The Fundamental Reflection of Phenomenology," pp. 56-134. Cf. also Hua VIII, pp. 35ff. for a radicalized consideration of his method of reduction, which I will be employing in this presentation.
3. And this, too, is a task that all too easily has been leaped over by philosophers, according to Husserl!. In fact, as it will turn out, the life-world as that world wherein the NA lives has never been thematized in its own right. However, Husserl was no longer in the position to work out a full "ontology of the life-world" in his last years. Cf. however § 51 of his *Crisis*, where he sketches the contours of such an ontology.
4. This lecture course is published as Vol. XI & XXXI series of the *Husserliana* and will soon appear in English translation in the series *Husserl-Collected Works* (transl. Anthony J. Steinbock).
5. Published in Hua X.
6. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Hua VI. Henceforth cited as *Crisis*. From here it is easy to see where the hermeneutical concept of the merging of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) has its origin. Especially Gadamer has given due credit to Husserl's influence in this respect.
7. A selection of this has been published in the three volumes on intersubjectivity, cf. Hua XIII-XV.

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