

**Of things and thoughts**

**Phenomenology for anthropologists**

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*(translation by the author with the help of deepl.com. To avoid misunderstandings due to a certain lack of precision in translations, the original German version has been quoted in the footnotes)*

## Abstract

The present essay deals with the question of whether and to which extent the so-called phenomenology or phenomenological method can be utilized for anthropological research and theory formation, as anthropologists, especially from the Anglo-Saxon-speaking world, have been postulating since the 1980s. In five chapters, the author first deals with the linguistic and theoretical difficulties of the reception of phenomenology. He then examines the fact that phenomenology is not a closed, unified theory, but consists of contradictory approaches. Although phenomenology is often presented as a (purely) “descriptive method”, at its core, at least in the case of its founders, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, it is an ontological philosophical system in the Western European philosophical tradition, in which the former is concerned with recognizing the essence of things or phenomena and the latter with the meaning of being. The phenomenological method, which seeks to arrive at the knowledge of truth through epoché (bracketing and disregarding any prior opinion), eidetic reduction (gradual process of abstraction with the aim of recognizing the “eidos”, essence), and free eidetic variation, is not critically appreciated by many of the phenomenologically oriented anthropologists. Instead, attempts are made to “apply” certain fragments, which can only lead to trivial methodological a prioris. Heidegger's world of thought is particularly problematic, as his concept of being thrown (into the world) brings him close to National Socialist ideas.

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## 0 – Introduction

He probably wasn't entirely wrong, Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), sociologist and philosopher at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, co-founder of the so-called Frankfurt School with its Critical Theory and certainly no intellectual lightweight, when he described the phenomenological theory of philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) as "thicketish convoluted, probably also ambiguous"<sup>1</sup> and added: "Moreover, in Husserl's deduction, his actual procedure contradicts the phenomenological program."<sup>2</sup> A judgment that could also be translated as "difficult to understand" and "inherently contradictory".<sup>3</sup>

Zurich philosopher Helmut Holzhey also considered it appropriate to reflect on Husserl's use of language<sup>4</sup>, to which we will return elsewhere; his Wuppertal colleague Klaus Held (1936-2023) explained politely and diplomatically in the selection of Husserl's texts that he edited: "The dry diction of the catheder philosopher Husserl did not lend itself to public debate"<sup>5</sup> and the psychologists Max Herzog and Carl Friedrich Graumann (1923-2007), for their part, cite difficulties with Husserl's use of language.<sup>6</sup>

It is therefore all the more astonishing to see the light-footedness with which a number of anthropologists, especially some from Anglo-Saxon-speaking world, seem to navigate their way through the seemingly rather convoluted texts, whose maxims and methods they try to transport from philosophy into their own science. Anyone who has

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno, T. W., *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie*, 1970 [2022], 9 f. („dickichtthaft verschlungen, wohl auch mehrdeutig“).

<sup>2</sup> op. cit., 99 („Darüber hinaus widerspricht in Husserls Deduktion sein tatsächliches Verfahren dem phänomenologischen Programm.“).

<sup>3</sup> The same can also be said of Heidegger's texts, in which one finds statements such as: "In-being is ... the formal existential expression of the being of Dasein, which has the essential constitution of being-in-the-world. The 'being-with' of the world ... is an existential founded in in-being." („In-sein ist ... der formale existenziale Ausdruck des Seins des Daseins, das die wesenhafte Verfassung des In-der-Welt-seins hat. Das ‚Sein bei‘ der Welt ... ist ein im In-Sein fundiertes Existenzial.“ Heidegger, M., 1927, 52 f.) Or also: "Dasein is being that relates itself in its being to this being ... But these determinations of being of Dasein must now be seen and understood a priori on the basis of the constitution of being that we call being-in-the-world." („Dasein ist Seiendes, das sich in seinem Sein verstehend zu diesem Sein verhält ... Diese Seinsbestimmungen des Daseins müssen nun aber a priori auf dem Grunde der Seinsverfassung gesehen und verstanden werden, die wir das In-der-Welt-sein nennen.“ [ibid]).

<sup>4</sup> Holzhey, H., *Zu den Sachen selbst! – Über das Verhältnis von Phänomenologie und Neukantianismus*, in: Herzog, M. & C. F. Graumann, *Sinn und Erfahrung – Phänomenologische Methoden in den Humanwissenschaften*, 1991, 7 f.

<sup>5</sup> Husserl, E., *Die phänomenologische Methode – Ausgewählte Texte I*, 2021 [2024], 6 („Die trockene Diktion des Kathederphilosophen Husserl bot sich ... für eine öffentliche Debatte nicht ... an“).

<sup>6</sup> Herzog, M. & C. F. Graumann, *Hundert Jahre phänomenologische Forschung: Rückblick, Status und Ausblick*, in: Herzog, M. & C. F. Graumann, *Sinn und Erfahrung – Phänomenologische Methoden in den Humanwissenschaften*, 1991.

to do with language can imagine that there are a few pitfalls that can trip you up. Just one example: the German Husserl distinguishes quite clearly between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* with their respective connotations of (immediate, sensory) perception and (reflective, conceptual) processing; a distinction that the English “experience” hardly makes, but which could have been made clear, for example, by the additions “lived” and “reflected” experience.<sup>7</sup>

The lack of clarity in this regard begins with some authors' definition of what they mean by phenomenology. The American anthropologists and philosophers Jarrett Zigon and Jason Throop, for example, define: „Phenomenology is thus, as Husserl maintained, not a philosophy of individual subjectivity but an eidetic philosophy, a philosophy that reveals essential structures of experience ...”<sup>8</sup> and specify that the “... concept of experience ... is central to all forms of phenomenological philosophy...”<sup>9</sup>. Hamburg anthropologist Michael Schnegg, who frequently publishes in English, for his part condenses this statement to “phenomenology is a theory of ‘experience’<sup>10</sup>” and again does not specify whether he is talking about *Erlebnis*, *Erfahrung* or yet another differently connoted “experience”.

Zigon and Throop's attempt at an explanation does not bring clarity either. In answering the question of what phenomenological anthropologists understand by “experience”, they first skirt a kind of circular argument - “When (they) write about ‘experience, they are primarily concerned with describing the essential conditions of ‘experience’” - and then lose themselves in philosophical exegeses of the type “what it means to be human in all its broad socio-historical diversity”.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> With Husserl himself, the question remains unclear, and the term “experience” is mainly used for reflected experience, even if his concept of originary perception would be more appropriate to that of perceptual “experience”. Cf. e.g. Husserl, E., *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*, 1913-1, 98: “Natural cognition begins with experience and remains in experience.”

<sup>8</sup> and „... has as its exclusive concern, experiences intuitively seizable and analyzable in their pure essential generality, not experiences empirically perceived and treated as real facts.” Zigon, J. & J. Throop, *Phenomenology*, [www.anthroencyclopedia.com](http://www.anthroencyclopedia.com), 2021, 4.

<sup>9</sup> op. cit., 3.

<sup>10</sup> Schnegg, M., *Phenomenological Anthropology – Philosophical Concepts for Ethnographic Use*, 2023, 5.

<sup>11</sup> „What, then, do phenomenologists mean by experience, and how has it been taken up by phenomenological anthropologists? When phenomenologists and phenomenological anthropologists write about experience, they are primarily concerned with describing the essential conditions of experience. Therefore, rather than simply providing a description of a series of events and activities that accumulate over time and shape a person's life, phenomenologists investigate and describe the potentialities and relationships that make experience possible in the first place. Rather than merely describing that a homeless person in Boston may be ‘struggling along’, phenomenological anthropologists will also investigate which conditions led to this predicament in the first place and offer a way for understanding how these conditions shape lives. As this entry hopes to show, these conditions of experience constitute what it is to be human in all of its vast socio-historic diversity. In other words, in contrast to a notion of human nature that might emphasise, for example, that humans are rational animals or animals with language, phenomenologists write about conditions of experience that above all indicate that humans are essentially relational beings that become who they are because of the relations with which they are always intertwined ...” (Zigon, J. & J. Throop, 2021, 4).

