IS PHENOMENOLOGY STILL ALIVE?

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Abstract

This address was delivered to the joint meeting of the 37th annual gathering of the International Society of Phenomenology and Literature and the 18th annual gathering of the International Society of Phenomenology, Aesthetics, and the Fine Arts at the Radcliffe Gymnasium at Harvard University on June 4, 2013. The presentation centered on two images that illuminate the lecture. These artifacts are available following the text of the address. While distinct in purpose, this text draws upon and is related to the paper, “My Living Body: The Zero Point of Nature-Mind and the Horizon of Creative Imagination” (Analecta Husserliana, 2014).

As we set out on this week of imaginatively considering the themes of life, origin, creativity, and the cosmos I would like to take a moment to remember another gathering, much like this one, that was called together at the University of Waterloo, Canada in April 1969. On that occasion Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka delivered an inaugural address entitled, “Phenomenology Reflects Upon Itself”.[1] In this lecture she asked a simple question, “Is Phenomenology still alive?” and
undertook to consider what it meant to have come through the founding period of the discipline and the, “self-reflective and self-critical phase of the research”.

As in 1969, 44 years later we find ourselves looking back over a history that has seen phenomenology metastasize into many fields (even if only nominally), and we find ourselves in no less need of, as Professor Tymieniecka noted then, the speculative means and constructive conjecture that would move our inquiry along, not past the eidetic project but through it, into the vast reaches of the cosmos.

Phenomenology is the philosophy of pre-logical validities, a vigorous thinking of the subsoil and the zero point, from which all else comes. It sets out to be a rigorous explication of the flowing, vital horizon of truth in motion. As Husserl wrote to the American graduate student E. Parl Welch in 1933, “It is part of the radicalism of the phenomenological reform that it undertakes to demonstrate how... the world acquires its sense and its validity.” Phenomenology is alive, I would suggest, to the extent that it is carrying out this mandate.

Life-Structure

For Husserl, there were two constitutively entwined fundamental domains for this inquiry into sense and validity: my body and the world which is its correlate. My living body, that is, and the social bodies from which it comes and of which it is a part, and their mutual dependence, relation, and connection with the surrounding worlds which they auto-generate and co-wield. These living bodies and their enveloping worlds together form the life-structure. In 1927, in his summer seminar, Husserl wrote:

“The fundamental character of phenomenology is... scientific life philosophy. It is not a science going along with, and assuming the same things as, the already established sciences, but a radical science that has concrete universal life and its lifeworld, the actual concrete surrounding world, as its primal scientific focus. Phenomenology comes forth from here and... shows that all possible sciences only make sense with reference to the primal structure of life in its actuality.”

All possible sciences only make sense with reference to the primal life-structure. This is the bedrock of any living phenomenology: that it is a life phenomenology. It is from this life-structure that all critical notions in Husserl’s work of disclosing mere nature through meaning-predicate dismissal (Abtun) and of the constitution of nature and mind (particularly in Ideen and the related manuscripts) until he achieves their deconstruction (Abbau) in 1919 with the summer seminar Natur und Geist (a seminar that was given three distinct times in Freiburg under the same name), and, with these achieved, the life-structure becomes the central working presupposition for the ongoing development of the manuscripts on time, ethics, culture, epistemology, ontology, anthropology, psychology, history, and metaphysics.

That my living body is the zero point of motile, kinesthetic orientation has been well developed in literature. What must be considered more assiduously is that, for Husserl, the event horizon of the nature/mind distinction is in the indistinction of the egosomatic organism. In Ideen (1913) Husserl speaks of the body as a region that is in some way distinct from nature and mind. This distinction is clarified in Natur und Geist (1919) through his analogizing of the body as a bridge that connects nature and mind and in Die Lebenswelt (1916-1937) it is described in a text from 1931 as my egoorganism that subtends the nature/mind distinction. That is, ego is “in inseparable unity with experienced nature”.

My body, which is always already living such that I discover it and continue to encounter it as it—the same arrangement I find myself in with regard to my transpersonal body constituted by the ancestral belonging through which I move from sensuous we to stratified me and we. My body, corporeal and social, is that which wields me as I wield it. As I come to wield it I find myself being wielded. This co-wielding arises from the life-structure. This structure of the my that is a structure of the our: the multiple-unitary body of the transpersonal we, that We-Subjectivity (Wir-Subjektivität) in the Die Lebenswelt manuscripts. This structure of the me and we is the Archimedean Point of creativity from which the world is constituted and actively reconfigured, the, “necessary structural system for each surrounding world as such” as Husserl...
wrote in a manuscript from 1926.

The world is not a thing to be experienced like other things.\(^\text{[17]}\) The \textit{umwelt}, my lived environment that I cannot but be co-constituting as long as I am living and awake. It is constitutive of the pre-logical unity of the world for me, determined by way of pre-logical experience: My surrounding world is a pre-theoretical world of instinctual life, affective attunement, and my most primal levels of presence through attending apperception “at the lowest level, whereunities of experience are constituted.”\(^\text{[18]}\)

This is the life-structure: my living body, my social bodies, and our environing worlds.

