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Essay 52

Historicizing Reason: Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology

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Abstract

Husserl’s methodology of grounding the world in consciousness avoids solipsism as well as subject-centred reason by way of demonstrating the full possibility of transcendental ego into “pure consciousness.” This pure consciousness is not another abstract transcendental nor a device of sense-making, rather it is operative at the level of the “reflexive” to make consciousness a part of every possible world. This act of reflexivity on the part of the human produces a life-world that connects transcendental intersubjectivity with trans-individual affectation of phenomenological consciousness.

I. Pure Consciousness as the Source of History

Husserl’s fundamental contribution to phenomenological method lies in the double moves of assimilating critical philosophy and speculative metaphysics within a single and coherent quest for the origin of the world. What critical philosophy espouses as conditions of possibility of knowledge is what speculative metaphysics sustains in the form of a First Principle that is transcendental and self-evident. None of them situates the world in its concrete place. Husserl’s call for a ‘return to the concrete’ through a return to the ‘origin’

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re-replaces the world not merely as noema or as transcendental constitution but as a product of genesis between constitution and the evidence/ground of constitution. An intentional and transcendental analysis of how the world is given in consciousness does not alone reveal the conditions of possibility or the First Principle unless such an analysis satisfies not just the fact or logic, but more crucially it is able to establish a relation between the 'revealed' and the 'horizon' within which it is revealed. Further the revealed aspect of human subjectivity and its objective content could be concrete only if one takes into account *how* and *what* of its becoming, which transcendental-intentional analysis alone cannot produce. The moot question before the constitution of world through subjectivity therefore is not just how the world is revealed, but how the world came to be as it is, a question of return to the concrete without lapsing into phenomenology's recoil into transcendental subjectivity.

The transcendental subjectivity, itself a product of phenomenological reduction of the world is not just a product of radical reflection on the 'subject of experience' but a product of reflection on the very subjective nature of the experience. This marks a reflective turn towards consciousness as such or 'pure consciousness' which is not a mere annex of the world or a substitute of actual objects of the world, but a realm of an emergent correlation between noema and noesis that becomes experience of the subject in transcendental reflection. In a certain sense, 'pure consciousness' emergent as a radically reflective becoming space of the world transcends the world disclosing functions of natural attitude as well as the priority of the world over the subjective as disclosed in the transcendental constitution of consciousness. What it emerges into is a realm of non-centred subjectivity and personhood, where one can attain the ground for all distinctions through which intentional-constitutional analysis progresses.

Husserl's project is to discover the origin(s) of the world *not* in transcendental subjectivity, but find it out in where a transcendental reflection on the subjective can lead us. Guided by one's own intuitions, where the self-given forms of the world emerge from the content of one's first person experience not just as discursive thought content but as transcendental experience, a radically different experience of a subject engaged in phenomenological reflection taking a turn towards the consciousness of the experience. This turn could be expressed as 'the primacy of pure consciousness' over the way the world is given in consciousness. Put in a different way, Husserl gets rid of not just what is constituted in the consciousness in order to discover the coincidence between the constituting role of consciousness and what is being constituted in the 'absolute consciousness'. This also depicts Husserl's strategic turning away from the

constitutive achievements of consciousness to the ultimate depth/ground of constitution. What comes out of such a turn is not just an answer to what is it to be conscious of the world, but an answer to becoming conscious of without a relapse into a solipsist self-consciousness.

Questions that could be raised as objections to such a turn to pure consciousness are: Is Husserl's notion of transcendental subjectivity inadequate in describing a genetic constitution of the world? Does pure consciousness give rise to a metaphysical realm beyond the noetic-noematic relationship as manifested in eidetic data? How does one distinguish between the achievements of an already constituted intersubjectivity and its origin as revealed in pure consciousness?

