

PHENOMENOLOGY AS FIRST PHILOSOPHY AND METAPHYSICS
SOME THOUGHTS ON HUSSERL'S METHOD AND SYSTEM¹

Abstract:

In this article, I shall address some of the central points tied to his claim that phenomenology should come forth as “first philosophy”. Understanding these can help the reader understand the main intentions driving Husserl. But before that, I will start out with a simple definition of what phenomenology is; this will provide the basis for my discussion of Husserl's attempt to bring phenomenology forth as first philosophy.

Keywords: Husserl, First Philosophy, Descartes, Aristoteles, Phenomenology, Transcendental Philosophy

1. A Simple Definition of Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the eidetic science of transcendental subjectivity. What does this mean? Let us start with subjectivity (or consciousness or mind, all of which are synonymous). Phenomenology studies the mind and its experience. The latter has a special feature: it is always of something. This “being-of-something” phenomenologists capture with the term “intentionality”. The term is technical and not meant in the colloquial sense, in which “intentional” means something like “deliberate” or “with (explicit) intention”. Rather, it designates the necessary “aboutness” of every mental episode or experience, and that in the broadest sense, which goes beyond merely psychic experiences. “Intentionality” thus refers to thinking, remembering, anticipating, hoping, but also seeing, feeling (such as pain), touching, wishing, emoting, willing, and so on. In a very basic sense, then, phenomenology studies the structure of intentionality in all regions of experience.

Looked at closely, every experience has a “subjective” and “objective” component. In the case of perceiving, for example, the act of seeing is the subjective component and that which is seen in the act is the objective component. Rather than calling this correlational structure “subjective” and “objective”, since we are dealing with the structure of intentionality, Husserl uses the technical terms “noetic” and “noematic” for the two poles of the structure of intentionality. Thus, in a yet more basic sense, phenomenology studies the way in which the subject is connected with the world it experiences. It is an investigation of the relation of mind and world.

As covering *all* forms of intentionality, not just the strictly speaking mental ones (“inside our head”), phenomenology is not just psychology or a special version thereof. That phenomenology would be “descriptive psychology”, as Husserl himself called it at the outset, following his teacher Brentano, is a severe limitation of its scope. Phenomenology studies the way in which the world is experienced in all forms, and the way the subject *has* this experience. It is thus an investigation from the standpoint of the experiencing agent in her having experience in the broadest sense.

As discussed so far, phenomenology is mainly a descriptive exercise or a descriptive science. As describing the structure of intentionality in its different forms, it also aims to arrive at general insights that go beyond one's merely personal whimsy. Of course, the investigator has to start from her (first person) experience, but what she describes are structures that hold for consciousness (intentionality) as such, regardless of the fact that

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¹ This text presents a modified version of a segment of my translator's introduction to the English translation of *First Philosophy*; that means that some passages may be identical.

the person doing the describing is located in Italy or India or on the moon, regardless that she has two eyes, and that she studies the perception of a tree, a tiger in the forest, an object on the moon, or an imagined monster or a remembered loved one. The descriptor, hence, has to abstract from her own perspective and describe structures that hold as such. Every science has to move from individuals to generalities. Phenomenology is in this sense a science like every other science, aiming at general insights about, or essences concerning individuals.

Consider a basic (Husserlian) example: in the case of perceiving, the object that I see shows itself to me from a side facing me and a hidden (but co-meant) backside. The general structure of *perception* (mine, and everybody else's who has the ability to perceive) as a form of intentionality (regardless of who has it) is thus that its objects necessarily show themselves in profiles and that the perceiving agent cannot see all profiles at once. Phenomenology as a descriptive science abstracts from the fact (of, for example, the person's historical and geographical setting and her physical make-up) and aims at general structures. While there are levels of generality in empirical generalizations, phenomenology is philosophy and is thus aimed at insights that are a priori (independent of experience) and essential (necessarily true). In order to reach essential truths, the phenomenologist has to aim at insights that are true as such and not only valid for a certain group of exemplars (e.g., the human being). Though starting from her own experience, she aims at truths that are true independent of any existing experience, but true of *any possible* experience. It is, in this sense, an a priori science of consciousness in the same way that arithmetic is an a priori science of numbers. Thus far, I have clarified what "eidetic science of subjectivity" means.

Next, "subjectivity" has the addition "transcendental". With Kant, the term has the meaning of "condition of the possibility". A transcendental investigation, hence, studies not a given something (in the case of Kant: cognition), but the conditions that must be assumed as necessarily in place to make this something possible. Again, to Kant, space and time as forms of intuition are the necessary condition of the possibility of us experiencing things in the world (as they give themselves to us conforming to our forms of sensibility).

In phenomenology, if subjectivity is called transcendental, it means that subjectivity is understood as that which enables, broadly speaking, objectivity (or the world). In what sense is subjectivity the condition of the possibility for the world? Is this not a wild claim? It is, indeed, to us living normally and naturally. Normally we experience the world, that is, things in the world, and we do not attend to the subject we are who experiences the objects. We take this subjective aspect for granted. The same goes for the sciences, who study parts of the world, roughly distinguished as nature and spirit. The natural sciences study different species of animals, the physical and chemical world; the other sciences are what we also call "human" or "cultural" sciences, such as history, literary criticism, and theology. They all study things in the world and take the subjective aspect of experiencing them for granted. This general stance, in which we take the world for granted as existing independently from any experiencing agent, Husserl calls the "natural attitude". The natural attitude is the general, everyday way of living in the world, in which we pursue our projects; it is also the stance every scientist takes. Phenomenology, as an "un-natural" science, stands opposed to the natural attitude, not negating it, but "bracketing" it in order to gain a different stance. Phenomenology takes place in a different attitude. In fact, its beginning occurs when we question the natural attitude and are, by virtue of that questioning, in a different attitude.