**The Event**

Husserl writes in a manuscript from 1933, “But now, what can a universal science wish for but a new kind of something emerging in history, breaking in to it?”\(^\text{[19]}\) A new kind of something breaking it. That is Husserl’s philosophy of the event. The unimaginable emerges as a new kind of something. The \textit{something} comes through a body, it is born: either through the continuous folds of history or its seemingly uncanny breaking in. A philosophy of the \textit{something} is the encircling of the unthought, the to-think of circumambulation itself. The encircling that is only every, to quote Merleau-Ponty, “side-tracked toward rationalism”,\(^\text{[20]}\) pointing to the centrality of the \textit{relation} of entangled embodied existence.

The subsoil of pre-logical validity goes about its generative work through relation. Husserl writes in \textit{Natur und Geist} (1919) “what I do not see, what I do not imagine in my own imagination is firmly related to me....”\(^\text{[21]}\) The same root word is used twice, “Vorstellungen vorstelle”. What I cannot imagine in my imagination—the unimaginable—I am yet related to. But in what way? In Husserl’s work, relation is the field of subjective encounter described as intersubjectivity and that between subjects and objects described as objectivity: the correlation that phenomenologists attend to is a field relation. What then of this purported relation between subjects and the unimaginable?

In imaginative constitution, imaginary objects function like any other objects: in a field of constitutive objectivity. The centaur, as an object of imagination, is no less a \textit{noema} than is the actually existing zebra. The unimaginable, on the other hand, is a peculiar state of affairs as it is an objectifying intersubjective field relation. My relation to the unimaginable is not a relation of consciousness, but one of inhabitation. It is a relation of my living body contained by a larger constitutive context. A relation of inhabiting a meta-field, a cosmic field, the \textit{nous} field that is itself the event horizon of the unimaginable. The relation to the unimaginable is the strange arrangement that places me in the position of other-consciousness to some unknown constitutive process. This anonymous constitutive move is an event horizon through which I have no view. The unimaginable is the unanticipated to come and my relation to it is one of the pre-event: which is always already a field relation with \textit{I know not what}.

This \textit{nous} of which we speak may be that found in Aristotle’s \textit{Metaphysics} where it is described as a field of divine inexistence that moves all of inhering creation. The divine in Husserl is very much in line with this notion and is somewhat akin to the Fichtean or Schellengian divine. Or, perhaps most fittingly, the Leibnizian divine monad (only as an open field rather than a closed autonomy).\(^\text{[22]}\) But Husserl’s God was not simply a carryover of the philosophical theology of another. As Derrida recounts in his Sorbonne seminar from 1962-63 quoting Husserl speaking to Edith Stein:

““the life of men is nothing else than a way towards God. I have tried to reach the target without the help of theology, its proofs, its methods. In other words, I wanted to reach god without God. I needed to eliminate God from my scientific thought to open the way to those who don’t know, like us, the safe path of the faith coming from the church””\(^\text{[23]}\)

There is a theological project here that is in shadow. A work of thinking-towards the divine. In an idiom sounding to our ears altogether Derridean (though it is becoming more and more clear as the decades pass just how Husserlian this Derridean idiom truly is), this subterranean project of phenomenology is about the task of pursing and reaching “god without God”. The infinite pole of the divine in Husserl and his notion of the event seem to coincide. The divine, in a very real sense, is the Husserlian philosophy of the event. Husserl’s project develops a path open to the
event by developing a path atheistically seeking the divine. A path that sets out to be the preparation for a future metaphysics.

“Philosophical problems disclose themselves… in a… systematic series of steps” wrote Husserl in a letter from 1933. He continues, “On these occasions it becomes manifest that the religious-ethical problems are problems of the highest level…. This is precisely the reason why in my writings I kept silent about the problems of philosophy of religion. However, in these and in my forthcoming publications the roads are cleared in order to work one’s way toward them…. the supreme ‘problem of constitution’ is the question of the being of ‘what is beyond being,’ i.e., precisely of this principle which makes possible in its existence a totality of transcendental intersubjectivity concordant in itself, together with the world constituted by it.…. [24]

This is the speculative edge of phenomenology. A project undertaken as a rigorous science, but through the zigzagging account giving procedures of a dialectical life manifesting the natural attitude and unnatural attitudes, which make the living subject the evental unfolding of history and the possible site of the unimaginable breaking-in. It is clear that Husserl not only accepted the possibility of the unfolding or in-breaking of the unimaginable, but he constitutively presupposed it and was indirectly working to achieve the conditions for its phenomenological engagement and eidetic description. It is also clear that this philosophy of the event in Husserl is inextricably theological, but in a manner that, again, reminds us just how Husserlian Derrida’s “rightly passing as an atheist” was.