The claims of pure consciousness as something *non-anthropological* and as a *ground* of validation of all other achievements of transcendental subjectivity reproduce a difference between what is immanent in consciousness and what is transcendent to it and to that extent one can take one of the two positions: either pure consciousness is a higher level consciousness above the transcendental subjectivity such that it overcomes the products of acts of consciousness, i.e., a total overcoming of intentionality and epochē *or* it is a dissolution of all the achievements of worldly traces as part of transcendental subjectivity. Both ways, it is a kind of consciousness un-affected by phenomenological performances of the human subject, non-causal and non-conceptual, but still an emergent part of world revealing consciousness. It is a 'part' in the sense that it does not abandon what is constituted in consciousness, while it is not seized by what is constituted, rather provides a further ground of reflection on the very nature of acts of constitution and it is in that sense consciousness provides a ground for genetic analysis without itself being a part of the genesis. In Husserl's words,

Things in Nature, persons and personal communities, social forms and formations, poetic and plastic formations, every kind of cultural work—all become in this way headings for phenomenological investigations, not as actualities, the way they are treated in the corresponding Objective sciences, but rather with regard to the consciousness that constitutes—through the intermediary of an initially bewildering wealth of structures of consciousness—these objectivities for the conscious subject in question. Consciousness and what it is conscious of is therefore what is left over as field for pure reflection once phenomenological reduction has been effected: the endless multiplicity of manners of

being conscious, on the one hand, and, on the other, the infinity of intentional correlates. What keeps us from transgressing this field is the index that, thanks to the method of phenomenological reduction, every Objective belief obtains as soon as it arises for consciousness. The index demands of us: Take no part in this belief; do not fall into the attitude of Objective science; keep to the pure phenomenon!¹

Therefore one can possibly relate the pure phenomenon to pure consciousness that abandons natural attitude in favour of phenomenological reduction. But this abandonment of natural attitude serves the purpose of recovering the world as reduced into the phenomenon transcendental to consciousness of the world, yet not transcendent of consciousness. This is possible only if consciousness itself yields a space to the world in the form in which it appears to consciousness. Such a yielding of space is possible only if consciousness does not leave the world in isolation, but makes it a part of itself, which as a reflexive act makes consciousness pure to arise as pure phenomenon that is neither bereft of nor pregnant with world as phenomenon. It not only constitutes the world, but also makes it a genesis of the world by an act of finding ground or being of the world in it.

For the purpose of this paper, how pure consciousness embedding pure phenomenon overcomes the unitary consciousness of multiplicity of constitution of objects and relations could possibly answer the objection about the delimited horizon of transcendental subjectivity. Further how this purification of the subjective content of consciousness enters the horizon of intersubjective, interpersonal and public domain of knowledge would provide an answer to the charge of turning metaphysical. This answer would lead us to distinguish between already constituted intersubjectivity and the achievements of finding out the origin of the intersubjective only in pure phenomenon/consciousness. In explaining the origin of the intersubjective, the essential role of 'intentional genesis' and 'community genesis'² in the becoming of sense within consciousness brings in a crucial self-reference. This self-reference does not happen within the way the world is given to consciousness, but *only* in the genesis of all such constitution, i.e., in the 'inner history' of being. This would give us a history of consciousness as part of the ground of constitution of history

¹ Edmund Husserl, "Pure Phenomenology, Its Method and Its Field of Investigation," trans. R. W. Jordan in Peter McCormick et al. (ed.) *Husserl: Shorter Works*, Notre Dame: Indiana Univ. Press, 1981. §35.

² Husserl Archive XIV, p. 221.

of sense without necessarily bringing in a unitary consciousness, but affecting consciousness to reflect on what is known of sense, a critical self-examination that requires a reference to itself within pure consciousness.

II. Genetic Analysis of Intersubjectivity

Subjective experience in Husserl is shorn off the primacy of intentional consciousness, which is temporally prior to the Subject and hence forms a common basis for sharing subjectivity, a kind of awareness of oneself which is transcendent and which retains a non-egological character. This non-egological character assumes a sense-bestowing role, which is transcendent to changing dimensions of experience. Given this character of subjective experience, sense bestowing and transcendent to experience, one can assume a first-personal description to this experience, internal to the Subject. Once such a Subject is recognized as a noetic entity, it produces a pathway to the act of referring to oneself. The task of phenomenology is to establish an identity between this self-reference and the ground of subjectivity in its transcendent form. This identity is established by establishing a relation between subjective experience and the non-subjective and representational character of the subject, which is the noema of reflective second-order consciousness.