This attitude of phenomenology is different in that which focuses on that which the natural attitude precisely ignores or overlooks: the subjective part (of consciousness in its intentionality). It is always there, including in the natural attitude, but it is not attended to unless we explicitly reflect on it, when we, e.g., say, "it seems to *me* that X". But, of course, this is far from a well-formed science, and in any case, the subjective part is never seen *in* the natural attitude as a potential object of a science, a science of the subjective.

But when we attend to the sphere of intentionality, we have to concede that every experience in the natural attitude has a subjective (intentional) side to it. In order to make any scientific utterance about something, I must first have *experience* of it. This fact, which is trivial in the natural attitude, becomes precisely the problem and the scientific task for phenomenology; what would be a trivial aspect becomes an explicit object of a specific investigation. Because, when viewed reflectively (i.e., from the habitual standpoint of the phenomenologist), *every* worldly experience (of something in the world in the natural attitude) has this subjective side, this subjective aspect *enables* us to have any experience of objects. In this sense, then, one can say that subjectivity (in the way phenomenology frames it) is the *condition of the possibility* of everything objective. Consequently, phenomenology is the study of *transcendental subjectivity*, subjectivity in the way it experiences the world, or in whose experience the world manifests itself.

Phenomenology thus studies a dimension that exists but is always overlooked in the natural attitude. This is a dimension for which firstly an appreciation has to be engendered. To express its novelty, Husserl resorts to different metaphors. For instance, he uses repeatedly that of a new continent that has never been entered, let alone mapped. In another metaphor that is perhaps more apt (taken over from Fechner), phenomenology discovers a third dimension to the world of the natural attitude, which is merely two-dimensional. Phenomenology becomes true philosophy when it realizes it is *toto caelo* different from any other scientific discipline, and it is universal philosophy, since it encompasses *all* other sciences. It proceeds in this way, in general, in which one can distinguish the work of the sciences from that of philosophy. Phenomenology as the true philosophy, hence, does not just enable the natural attitude, but also all sciences of the natural attitude. As Husserl explains:

“To carry out plane-geometry, to investigate planes and their shapes, means: not to pay attention to the bodily dimension. But the latter is always there and everything spatial also has its third dimension. One may not ask too much of a metaphor, yet what it means for us for the sake of metaphorical talk is clear: Everything that the nonphilosophical sciences investigate also has its ‘philosophical’ dimension, but to investigate it lies beyond the scope of these sciences.

Pure philosophy, hence, relates to all sciences, but what it searches for and captures theoretically, it cannot ever (for essential reasons) gain from these sciences. [...] The philosophical dimension provides not additional, generically related problems, but generically novel ones”².

This enabling transcendental dimension comes first before the other dimension and the latter is dependent on it (the two-dimensional world is embedded in the three-dimensional one). It is the first for us (experience as access to the world), though it is not seen as such *in* the natural attitude. As standing on the ground of the natural attitude, all other disciplines of this dependent dimension are related to it in an essential way.

In this way I have spelled out, in all brevity, not only the transcendental character of phenomenology, but its systematic position as *first philosophy*. Being in such a position, phenomenology, as being the “true” philosophy, also has, as it were, a special responsibility and calling³. We are now in a position to situate phenomenology’s task as first philosophy, starting out with a short account of the term in the history of philosophy, and then in Husserl’s oeuvre, where, as we shall see, it has several meanings that are related, to be sure, but that indicate different meanings and different tasks for the phenomenologist.

2. The Very Idea of Phenomenology as First Philosophy

Although it seems easy, at first glance, to give a definition of what Husserl means by “First Philosophy”, it becomes a challenge to further explain this concept when he claims, *a*

² Hua-Mat IX, p. 2. Compare this to Husserl’s use of this metaphor in the *Crisis*, cf. Luft (2012), FN 9.

³ Cf. also Schuhmann (2004) for an in-depth account of Husserl’s idea of philosophy.

fortiori, that specifically *phenomenology* should come forth as a discipline that is more than just a descriptive, but also foundational discipline⁴. Rather, it is perhaps helpful to assume that there is a cluster of motives that come together in this term. In order to gain some clarity here, I will begin by highlighting the main definitions in the two philosophers who were clearly most influential for Husserl in this regard: Aristotle and Descartes. Then I will present some of the notions involved in Husserl's usage of the term. Husserl was never able to bring these different notions together into one systematic or coherent account⁵, nor is the following account exhaustive. For a circumspect understanding, it is more fruitful to single out some of these ideas and concepts.

i. *The Idea of a First Philosophy in the History of Philosophy*

The term in the Greek original *proté philosophia* is coined by Aristotle. Aristotle introduces it in his *Metaphysics* as the discipline that studies “being qua being”, that is being as such, prior to and vis-à-vis being according to one of the ten categories. Thus, the study of being as being is a proto-scientific discipline, meant to be foundational for all others to follow (logically preceding them). But it also studies the highest being (God) as that which goes beyond (*meta*) the physical. Thus, “metaphysics” and “first philosophy” (or “study of wisdom” or “theology”) are more or less synonymous to Aristotle⁶. As such, it is based on his famous claim that “all men suppose what is called wisdom (*sophia*) to deal with the first causes (*aitiai*) and the principles (*archai*) of things”⁷. First philosophy studies these first causes and principles of entities.