Among the manuscripts from 1933 Husserl writes,

“Accordingly, if… a [universal] science [that does not presuppose revelation] still leads to God, its way to God would be an atheistic way to God, like an atheistic path to genuine, unconditionally universal humanity.”[25]

There is a line break in the manuscript and Husserl then adds the text at the center of our inquiry here,

“But now, what can a universal science… wish for but a new kind of something emerging in history, breaking in to it?”[26]

We are the site of this something. Humanity write large in their living bodies, social bodies, and environing worlds. The life-structure is the means through which the unimaginable comes. The philosophy of the event in Husserl is, like everything since the transcendental turn, a philosophy of the body. Incarnation. Or perhaps, incarnation without Incarnation.

The life-structure is an autopoietic engine generating intersubjective sense and validity. We manifest sinn und geltung, sense and validity, by default. This is why explanatory procedures that become reified (the functional shortcuts of the nature attitude) must be (at the very least) suspended if truth is to be rigorously contended for (and the natural attitude transformed as a result). This is the reason we need the rigor of phenomenological method: because our account giving is always already underway through auto-generated sense and validity.

Cosmological Nervous System

Tymieniecka recently wrote, “The world of life that the human being projects is, indeed, transcendental, but not on account of its basic origin in human constitutive consciousness/mind… but rather with respect to its positioning within the dynamic web of the geocosmic architectonic of life.”[27] In one sense, this positioning is the ongoing expansion of the human purview, the scaling up and out of the human boden, that has been underway from the fundamental turn that we, through our naturwissenschaften, mark at 2.5 million years ago when the exponential curve of genus homo began.[28] Through the meteoric rise of genus homo and the tectonic shifts that brought about subspecies homo sapiens sapiens, along a trajectory that is yet underway, we find one thing a primal necessity for its continued unfolding: our living bodies. The life-structure is the only sense constituting apparatus we have yet discovered in the cosmos and we have found it, in its most supple and profligate iteration, in ourselves. Which is not to say, of course, that the life-structure is human. The human life-structure is an instance of it. Husserl references this in the
manuscripts when he speaks of non-human life\(^{29}\) (to include even plant life\(^{30}\)), and we have seen a worthwhile statement released very recently in this regard from the group that joined together for the Francis Crick Memorial Conference in 2012 that produced The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness in Non-Human Animals.

Despite our inventions and discoveries, our sophisticated out-workings of natur und geist that fuel an ongoing discovery and novel use of reality—and the attending expansion of the human purview. Despite even those things built by the generations to whom we are the ancients—interstellar communication and travel, interplanetary species migration, artificial general intelligence—despite anything built, the life-structure is the unexchangeable ground through which these things unfold and to which they must return by necessity (even if this means the material constitution of these conditions through novel instrumentalization): Our terraforming of the cosmos is a work of natur und geist that cannot dispense with or forget its terrestrial ground despite its distended path to maintaining it in ways far removed from those that have emerged. We are the builders of the world not simply its bearers. We wield that which wields us.\(^{31}\) There is a kinship between our living bodies and everything we have come to do, make, and know in the built worlds. There is no escaping this family tie. We live and we die the people of the life-structure.

This new science, phenomenology, is radical because it is looking to achieve an objectivity that it cannot hold. An account of sense and validity as such as they pass episteme along fruitfully in the multigenerational genealogy of truth in motion. This account giving discloses a structure of inheritance through which we have come and by which we are made the ancestors of a better truth (though not necessarily, this is contingent Husserlian geist after all). For phenomenology, truth has no final form save the living trajectory of those bearing it. The living experience of the subject, her communicating communities, and their mutual inscribing and reciting, writing and reading, encoding and manifesting: the I/O of our species’ truth machines—those engendered environing worlds—in aggregate, which are the unfolding of the possibility of a metaphysics that holds from the infinite variantology of the pure, the empirical, and the lifeworld manifesting from the pre-given world of the life-structure that is only ever the my-structure autopoietically rooted in umnatur. This is a phenomenology that is alive. That does not hold back from being speculative, but that is not glib in doing such work.

This is a phenomenology that lives.

REFERENCES


[3] Ibid., p. 15.


[8] Ibid., p. 675.


[16] Ibid., p. 262.

[17] Ibid., p. 67.


[26] Ibid.


[31] The life-structure, its manifested lifeworld, and attendant attitudinal developments are not simply wielding me. I ontogenetically come to co-wield them. This is to become, in the words of Husserl’s last research assistant Eugen Fink, “the self-mastering experimenter of being… the player of the world [Weltspieler]”. Fink continues, “In this way… he is like the gods, as Heraclitus says of Zeus: ‘He plays with worlds.’” Ronald Bruzina, Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology, 1928-1938. (New Haven: