

Review from Last Class

Let's begin by reviewing some themes from last class. Recall that – starting this Monday - I want you to start writing reflection papers on themes and/or concepts discussed in the texts. With this in mind, allow me briefly *in hindsight* to highlight some of the themes that we identified in Husserl's "Epilogue."

The clarion call of phenomenology is "to the things themselves," or if you prefer, *zu den Sachen selbst*." Though the different philosophers in the phenomenological movement seem to share this one central motivation, i.e., "to get at the heart of the matter itself," Husserl explicitly denies unity to this movement. With this in mind, in his "Epilogue" and also to some extent in the introduction to the *Cartesian Meditations* he highlights the novelty of his phenomenological philosophy. Central to transcendental phenomenology is the assertion of phenomenology as philosophy par excellence, i.e., it aspires to be philosophy as rigorous science. According to Husserl, in other words, the essential character of his phenomenology is to be found in the phenomenological reduction. It is our job to understand how the phenomenological reduction as a method of philosophizing is related to the aspiration of phenomenology to be science in the most rigorous sense.

As you have been able to see, the reading for today and the reading for last class, i.e., the "Epilogue," exhibit a striking similarity. In the "Epilogue" Husserl states clearly that, and I quote, "the great task of our time <is> to carry out a radical meditation, in order to intentionally explicate the genuine sense of philosophy <i.e., philosophy as rigorous science> and to demonstrate the possibility of its realization."¹ Compare this statement against the thrust of the first of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, especially as expressed in the final lines of §3. Recall that the radical philosopher of new beginnings, i.e., the philosopher motivated by Descartes' *Meditations*, cannot take any factually existing science to exemplify the idea of philosophy as rigorous science. This idea of rigorous science is an ideal motivating the striving and performances of theoretical reasoning, but it is as yet merely a goal and not an actuality. So though "we do not as yet accept any normative ideal of science," Husserl argues, we are nevertheless, and now I quote from the *Meditations*, to "consider how the <the idea of philosophy as rigorous science> might be thought out as a possibility and then consider how it might be given determinate actualization."² Both the "Epilogue" and the *Cartesian Meditations* point, therefore, to the task of considering the possibility of philosophy par excellence as well as the manner by which this possibility can be realized. Yet where Husserl in the brief "Epilogue" only points to this meditation as a task, Husserl in the *Cartesian Meditation* takes up this task actually. The task of the *Cartesian Meditations* is, in other words, the explication of the possibility of philosophy as rigorous science and the manner by which to bring this possibility to reality.

According to Husserl, the philosopher must – as Descartes suggests as well – "withdraw into himself" and "reflect on how I might find a method for going on, a method that promises to lead to genuine knowing."³ Let's for a moment recall the fundamental moves the meditating philosopher performs in Descartes' *Meditations*. In the first Meditation, the philosopher engages herself in a thorough-going skepticism of things

Themes from Last Class

1. Clarion call of phenomenology: to the things themselves – to the matters themselves
2. Denies there unity to the phenomenological movement
3. The novelty of Husserl's phenomenological philosophy: the phenomenological reduction
 - a. restriction to pure self-givennesses
 - b. reduction to transcendental subjectivity
 - i. absolute field of scientific research
4. Consciousness (vs. existence/life)
5. Intentionality
6. Science of essences, the apriori
7. Rigorous science – a science based on ultimate self-responsibility

¹ Husserl. "Epilogue, 406.

² Husserl. *Cartesian Meditations*, 9.

³ Husserl. *Cartesian Meditations*, 2.

that can be brought into doubt. This practice of doubting is not directed at the particularities of my experience, i.e., I don't need to ask, is this chair real? Or this table? I am standing before you speaking? Etc. Rather "if I am able to find in each one some reason to doubt, this will suffice," Descartes argues, "to justify my rejecting the whole."⁴ Descartes need only find some doubtfulness in the things of sensory experience, which he finds in the possibility of dreaming. Hence sensory perception is in principle not a secure foundation for knowledge. But what of the intellect and its objects, i.e., the things of seeming indubitability such as the simple objects of geometry or even God? Here as we all know, Descartes posits the possibility of an evil genius whose sole end is my own deception. Is there nothing unshakable, then? is there no solid shore on which I can find solace from the buffeting of my skepticisms? Of course, there is. No matter how fully I am deceived, I cannot be deceived about the fact of my thinking. For deceived thinking is but a deficient mode of thinking generally. Hence I am a thinking thing. It is here that Descartes initiates the modern "turn," as Husserl expresses it. The Cartesian "turn to the subject," this "going back to the pure *ego cogito* ... inaugurates an entirely new kind of philosophy," Husserl tells us. "Changing its total style, philosophy takes a radical turn: from naïve Objectivism to transcendental subjectivism."⁵

Husserl, himself, is motivated by the Cartesian method of doubt. That is, he, himself, follows upon Descartes in the latter's effort to find a method that promises to lead to genuine knowing. But Husserl is ever on his guard, as well, against misunderstandings arising from the special ground of this meditation. Listen to what he says in the "Epilogue."