Descartes famously takes up the term in his *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* of 1641. Here the method of hyperbolic doubt is introduced to radically call into question everything that can be doubted in order to establish “first principles” and “firm foundations” for the sciences. The first principle upon which to base all other mediately certain axioms is the certainty of the “I think, I am”, which remains even after the most radically possible doubt, doubting that God exists and that he is, instead, a genial but evil deceiver manipulating our every sensation and thought⁸. With this meditation, historically, the idea of a first philosophy is firstly linked to the thinking substance, the *ego cogito* or the subject. This is why Kant and Husserl could justifiably call Descartes' *Meditations* the (dimly anticipated) origin of *transcendental* philosophy⁹.

Despite Husserl being closer to Descartes, nonetheless both elements, that of a foundational discipline dealing with first principles and the necessity of the turn to the *ego cogito* in order to accomplish the former, are present in Husserl in various ways, and he acknowledges his predecessors. At the very beginning of *Erste Philosophie*, Husserl explicitly begins with an invocation of Aristotle's notion of “First Philosophy,” which he also immediately connects with the term “metaphysics”¹⁰, though he makes it clear that he is not interested in the historically correct account but rather in the «formal preliminary

⁴ On Husserl's alleged foundationalism and exactly which kind of foundationalist he is, cf. the helpful discussion by Berghofer (2018), who also gives a survey of this discussion both in contemporary philosophy of mind as well as in the scholarship on Husserl beginning with Føllesdal and up to more recent works by Drummond, Beyer, and Zahavi. It should be pointed out, however, that Berghofer, too, repeats the old error that Husserl does not distinguish between adequate and apodictic evidence until the *Cartesian Meditations* (cfr. Berghofer, 2018, p. 12). As is clear from the present discussion, this distinction was one of the main issues dealt with as of 1922 and it was a defining moment for the characterization of his phenomenology as First Philosophy.

⁵ Schuhmann (2004), p. 62 also takes this position and argues for a “compiling method” for assembling what he calls (with Fink) an “operative concept” of Husserlian phenomenology” (*ibidem*).

⁶ This is notably *not* the case for Husserl, for whom metaphysics is “second philosophy”. See subsection 2.viii of *Erste Philosophie*.

⁷ Met. 981b28. Cfr. also the overview by Cohen (2016).

⁸ Cf. Descartes (1904), pp. 17-23.

⁹ Arguably, the Cartesian legacy is stronger in the early German Idealists, who sought a “first principle” (Reinhold, Fichte), whereas for Kant the idea of grounding knowledge on a first principle would have been rather unnecessary. For Kant, the touchstone are the facts of cognition and freedom.

¹⁰ *Erste Philosophie*, p. 3.

indication of the theoretical intention»¹¹ guiding its inceptor. Also, Descartes's *Meditations* are mentioned in the same passage as «represent[ing] a completely new beginning in the history of philosophy in their attempt to discover, with a radicalism unheard of up to then, the absolutely necessary beginning of philosophy»¹².

Thus, it must be said that First Philosophy has first and foremost for Husserl the role of a foundational discipline. Moreover, since Kant's critique of reason, it takes the shape of a transcendental critique of knowledge or cognition (epistemology). His closest allies here, despite all differences, are thus clearly Descartes and – though he is not mentioned here – Kant, especially via the mediation through his Neo-Kantian contemporaries. Natorp has already been mentioned before. Boehm mentions another person who may have also been influential, the Neo-Kantian Eduard von Hartmann (1842-1906), who, he claims, was «presumably the first to call “epistemology” “first philosophy”»¹³. Von Hartmann writes in his *Philosophy of the Unconscious* of 1878, «epistemology is the true *philosophia prima*»¹⁴. Husserl had this book in his possession. To claim that Husserl would have been directly influenced by von Hartmann in this respect cannot be established with certainty. Yet, Husserl would certainly agree with von Hartmann's statement¹⁵.

What should be clear is that Husserl's perusal of the term First Philosophy in the context of his characterization of phenomenology is not meant as something radically novel; he is intentionally making connections to traditional conceptions of philosophy, both to demonstrate his indebtedness to his forebears and to show that, despite all originality, his philosophy is the true fulfilment of these earlier visions.

ii. Husserl's Idea of First Philosophy (*Sans Phenomenology*)

Husserl's most basic idea of what a first *philosophy* as universal science should accomplish can be circumscribed without yet connecting it with phenomenology. There is a proto-phenomenological sense, as it were, for it is such a foundational structure that it is a universal, all-encompassing science and as such should be the guiding ideal for *all* scientists, that is, all those who have dedicated, or intend to dedicate, their lives to the search for Truth, which is the path towards bliss (“*Seligkeit*”). Universal science, as a general science, encompassing every individual science as specific formation thereof, is

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Ivi, p. 9.

¹³ Boehm (1954), p. xviii.

¹⁴ Quoted in Boehm (1954), n. 2.