Husserl characterizes subject as noema by linking together the primary presence of a subject that is constitutive of the noetic with transcendent character of intentionality. But in linking up the two, Husserl is pointing at how intentional consciousness constitutes the concrete material life of the subject, which in turn constitutes the living subject that claims intentionality qua consciousness. It is a transcendence, but a transcendence in the immanence of a living subjectivity.³ Put in other words, the claim of intentionality of the living subject makes it correspond to a procedural universalization of the world as given in the consciousness in well-known acts of epochē. At the empirical level, the sense-giving acts of consciousness is not attained in solipsistic self-experience, but is given only through a recognition of identity of the other subjects, which is attained only through an irreducible relationship between consciousness and subjectivity manifest in the other person analogically transferred to me.⁴ This

3. Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phanomenologie der Intersubjektivitat II* (Husserliana XIV). Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, p. 43.

does not deny the identity of the subject to the consciousness but is structured intersubjectively.

This intersubjective structuring of the living subject acts as the immanent condition of possibility of sense-bestowals together with references to the world as a totality. This further turns consciousness into a totality of all the achievements of intentional-constitutive acts of consciousness that goes hand in hand with self-same source of totality of world. From these intentional-constitutive acts of consciousness to the totality of the world, there is progress of consciousness from conditions of possibility to origin of the totality of the world. This could be exemplified in the move from anthropological origins of subjectivity to logical-formal relations between conceptual entities. Further to this manifestation of an intersubjective structure of a phenomenological attitude, the structuring of consciousness and world relation in terms of origins of givenness of the world in consciousness, it has become an imperative to assert the position of the human subject in a manner that fulfills the intersubjective structuring of the origins of the world.

Geometry as a science of ideal shapes and figures gave rise to the necessity of a set of postulates that describes bodies in space and disclose apriori structures of what is real and captured “the invariant essence of the already given world and of every possible experientiable world.”⁵ This essence is not “finished inheritance in the form of documented propositions, but rather in a living, productively progressive sense-formation”⁶ that refers back to the ideal and functional relations between various entities and forces of nature not given in our senses to its ideal limits. This is closing the gap between the way things are and their apriori necessity as they are given to consciousness. Such apriori necessity of idealizing relations is a progress in consciousness as the methodology of science is a product of phenomenological epochē that take place in their intentional structure. The question here is twofold: one, does the intentional structure of consciousness follow the laws of nature that give rise to figures of transcendental necessities and, two, where is the independent role of acts of consciousness as constitutive of the world as well as its idealizing apriori forms? Further, in what ways does the intentional structure of consciousness

4. Edmund Husserl, “The Constitution of Psychic Reality in Empathy” in *Ideas Book Two, Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989, p. 175.

⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenological Psychology*, trans. John Scanlon, Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977, p. 70.

⁶ Husserl Archive VI, p. 375.

accommodate the transcendental necessities and forms in such a way that it finally produces a unity between consciousness and the world?

The achievements of transcendental subjectivity undergo a transformation rather *different* than what happens to eidetic data in human's becoming conscious of givenness of the world. As we can see that Husserl's crucial move of rediscovering an origin which lies in pure consciousness draws the veil upon the difference between the disclosure of the world and the world per se opens up not the field of experience to intersubjective verification but closes it off to the subjective necessity of finding out origin of the world at some level of consciousness through the intrinsic relationship between its layers. One would shudder at this elimination of difference between experience and consciousness inseparably attached to that experience that externalized much of the intersubjective sensibilia into cognitively accessible difference without any progress from apriori to empirical. Instead what is posited as a crossover from apriori to empirical is an act of closing off the empirical at the limits of the intentional as an analogue of limiting apriori logical forms to the immaterial phenomenology of the conscious life. Husserl states,