Though the phenomenologist, in all his transcendental descriptions, does not pass the slightest judgment about the world and about his human Ego as a mundane being, nevertheless he does constantly make a judgment about his Ego as a being absolutely in itself and for itself, "*prior*" to all mundane being, which only in this Ego first acquires ontological validity.⁶

Now compare this expression against that of the *spirit of Descartes' philosophy* which Husserl sees as a motive force to his own philosophy. Here I'm quoting from §1 of the Introduction to the *Cartesian Meditations*

The meditator keeps only himself, qua pure ego of his *cogitationes*, as having an absolutely indubitable existence, as something that cannot be done away with, something that would exist even though this world were non-existent. Thus reduced, the ego carries on a kind of solipsistic philosophizing. He seeks apodictically certain ways by which, within his own pure inwardness, an objective outwardness can be deduced.⁷

This indubitable un-worldly being – that is, this being that is absolutely in and for itself "*prior*" to all worldly being – remains the most fundamentally significant discovery obtained by Descartes by his method of radical doubt. Yet we should tread with caution. For this is not to suggest, however, that Husserl simply accepts Descartes' method of doubt as his own. Indeed, I would suggest that Husserl's philosophy is the one philosophy which – while calling itself neo-Cartesian - rejects precisely the kind of doubt as practiced by Descartes. Husserl says at the beginning of section 3 (in the First Meditation), akin to Descartes *it appears*, that as we begin anew our philosophizing "we shall (quote) put out of action all the convictions we have been accepting up to now."⁸ But what is this "putting out of action" to mean? Though Husserl is certainly motivated by Descartes and the idea of radical self-responsibility at the heart of his scientific philosophy, the Husserlian epoché, that is, this "putting out of action" that is initiated here, is certainly no Cartesian project of doubt. Though Cartesian Husserl's method may be *in spirit*, he clearly cautions that the phenomenologist does not, as does Descartes, "suppose, then, that all the things I see are false" and "persuade myself that nothing has ever

⁴ Descartes, René. "Meditations on First Philosophy." In *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, volume I. Translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross. Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge University Press, 1967, 145.

⁵ Husserl. *Cartesian Meditations*, 4.

⁶ Husserl. "Epilogue," 413.

⁷ Husserl. *Cartesian Meditations*, 3.

⁸ Husserl. *Cartesian Meditations*,

existed of all that my fallacious memory represents to me.”⁹ Hence Descartes’ methodological extension of doubt to the principle of perception, itself, remains foreign to the method of phenomenological ἐποχή. Whether or not a perceived object really exists (as perceived) or not is not precisely at issue here. That we may quite naturally doubt the veracity of particular perceptions, the soundness of our imaginations, the authenticity of our memories, etc., is not directly relevant to this epoché, or, what is the same, to the parenthesizing, the bracketing, or the suspension of our convictions, that we, as worldly subjects, perform as phenomenologists. Husserl's method of philosophizing begins with the epoché, but what is this epoché? It is the putting out of play all our previously held convictions that prejudice our meditative investigation. Radically understood, it is a parenthesizing even of the belief in the world as a real world existing independently of me. It is a bracketing of our most natural mindset as well as the naturalistic scientific conception of the reality of things.