¹⁵ Husserl knew of von Hartmann's notion of the unconscious. There are five books and offprints of von Hartmann's preserved in Husserl's library, of which he only annotated the book *Kritische Grundlegung des transzendentalen Realismus* (2nd edition of 1875). Von Hartmann is mentioned thrice in the entirety of Husserl's oeuvre, and in no case does he make reference to the concept of first philosophy: in Hua. VII, pp. 408f. (these are texts that appear to be excerpts from post-Kantian philosophers, such as von Hartmann, Jacobi, Hamann, Fichte, Hegel, Trendelenburg, Weisse, Fichte Jr., and Fries), B I 1/14 (unpublished), and in an annotation of Benno Erdmann's *Die Axiome der Geometrie: eine philosophische Untersuchung der Riemann-Helmholtz'schen Raumtheorie* (*The Axioms of Geometry: a Philosophical Investigation of Riemann-Helmholtz's Theory of Space*) of 1877, here pp. 130f. Erdmann here discusses von Hartmann's book of 1875. Boehm further speculates (Hua. VII, pp. xvii f.) that von Hartmann, in reconceiving first philosophy as epistemology, attempted to further the impulses of the late Schelling. Boehm asserts that Husserl's distinction between first and second philosophy (to be discussed below) is reminiscent of the late Schelling's distinction between positive and negative philosophy. However, for reasons that cannot be discussed here, neither the assumption that Husserl knew of Schelling's distinction nor that Husserl's distinction is parallel to that of Schelling are very convincing. While Fichte and, to some extent, Hegel clearly influenced Husserl, any relation to Schelling's philosophy is spurious at best. (Cf. the collection, ed. by Luft & Fabbianelli 2014, on Husserl's relation to classical German philosophy).

dedicated to the pursuit of truth for the sake of truth, of “theoria and nothing but theoria”¹⁶. This is the way Husserl makes his opening moves in *Erste Philosophie*¹⁷.

It is historically interesting that the two main inspirations Husserl credits here are *not* Aristotle and Descartes, but rather the latter and “the incomparable twin-star Socrates-Plato”¹⁸. What links Descartes and Socrates-Plato together, in Husserl’s estimation, is that their philosophizing (as search for “pure truth”) is inspired *first and foremost* by the specter of skepticism, that is, by the doubt in firm truths and fixed principles, principles which enable knowledge to come forth on the secure path of science. Yet principles are necessary not only in science and knowledge, but indeed in all practical life as well¹⁹. If one recalls Husserl’s personal motivations for becoming a philosopher, which he recounts at times somewhat ceremoniously²⁰, he too saw skepticism in theory *as well as in praxis* – *more importantly in the latter* – as the greatest threat to the flourishing of humankind. Indeed, the paradoxes raised by skepticism are not first and foremost problems arising in the theoretical armchair but make themselves felt most crucially in practical life. Indeed, they are «fateful problems for mankind on its way to genuine humanity»²¹. What is needed to combat skepticism, in most general terms, is “complete clarity” and “clarification” of all opinions, as to which are true (to the extent they can be justified), and which are mere opinions.

This clarity can only be achieved – and here we get a first indication of phenomenology’s role in this endeavor – by a return to “insight”, or “evidence”²². The “principle of principles” («*that each intuition affording [something] in an originary way is a legitimate source of knowledge*»)²³ ought to be invoked and applied already in everyday life. Thus, completely clear evidences are the foundations for any scientific endeavor; they are the only thing upon which arguments or correct inferences can be founded. Trying to arrive at complete clarity and evidence is not already the working out of first philosophy, but it is this burning necessity that marks the Cartesian drive to “once in a lifetime” (*semel in vita*) start over and subject every commonly held opinion to radical scrutiny and to come up with first principles supporting other assertions. Everything must be subjected to the famous Socratic *lógon didónai*, to giving oneself a radical account, ideally spanning one’s entire life. This is the first impulse to gaining any clarity and, *a fortiori*, lasting knowledge, enabling both the flourishing of theoretical and practical life.

iii. First Philosophy as Grounding a Fully Justified Life of Ultimate Self-Responsibility. Becoming an Honest Philosopher

While continuous with the last point, the project of a first philosophy takes on a more concrete shape in Husserl’s narrative once this project, which begins with Socrates as a

¹⁶ Hua.VI, p. 326. This notion of “truth for the sake of truth” and “theory for theory’s sake” does not mean, however, that philosophy should not have practical application. To the contrary, all philosophy is ultimately aimed at practice in the sense of enabling the good life; cf. Schuhmann 2004, pp. 64f., for an elucidation of the relation of theory and praxis.

¹⁷ A part of these texts, it should be noted, Husserl took from an essay he published in the *Japanese-German Journal for Science and Technology* (vol. 1) in 1923, entitled “The Idea of a Philosophical Culture” (Hua. VII, pp. 203-207). Husserl also begins the lecture course of 1922/23 with similar reflections on the nature of the ideal of science and the ideal scientist, cf. Hua. XXXV, p. 43ff.

¹⁸ *Erste Philosophie*, p. 8.

¹⁹ Husserl ignores that this presumably was an important motivation for Aristotle as well, e.g., to establish a well-grounded formal logic to counter Sophistic pseudo-argumentation.

²⁰ Cfr. Husserl’s impromptu speech at the celebration of his 70th birthday, cfr. Schuhmann (1977), p. 344. There he says, according to a recollection from Roman Ingarden, «I *had* to philosophize, otherwise I could not live in *this* world».

²¹ *Erste Philosophie*, p. 9. It is here where Plato departs from Socrates, in Husserl’s estimation, for the latter only engaged in thinking «only as a practical reformer» (*ibidem*). The relation to Husserl’s ethical thought cannot be broached here, though clearly for Husserl, in most general terms, philosophy should be in the service of the good life. These motives come to the fore especially in his late ethical writings, cfr. Hua. XXXVIII and LX, cfr. also here the editors’ (Peucker and Sowa) introductions to these volumes.

²² *Erste Philosophie*, p. 9.

²³ Hua. III/1, p. 51 (Dahlstrom trans.).

practical one, becomes applied to the *theoretical* project of science in the broadest sense in which it is synonymous with philosophy. This happens with Plato. As long as the quest for clarity is still merely a practical matter (as in Socrates), it is not yet radically reflected. Such a life is, in Husserl's terminology, still *naïve*. It becomes philosophical the moment it reflects on its ultimate grounds and thereby loses all naiveté. It thus becomes fully justified in every respect. This *complete* justification in *every* respect is an ideal, to be sure; but only true philosophy, rising above the everyday, can posit this ideal as a limit idea to which the individual scientist is to approximate herself asymptotically. Only then can the scientist in her individuality claim to be a true scientist, as following the ideal set up by the true philosopher; just as, in the practical sphere, one can only claim for oneself to be a truly good person once every guiding principle for action has been justified²⁴. To do this in general, every dogmatic assumption must be suspended. Thus, the phenomenological epoché, the withholding of assent to any truth claim, finds its equivalent in the "ethical epoché" that every person must undertake, insofar as she wants to realign her life to an absolutely justified principle²⁵. The ethical aspect is foundational for the epistemological one. This does not mean that every person should become a scientist or philosopher; rather, the scientist practices this "renewal" with more rigor than is possible in the practical sphere and with a clearly defined methodological form of reflection, which cannot be demanded by the prescientific person.

Thus, the ultimate motivation for any human being is, to Husserl, to become a good and honest person (to oneself, to others), and the same standard ought to be applied to the good scientist and philosopher with respect to her ethos, which can only be the never-ending search for insurmountable truth. Once this goal has been conceived in its purity, which is *eo ipso* a philosophical achievement (since it is not contingent or applied to anything in particular, it is the "goal qua goal"), it must then be applied to the particular sciences. Every single scientist should also adhere to this ideal of being able to justify every actual and possible deed (in the field or the laboratory) and judgment (in fixating findings). As enacting this idea of a first science or first philosophy, they thereby are "second philosophies" in referring themselves back to the very idea of the master science, which posits the pursuit of truth as an ideal. A first philosophy thus formulates in ideal terms the very principles under which every individual researcher must stand if the enterprise of science as the search for truth can ever come off the ground and withstand the never-ending attacks of the arch enemy, «the hydra of skepticism»²⁶. With this securing of first foundations, its heads have been chopped off for good.

iv. *Phenomenology as the True Philosophia Perennis, Asymptotically Approached*

While first philosophy formulates the very idea of the pursuit of knowledge that serves as the ideal for all scientific endeavors, there is a fundamental *discontinuity* between the sciences and philosophy, according to Husserl. Philosophy is fundamentally different from the sciences in several ways. For one, where the sciences are continuous with common sense and the natural view of the world – in Husserl's terminology: modern natural science establishes itself as a "naturalistic" attitude on the basis of the natural attitude, thus constituting naturalism – philosophy can only come to be with a radical break with common sense and all "natural" assumptions. It breaks with the naiveté of the natural attitude. While the natural sciences are reflective at times – every person reflects on the meaning of her life from time to time; no scientist can further her work and break the mold of the current paradigm without being reflective – they are not *radically* reflective. This means that they have not reflected on the most basic assumption of all worldly pursuits, namely that they all presuppose the mind-independent existence of the world (the «general

²⁴ This is the "personalistic" aspect of Husserl's thought, which becomes salient especially in his ethics. The fully justified person is beholden to *herself* and her own evidences exclusively. The contrast would be to the ideal laid out in virtue ethics, where the norm comes from the virtuous *other* who is admired by the people.

²⁵ Cf. Hua. XXVII, pp. 3-94 (the "Kaizo Articles") for a presentation of this line of thought.

²⁶ *Erste Philosophie*, p. 59.

thesis of the natural attitude»). Philosophy in the transcendental tradition breaks with this fundamental assumption and thus reveals the subject-relativity of all experience. In order to study this experience (intentionality), such an investigation is only possible on the basis of the fundamental move from all “mundane” scientific affairs to philosophy, through a break with the natural view of the world. It is here where Husserl’s pronouncements about phenomenology being “absolutely without presuppositions” come into play. A complete break with the natural attitude is identical with a suspension of all presuppositions.

Husserl believes that only this radical break with the natural attitude reveals the *very idea* of philosophy, as *philosophia perennis*, the secret desire of all Western philosophy. It is an a priori notion that has been conceived by Western philosophy but never completely executed. Husserl for the first time places philosophy on a novel basis from which it will henceforth ensue, without ever fulfilling it completely.

Especially in the *Crisis* work, Husserl is insistent that he has formulated this idea to which future philosophy must approach asymptotically. He is emphatic about his philosophy being the «true scientific discipline of beginnings», since it has for the first time made such a beginning. This view also squares with Husserl’s view of his own work in the entirety of the Phenomenological Movement. The way he sees it, he has spent his life laying foundations, which will remain firm for all time. What yet needs to be accomplished is a full mapping of the terrain of future philosophy qua phenomenology. This is the task of future generations who shall build upon the ground laid by its founder.

v. *Phenomenology as First Philosophy: as Mathesis Universalis, as Universal Science, as Absolutely Justified, as “Ultimately Grounding Science”*

As a grounding science, phenomenology not only lays the basis for its own work, but also has an invaluable importance for the sciences. Philosophy does not come at the end of the work of the sciences, but must come at the outset (logically, not temporally), preceding and grounding it. What the Neo-Kantians do, Husserl says in a manuscript of ca. 1908, in laying foundations after the work of the scientist, is “last philosophy”²⁷. To Husserl, such a procedure, as advocated by the Kantians, is naïve; to watch scientists just go about their work, to then later spring into action, is, for the philosopher, irresponsible. For that reason, all sciences are in need of a theory of science systematically preceding them. That is, temporally speaking, they begin going about their business; but they are in need of a grounding that comes logically prior. Though necessarily proceeding naively, they are in need of a systematic grounding in order to overcome this naiveté.