The consciousness of the world, then, is in constant motion; we are conscious of the world always in terms of some object content or other, in the alteration of the different ways of being conscious (intuitive, nonintuitive, determined, undetermined, etc.) and also in the alteration of affection and action, in such a way that there is always a total sphere of affection and such that the affecting objects are now thematic, now unthematic; here we also find ourselves, we who always and inevitably belong to the affective sphere, always functioning as subjects of acts but only occasionally being thematically objective as the object of preoccupation with ourselves.⁷

Two consequences clearly follow here: one, Husserl maintains that subjecthood is constituted in relation to the world only when it the knower as subject reflects upon the self-knowledge as well as knowledge of the world and two, this very subject as a product of acts of consciousness is entrenched and embedded in an intrinsic and inseparable relationship between the already constituted objective

⁷ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970. p. 109. Henceforth, *Crisis*.

unity of/in the world and consciousness, which is without a fixed centre. This centreless consciousness does not posit itself as a being or a thing but it appears as transcendental to make possible the interrelatedness between the subject and the phenomena/object. Husserl calls this as achievements of consciousness constitutive of transcendental subjectivity that establishes a genetic link between achievements 'now' and 'then' that temporally constitute the transcendental subjectivity as a process. The process is such that it not only shows how consciousness is directed to itself as well as outside itself through noetic-noematic structure, but it also makes this structure mediated by sense-bestowing activities of other subjects and thereby producing a genesis of subjectivities into a transcendental intersubjectivity. Transcendental intersubjectivity not only identifies the acts of consciousness responsible for noema but also gives it an eidetic validity by the immediate presence of forms and ideas mediated by other subjects.

III. Historicity as the Pathway to Becoming

The achievement of transcendental intersubjectivity is much more explicit in terms of pre-constituted and shared horizons of the world, constituted by a shared background. Although such a horizon is socially present as a taken-for-granted set of truths and values, yet it is a passive genesis between background and the beliefs shared in constituting oneself as Subject. Husserl gives this 'datum of original impression' a place within the constitution of sense which itself is a product of a passive genesis of the original datum with finished transcendental products. He yields the place within the enclosure of the subject but opens it up to reality which holds for everyone with a surplus of sense. This surplus of sense comes through reduction of sense to transcendental world-phenomenon such that subjects could perceive their acts of sense-bestowal as part of transcendental and inter-woven sense bestowals.⁸ What emerges from this perception of being a part of a larger whole is a transcendental "we-community" formed on the basis of sharing a horizon intentionality of givenness. What is given is always meant to be more than actuality of it and it includes the possibility of future transformations, a possibility that appears in a progressive synthesis of the given with the new. But this appearance is a temporal structure of the acts of consciousness that constitutes the sense of the given.

⁸ Ibid. p. 133-37. Husserl here talks of methodological appropriation of life-world and talks of an apriori norm of substitution of subjective-relative truth by logical entities.

Every sense of the given for Husserl has an original historicity in the sense of a temporal dimension as available in history of transcendental subjectivity that carries out an intentional-constitutive genesis between now and then. The original historicity lies within the framework of transcendental reduction such that the horizons of temporally structured consciousness fuse the genetically constituted sense. What is original about it is its grounding in a shared background that finds itself revived in transcendental intersubjectivity without losing its content but merely getting fused into what is genetically constituted from such contents. Historicization, therefore, is a move within transcendental intersubjectivity that connects the subject with its own transcendental subjectivity via an internal history of sense that merely images what is given in time and community.⁹ In concrete terms, Husserl conceived history as transcendental in so far as the achievements of transcendental intersubjectivity incorporates a history of sense in terms of shared background and a foreground of tradition that acts as a horizon for the we-community. Husserl specifically devised the concept of life-world to mark what is already sedimented and constituted as an intersubjective realm of knowing, as a shared domain of pre-constituted background mostly available in traditions that refuse to go back to their origins, simultaneously making possible a live sense of history and an impossibility of going back to origins with an apriori form as revealed in transcendental history. Husserl's example of geometry and formal-logical structures of natural sciences leads to a forgetfulness of their origins in so far as they are not just given in the world but given in history of sense making which could only be retrieved within phenomenological reduction. This attempt of retrieval does not succeed in mere constitutive analysis of intersubjectivity, but requires a transcendental analysis of historicity of intersubjectivity itself. This analysis for Husserl constitutes "a problematic at higher level"¹⁰ as the constituted subjectivity wouldn't know its own historicity except in a higher-level reduction of contents of such a subjectivity, which brings out a genetic constitution of transcendental subjectivity as well as reveals its constitutive phenomenological foundation. So, Husserl calls for a "teleological-historical reflection upon the origins of our critical scientific and philosophical tradition"¹¹ that could be carried out only within a shared horizon only by a theoretical attitude of unpacking its phenomenological foundations. Such a move for Husserl is phenomenology's competence for crisis-consciousness as part of the

⁹ Ibid. pp. 349-51.

¹⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. D. Cairns, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960, 134f.

¹¹ Edmund Husserl, *Crisis*, p. 3.

project of historical consciousness that refuses to bend back to origin by an active forgetfulness of its origin and hence invents the new in the tradition. Searching out the ground of sense in history within transcendental intersubjectivity transcends the consciousness of the material time and locates the problem of constitution of sense within a certain history only to reveal the hidden layers of sense-substitution carried out at the level of sense.

So there is a fundamental modification of sense within history, but it is carried out only at the level of transcendental intersubjectivity which needs to steer clear the specific constitutive elements of a specific history, but it can't do that without sharing a revolutionary or transformative self-critical edge, which itself becomes history by including a genesis of community. This is a kind of phenomenology of non-temporal becoming beyond the acts of consciousness engaged in sense-bestowal that occurs in time and space. But this non-temporal dimension of consciousness as the becoming of historical phenomenon dissolves the intentional constitution of sense into a genetic constitution of its history. The difference between this 'genetic history' and the 'transcendental grasp' on history of sense making lies in non-participation of apriori forms of consciousness in the genetic, while any transcendental grasp assigns a becoming space for sense within the transcendental intersubjectivity as historical phenomenon. In genesis there is the theoretical light of consciousness reflected on some of its own layers that constitute a move towards itself as well its achievements, a hermeneutic realizability of history in its present form with consciousness as a participant. This hermeneutic realizability allows for a constitution of transcendental subjectivity in terms of worlds that are genetically born of the same origin, yet which are different in their objective constitution and thereby establishing a unity between senses of the objective with the subjective. This unity transcends both the subject-world relationship as well as the subjective relative nature of the life-world without committing itself to a particular form of life-world that could be substituted by traditional logical forms.

What emerges from this essential historicalness of the constitution of transcendental subjectivity is no metaphysical commitment to any form of life-world or subject, but only a critical intersubjective reflection on traditions that does not allow a uniform, singular formation of a metaphysical necessity which is historically static. Should this lead us to a phenomenology of the relative, contingent nature of historical understanding or merely an affective, logical, objective and valid mutually recognizable intersubjective communication of

originary constitution of sense, to be discovered only when the contingency of historical meanings are shorn off to a problematique of becoming?

An answer to this question is possible from a radically intersubjective reduction of history of sense into a non-dual consciousness of sense-awareness, which is neither between individuals, selves and worlds nor between transcendental subjective and transcendental consciousness, but based on sheer availability of ideas. Such ideas make impossible a sense of a-historical reduction into the real or the ideal, rather proposes a co-affectation resulting into co-singularity of ideas as transcendental. Such a co-affectation does not depend on powers of transcendental subjectivity as it acts as praxis of de-centring the subject into a trans-individual dimension of transcendental experience. This opens up the transmission of tradition to pathways of inter-affectation and thereby generates a historicity in exercises of intersubjective relationships. This inter-affectation through mutual recognition in transcendental intersubjectivity which allows a prior genetic process that reason strives to unveil, remains there in the realm of the co-reductive phenomenological consciousness.