What then does this epoché open up? A wholly new field of absolute data or absolute givens, Husserl suggests. Phenomenological descriptions concern the total systems of conscious intentions, including those whereby doubt, itself, becomes manifest. This is really the very meaning of the idea of evidence articulated by Husserl in the First Meditation. I quote now from §5 of this Meditation on page 13:

We have gained a measure of clarity sufficient to let us fix, for our whole further procedure, a first methodological *principle*. It is plain that I, as someone beginning philosophically, since I am striving toward the presumptive end, genuine science, may neither pass a judgment nor go on accepting any judgment as scientific *that I have not derived from evidence*, from "experiences" in which the matters and states of affairs in question are present to me as "*they themselves*."¹⁰

Hence, by bracketing even the worldly station of egoic life, what the phenomenologist initiates in this move is a very unique performance. In the phenomenological attitude, every objectifying act as well as every judging, striving, valuing or any intention quite generally which occurs in consciousness is neither denied nor averred. As a phenomenologist—reflecting on the total life of intentional consciousnesses unitarily occurring as "mine"—I qua phenomenologist aim to articulate in this neutralized consciousness precise descriptions of the positing of transcendental consciousness as I qua worldly subject live through them.

Ok, that's a mouthful, and I am aware of the complexity of these last assertions. Let's not lose sight of the forest for the trees, though. The novelty of Husserl's philosophy lies in its aspiration to be rigorous science. The *Cartesian Meditations* are reflections on the possibility of this idea as well as the manner by which to realize this idea. Before we move on, though, let's recall certain objections to Husserl's philosophy that he, himself, mentioned in the "Epilogue." The ultimate ground of phenomenological investigation is the intentional consciousness.¹¹ But it is precisely Husserl's characterization of transcendental ego disclosed in the method of epoché and phenomenological reduction¹² (1) as a "being" antecedent to the natural being of

⁹ Descartes, René. "Meditations on First Philosophy." In *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, volume I. Translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross. Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge University Press, 1967, 149.

¹⁰ Husserl. *Cartesian Meditations*, modified 13

¹¹ i.e., the standing-streaming apodictic field of consciousness intending (a) transcendent objectivity, on the one hand, and the appearing, on the other, of such (an) objectivity according to how it is meant qua as accepted in consciousness.

¹² "The phenomenological reduction has frequently, even at first by Husserl himself, been confused with certain epochés which may be exercised in the natural attitude. An example which Husserl earlier used to illustrate the phenomenological reduction but which he now uses to illustrate a differential character of an epoché in the natural attitude, is as follows:

Two persons having a difference of opinion may agree to "*suspend judgment*" until they can appeal to the facts. Each however retains his own opinion, not only as a content, but also as an *opinion*; he "suspends judgment" only in the sense that he no longer makes use of his opinion, pending verification. This epoché is not phenomenological reduction, since the real (world-) background of the opinion remains as posited by the persons in our illustration. The epoché concerns a detail of the natural world, whereas the phenomenological epoché concerns the entirety of existence. But it is important to see that the phenomenological reduction does not involve a suspension of thetic activity. This characteristic it has in common with the above-described "suspension" of judgment. The naïve setting of the world still goes on. The epoché is one exercised by the ego, not as directly *living* its intentionalities, but as

world, (2) as solipsistic and (3) as ultimately a field of pure immanence. Husserl's characterizations of the transcendental ego in this manner are, indeed, the source point for many of the criticisms against his philosophy, specifically the ones he mentions in the "Epilogue." Existentialist philosophers argue, for instance, that by this one-sided focus on immanent *consciousness* Husserl remains blind to the always-already structuring of this being that I am as *being in the world*. Certain life-philosophers, on the other hand, argue that transcendental phenomenology mires itself in a formalization of theoretical consciousness and so loses sight of the living being that we, in fact, are. In his transcendental phenomenology Husserl, in other words, replaces the fixed *idea* of consciousness (found in reflection) for the living, active, striving, valuing, bodily being that I am truly. All these objections cut to the core of Husserl's phenomenology in its effort to get to the things themselves. For they all insinuate that transcendental phenomenology asserts but a prejudiced *interpretation* in that it projects a picture of the being that I am *as* essentially an immanent intellectual consciousness. Husserl phenomenological descriptions offer merely an interpretation of its subject matter but they do not truly get to matter at issue. This is the claim.

It is important not to lose sight of these objections for two reasons. First, Husserl thinks that these objections miss the basic meaning of his philosophy. So our aim will be – as well as we can - to uncover to the true sense of transcendental phenomenology which Husserl articulates in these writings. Second, these are, in fact, objections put forward by philosophers we'll be reading after Husserl. So keep them in the back of your mind as we go along. But bear in mind that Husserl does not directly respond to these criticisms. Rather, he pushes on with his investigations. And this is what we will do in the days to come.

reflecting on them." (Dorion Cairns, *Conversations with Husserl and Fink*, 11-12.) See also Fink/Husserl. *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, p. 41ff.