This very task is formulated as early as the “Prolegomena” to the *Logical Investigations*, where Husserl, after his famous refutation of psychologism, ends with a sketch of a “pure logic” fulfilling the Leibnizian vision of a “*mathesis universalis*.” The latter is, to Husserl, an a priori theory of science, more specifically «the theory of the form of possible systems of propositions that are in principle of non-empirical structure»²⁸. This pure logic is to govern the «ideal conditions of science»²⁹. *Mathesis universalis* is, in effect, a first philosophy, which lays out in principle the pure (or formal) logic that all sciences must utilize if they are to reach sound foundations. Husserl is not doing something altogether new in *Erste Philosophie*, but merely giving it this traditional name.

Moreover, due to the correlational a priori between thought and object, a formal *mathesis* implies a formal ontology culminating in the pure “thing as such” (*Gegenstand-überhaupt*)³⁰. Such was Husserl’s vision of forging a complete a priori theory of science, divided into formal logic and formal (and *a fortiori*, material) ontology. This project, while never fully completed, is nonetheless reaffirmed as a task to be completed in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* of 1929. In *Erste Philosophie* Husserl explicitly links up this sense of

²⁷ Hua. VII, p. 385, it. added.

²⁸ Peucker 2017, p. 58.

²⁹ Hua. XVIII, p. 244.

³⁰ Cfr. again Schuhmann 2004, pp. 65-68 for a succinct summary, also highlighting the parts Husserl did not complete of this universal project.

mathesis universalis with the task of a first philosophy³¹. This first philosophy as a theory for all science is not yet phenomenology proper, but a propaedeutic for *all* possible sciences that stand under rational (a priori) laws, attempting to reach cognition. Next, then, first philosophy, naturally, leads to a *theory (or critique) of such cognition or an epistemology*.

vi. *First Philosophy as Transcendental Critique of Cognition. Consciousness as the Absolute*
It is only now possible to explain how *phenomenology* is to be specifically this first philosophy. The cue is given through the previous exposition of the *mathesis universalis*, whose execution contains a necessary correlation, namely between consciousness and world. Husserl calls this the “correlational a priori” – no consciousness without something conscious, no being without a relation to (actual or possible) consciousness. Phenomenology’s basic claim is that every object is actually or possibly conscious in some form of consciousness, or gives itself in consciousness. It is the task of phenomenology to investigate the different manners of intentionality or of givenness of objects to consciousness. Consciousness constitutes the objects of its experience, or better, objects constitute themselves in consciousness. In this sense, phenomenology is the study of objects-as-constituted, -as-given, as they appear to us as phenomena, in their different forms (perception, imagination, memory, and so on, with their respectively different objects or contents, visual object, image, melody, and so on), all of which are objects in the world. In short, phenomenology is the investigation into the constitution of the world.

The full realm of the correlational a priori and the opening up of the realm of consciousness can only occur through a radical break with the natural attitude. This break consists in the rupture of the “ordinary” assumption that the world exists mind-independently. Part of this natural assumption is that there is an ontological priority to the world prior to it being experienced and cognized. However, the transcendental turn reveals that all being is only being-for-consciousness. In different terminology, phenomenology as transcendental reveals consciousness as the absolute, to which everything is relative. It is the “condition of the possibility” of all being becoming experienced. Without it being experienced, actually or potentially, it does not *exist* for us³².

Once one has seen the absoluteness of consciousness, it is both the first for us (it is our primal and only access to the world, as world for-me from the first person perspective) *and* the first in itself, since it constitutes the world. There is a *unilateral dependence* of world on consciousness from the standpoint of philosophy. Consciousness is *both* the first for us *and* in itself, and the study of it is, accordingly, first philosophy. As such, it is an eidetic study of the transcendental structures that enable us to have experience of worldly being (essential structures of conditions of the possibility of any encounter with the world). In this sense, it is more fundamental than traditional epistemology, which studies the conditions of the possibility of *cognition* (Kant) or those of the current status of cognition in the *sciences* (the Marburg School, who therefore called their project *Erkenntniskritik*, critique of – existing – cognition)³³.

Phenomenology is the study of *all* forms of experience, beginning with passive, pre-predicative, pre-scientific, ordinary experience, then addressing simple perception, its temporal stream, all the way up to active behavior, such as acting, willing, and judging. Phenomenology is thus the study of the absolute, of that which constitutes everything worldly relative to it, and it is for this reason transcendental idealism. Transcendental phenomenology as transcendental idealism is the «*synthesis of natural and transcendental attitudes*»³⁴: «Necessarily a synthesis of natural and transcendental viewing of the world

³¹ *Erste Philosophie*, pp. 30f., cfr. the entire lecture 4. But cf. his self-critical note regarding his initial conception of *mathesis universalis* in *Erste Philosophie*, pp. 627 ff.

³² There is a disagreement in scholarship whether or not Husserl’s prioritizing (after the reduction) consciousness over the world entails an ontological commitment, or whether it is metaphysically neutral precisely due to the reduction. For a discussion of this, cfr. Zahavi (2002).

³³ Husserl was aware of the distinction between the Kantian and Neo-Kantian projects, especially in his subtle usage of the term “*erkenntniskritisch*”, cfr. *First Philosophy*, p. 35.

³⁴ Hua. XXXIV, pp. 16 f.

needs to be enacted [through phenomenology], and its enactment is, precisely, ‘transcendental idealism’³⁵. Phenomenology is thus not just a philosophically “purified” psychology, but is situated altogether on a different plane, as it investigates all forms of consciousness, of the absolute; it does not merely study a layer (the psyche) within the psychophysically conceived human being, or even more narrowly its cognitive faculty. It is a study of the essential structures of transcendental subjectivity in all of its (genetic, intersubjective, historical, embodied, etc.) dimensions.

vii. *First Philosophy as Eidetic Phenomenology and Metaphysics as Second Philosophy*

This notion of phenomenology as transcendental idealism leads to the last element of Husserl’s understanding of first philosophy, which links up to his peculiar notion of metaphysics. Phenomenology is first philosophy, finally, because it studies, as *philosophia perennis*, the eidetic, essential structures of consciousness(-as-world-constituting). In order to do so, I must start out from my personal, private for-me-ness, but attempt to reach *essential* results. Hence, in order to arrive at the eidetic level, an additional method is needed, that of eidetic variation. Once this variation is enacted, the “bind to the factum” is dropped, that is, the first-person access of the phenomenologist as an individuated, gendered, historically situated person in a certain time and place³⁶. Phenomenology thus is, in its fullest form, *the eidetic study of transcendental (world-constituting) subjectivity (as a field of experience including other minds, hence as intersubjectivity) in its static and genetic dimensions*. In this form, it is the true First Philosophy.

But what about a phenomenology of the factum, *prior to* the eidetic variation? Such a discipline is indeed possible, it is by definition *second philosophy* and is thus a study of the factum of the world in its contingency, in its actuality as opposed to eidetic phenomenology, which investigates *any possible* consciousness. Contrary to traditional understanding, Husserl calls this second philosophy, a phenomenological study of the world in its facticity, *metaphysics*. He defines it as a study of the «irrationality of the transcendental *fact*, which expresses itself in the constitution of the *factual* world and of *factual* spiritual life – that is, metaphysics in a new sense»³⁷. The world as we know it and as it has evolved is contingent, it was not necessary that consciousness would come on the scene (in the course of evolution) and from there humans, who ultimately do phenomenology. Yet in spite of its contingency, it is worth studying it as well and worth attempting to detect empirical laws that govern this factum world.

Yet it is only through phenomenology that we can even begin to address and eventually answer the “ultimate and highest questions” of this factum in which we live. As he confidently predicts: «But indeed [it will be possible] in the near future, through the power of this new rigorous scientific method, which we will get to know as “phenomenological”, to truly get a grasp on those sought for, but also much-maligned, problems of metaphysics, about the ultimate meaning of the world and human life, the time-honored goals of highest human striving for cognition, thus also about God, Freedom, and Immortality, to carry out rigorous scientific investigations with, correspondingly, secured results»³⁸.

To give an example, one of the principles of the irrational factum world Husserl detects is its teleology – *eide* do not have developmental forms. This world, in its historical course, has an inherent telos, which governs its factual evolution. The philosophical consideration

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ For a classic presentation of the method of eidetic variation, cfr. Para. 87 of *Experience and Judgment*. It is also mentioned in passing in the manuscripts, cfr., for instance, text n. 9 of the supplemental texts of *Erste Philosophie*.

³⁷ Cfr. Also *ivi*, p. 479 (the only other place in the present volume where he uses it in his sense). In the lecture course itself, when Husserl uses the term “metaphysics”, he uses it in the ordinary sense or in that of the philosopher in question.

As an aside, it would be interesting to investigate whether Heidegger’s project of a metaphysics, which he pursues in his “metaphysical decade”, in the 1930s, could be construed as an execution of this project, which is never worked out in detail by Husserl.

³⁸ Hua-Mat IX, p. 6.

of this world necessitates the positing of such a teleology, as a limit idea, for otherwise the factum of the world would be meaningless, and hence, absent the assumption of such a telos, living in it would be rendered meaningless and lead to despair. It is from here that Husserl discusses existential phenomena such as personal crises and the loss of hope. This is a phenomenologically justified “existentialism.”

Husserl did not work out such a phenomenological metaphysics in detail. He mentions it a few times in his published writings; in the *Nachlass* order of his manuscripts, Husserl designated a separate section to “Theology, teleology, metaphysics” (E III), which touch on “limit problems” lying on the fringes of phenomenological description and evidence. A selection of these (scant) texts have now been published in Hua. LX³⁹. This is not the place to discuss Husserl’s project of a “phenomenological metaphysics” as second philosophy. Only its contrast to and dependency upon eidetic phenomenology as first philosophy should be explicated here.

viii. “First Phenomenology” as Self-Critique of Phenomenological Experience (*Apodictic Critique*)⁴⁰

Finally, a last task for phenomenology deserves to be mentioned, which is that of a “first phenomenology” (which does not exist in name) that would have the same relation to “ordinary” phenomenology as that between first philosophy to second philosophies. What Husserl means by such a higher-order investigation also functions under the headings of “phenomenology of phenomenology” or a “critique of critique”. Once phenomenology has been established, it too still operates with a “higher naiveté,” since its own work and the experience it scrutinizes have not, in turn, been subjected to a critique. If the first naiveté of the natural attitude is dislodged through the reduction, the phenomenologist, if she has not investigated her own work, is left with a “naiveté of the higher level” or a “second general thesis” (of the transcendental attitude). Without doing so, phenomenology is «*carried out in a certain uncritical naiveté*»⁴¹. As he says: «In the *transcendental sphere* I have bracketed the universal presupposition of the natural thesis of the world. I proceed in this manner without presuppositions, so long as I experience and think purely transcendently (transcendental justification). But is transcendental experiencing without presuppositions? Does it not also require a critique? *Second, transcendental general thesis*: I am, I, the concrete ego, while the entire world, also I as human being, is bracketed. A new universe»⁴².

Hence, following especially the critiques the early German idealists brought forth against Kant – as in Reinhold, e.g., who claimed that Kant had provided the results but not the premises of his critique – Husserl, too, sees the need to carry out a self-critique of phenomenology to overcome the naïve first method of description. Such a self-critique investigates, as he writes in *Cartesian Meditations*, «the range and limits, but also the modes of apodicticity»⁴³.

This recalls the distinction between the two modes of evidence that Husserl discerns in the early 1920s, adequate and apodictic evidence. The importance of this distinction cannot be overstated. Phenomenology in general studies the various types of evidence; yet not every evidence is ultimately trustworthy. Only laying bare what can count as apodictic evidence (and distinguishing it from evidence that is *merely adequate*) can fulfill the demand for an ultimate justification of evidences that *cannot in principle* be falsified. The

³⁹ Hua. LX, pp. 3-263.

⁴⁰ This project is, once more, to be distinguished by what Husserl and his last assistant Fink later discuss under the title of a “phenomenology of phenomenology”. On this project and in its distinction from the apodictic critique of the early 1920s, cfr. Goossens (2002) and Luft (2002).

⁴¹ Hua. XXXV, p. 344.

⁴² Ivi, p. 406. From a manuscript, presumably of 1915, entitled, “Levels of Justification”.

⁴³ Hua. I, p. 177f.

demand for an apodictic critique is thus not an invitation for high-flying speculation, but rather the reining in of the sphere of apodicticity *within* the field of evident experience⁴⁴.

The story of this apodictic critique deserves to be recounted briefly. This critique is mentioned, as noted earlier, at the end of the *Cartesian Meditations* and stated there as a desideratum. However, as also noted earlier, Husserl did perform this critique in the 1922/23 lecture course *Introduction to Philosophy*. Though left unpublished, Husserl himself drew attention to it later; e.g., he mentions this text in a footnote in *Formal and Transcendental Logic*⁴⁵. Yet, both the transcriber of these manuscripts of 1922/23, Husserl's assistant Landgrebe, and Kern, an editor of three *Husserliana* volumes, downplay or even ignore it. For instance, Kern claims that Husserl has "postponed [this critique] *ad Calendas Graecas*"⁴⁶, thus stating a factual error. It is only with this self-critique that the project of a complete ground-laying of phenomenology comes to its completion⁴⁷. Whether it really *was* completed in view of the rather puzzling fact that Husserl carried out this critique in 1922/23 and referred to it in 1929 but never published it, will have to be the topic of further research.

3. Conclusion

A concluding comment on Husserl's conception of phenomenology as first philosophy. Using these terms in contemporary philosophy has a rather adverse effect to many working in the areas of epistemology, the philosophy of mind, and even phenomenology itself. Grandiose notions of "first philosophy" grounding all other scientific endeavors and ambitious system-building have come out of fashion in much of contemporary philosophy. For this reason, it might seem a challenge to make this aspect of Husserl, doubtlessly the most important to its author, palatable to contemporary philosophy. Two comments may be permitted here.

First, the exposition on what first philosophy means to Husserl in all of its complexity should make it clear that it is anything but a naïve approach to these issues or a superficial, merely brushed-up "neo-Cartesianism". In anything he wrote, Husserl was never trivial. His thought and its meditative style are both difficult and rewarding. Understanding and appreciating what one of the greatest minds of 20th century philosophy meant continues to be a challenge and will further require careful study and interpretation, and at any rate cannot be put off easily. Philosophy the way Husserl understood it knows no fashions.

Secondly, it is undoubtedly the case that the notion of phenomenology as first philosophy is something for which even contemporary phenomenologists, even those considering themselves "Husserlian", feel a sense of embarrassment. Here is not the place to launch a defense of Husserl's project. However, those who reject notions such as foundationalism, idealism, and first philosophy will find in Husserl one of their staunchest and most sophisticated defenders. Although those who engage with these ideas might end up rejecting them, they will find that Husserl's project cannot easily be dismissed and will continue to require strenuous attention and a sophisticated response. If anything and even if there is disagreement methodologically speaking about the substance of Husserl's philosophy, a sustained *Auseinandersetzung* with this substance deserves to be, at the very least, Husserl's lasting influence.

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⁴⁴ Thus, this "critique of critique" is to be distinguished from Fink's indeed speculative VI. *Cartesian Meditation*, which is, as Fink claims, a piece of "constructive" phenomenology.

⁴⁵ Cfr. Hua. XVII, p. 295.

⁴⁶ Kern (1964), p. 202.

⁴⁷ For a detailed explication of these historical circumstances, cf. Goossens (2002).

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