The fact that the problem of different “experiences” was not unknown to at least some of the protagonists of phenomenological anthropology is indicated by the US anthropologist Robert Desjarlais in his review of Schnegg's cited work, in which he reminds his colleague that „...complications quietly involved are suggested by the fact that in the German language there are two words that are often considered cognate with the English word ‚experience’: namely *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* ...” and that „... there is a whole gamut of connotations, implications and linguistic and conceptual histories in words ...”<sup>12</sup>. A differentiation that would be important for understanding important elements of phenomenological philosophy.

Questions concerning the understanding of language also arise elsewhere, for example when Schnegg speaks of “result of reflections” as “experience”<sup>13</sup>, a translation that requires at least some explanation if one does not want to understand the lived experience itself as synonymous with the reflection on it.

In this context, it is noticeable when reading pheno-anthropological texts that their authors for the most part do not refer to the originary Husserl and Heidegger texts in their reception, but to secondary literature, mostly in English. In Dejarlais and Throop<sup>14</sup>, for example, the reader will find just three sparse direct references to Husserl<sup>15</sup> and one each to Heidegger<sup>16</sup> (1889-1976) and Merleau-Ponty<sup>17</sup> (1908-1961) among the countless source references, all of which are cited only in the English translation and not in the original, which may seem trivial, but is certainly relevant in view of the translation problems mentioned above.

What is more, after reading Husserl and Heidegger in the German original, one cannot but wonder whether their texts could really be read in the Anglo-Saxon-speaking world and understood in their tendency to be convoluted and contradictory; an impression that is also reinforced by the largely complete absence of a direct critical engagement with them as well as a reception of their critics (Adorno et al.<sup>18</sup>) on the part of the pheno-anthropological authors. In this context, we will have to return to Husserl's and Heidegger's use of language in the context of Husserl's “eidos” and the political implications of Heidegger's world of concepts and ideas.

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<sup>12</sup> Desjarlais, R., The Question of Experience, in: *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie/Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 148 No. 1, 2023, 104.

<sup>13</sup> „... result of reflections (*Erlebnis*) of what we have lived-through (*Erleben*)...”, Schnegg, M., op. cit., 4.

<sup>14</sup> Desjarlais, R. & C. J. Throop, *Phenomenological Approaches in Anthropology*, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Husserl, E., *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, 1962 und *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 1970.

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, M., *Being and Time*, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1962.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno, T. W., *Negative Dialektik*, 1966 (1975) and Adorno, T. W., 1970 (2022).

Any discussion of the still relatively recent attempts to apply phenomenology or the so-called phenomenological method in anthropological research will inevitably have to begin at least with an examination of the phenomenological “classics”, their maxims and antinomies. For these alone, so much in advance, could give rise to doubts about the claimed usefulness, quite without - we will return to this later - having to make an effort to discuss the reception of phenomenological philosophy by scholars of the culturally foreign, a reception that often neglects or completely ignores contradictions and incoherences between the many variants of this philosophy, indeed even within one or other of these variants themselves.

In addition to the aforementioned linguistic difficulties, there is also the fact that it is not actually possible to speak of THE phenomenology (and its method). Even when reading the classics, it is difficult to assume a unified theory. Where Husserl's approach is clearly determined by methodological questions, Heidegger places more emphasis on the discussion of the meaning of being and thus comes closer to metaphysical philosophy, which Husserl had sought to leave behind quite radically<sup>19</sup>, so that one can ask oneself at times whether this can be subsumed under the term “phenomenology” at all, despite the latter's commitment to Husserl's maxim of “back to the things themselves”.

Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, whose approach is often apostrophized as a “third” or “middle way” (between Husserl's and Heidegger's), whereby his “existentialist” philosophy can probably be explained more by the experience of two world wars and dictatorships than by motives immanent to philosophy, positions the principle of corporeality as a central element in phenomenology, which, according to the prevailing opinion<sup>20</sup>, receives little or no attention in Husserl and Heidegger, but all the more so in the Herr-Knecht chapter of Hegel's (1770-1831) “Phenomenology of Spirit”<sup>21</sup>, one of the main writings of the “metaphysician” par excellence<sup>22</sup>. It will be discussed more

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<sup>19</sup> Husserl defined his first task as “... a critique of reason. A critique of logical and practical reason, of evaluative reason in general.“ („... eine Kritik der Vernunft. Eine Kritik der logischen und der praktischen Vernunft, der wertenden überhaupt“, Janssen, P., Einleitung zu Husserl, E., *Die Idee der Phänomenologie*, 1986 [2016], IX

<sup>20</sup> Rehding and Worreschk locate corporeality - “... that the world is first of all revealed to the subject on the basis of his corporeality ...” („... dass sich dem Subjekt die Welt allererst anhand seiner Leiblichkeit erschließt ...”) - not only with Merleau-Ponty, but already with Husserl. “The body, as a living experience of the first-person perspective, forms the center around which the world unfolds for the subject.” („Der Leib, als lebendige Erfahrung der Erster-Person-Perspektive, bildet das Zentrum, um das herum sich die Welt für das Subjekt entfaltet.“, Rehding, F.-M. & J. C. Worreschk, *Die phänomenologische Methode*, www.macau.uni-kiel.de, 2024, 91 f.). In Husserl, the body is found in the “basic problems”: “Let us now look at the body and the spatiotemporality surrounding the body. Every ego finds itself as having an organic body. The body, for its part, is not an ego, but a spatiotemporal “thing” around which a material environment is grouped that extends into the infinite.” (Husserl, Edmund, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* 1910/11, 1977 [1992]).

<sup>21</sup> Hegel, G. W. F., *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Theorie-Werkausgabe (TWA), 1970 (2023), 145 f.

<sup>22</sup> vgl. Bertram, 2021, 108: Hegel knows that the mind without the body (Leib) yields little “Consciousness in the form of the thing, the body, is a necessary precondition for self-consciousness to prove itself as independent.“ („Das

frequently in this essay because, despite its “idealistic” approach, it is often much clearer and more comprehensible than Husserl and Heidegger.

Although there were attempts to reconcile the sometimes contradictory theories<sup>23</sup> - Herzog and Graumann, for example, believe that the concept of intentionality, to which we will return, forms “the lowest common denominator under which even heterogeneous methodological approaches can be interpreted in a phenomenological perspective that unites them”<sup>24</sup> -, but the discrepancies, not to speak of confusion or cacophony, have become increasingly apparent over time, mainly due to the attempts to make phenomenology and its method usable for all kinds of sciences (including law, natural sciences, anthropology, education, business administration, sociology and many more).<sup>25</sup> Rehding and Worreschk's observation that all later phenomenologists “distanced themselves from Husserl's original program in their own way” is remarkable.<sup>26</sup>

In anthropology, which is the ultimate topic of this essay, euphemistic descriptions of this diversity or chaos prevail, as when Desjarlais states: „Although each of these perspectives can be understood as involving distinct applications of phenomenology, they all share a number of thematic and methodological orientations that are variously taken up in the work of contemporary anthropologists”<sup>27</sup> Schnegg seconds this view, stating that „Phenomenology offers a wealth of concepts that have not been fully explored.”<sup>28</sup>

Adorno, on the other hand, who will be repeatedly quoted in this essay because he provides the perhaps most thorough critique of Husserl and Heidegger, is irreverent at this point: “Husserl's successors only think in order to disempower thought and canonize a dogma that is nevertheless binding and therefore abstract. When the critical execution of the motives that have congealed into phenomenology reveals the holes that it vainly plugs by moving from one concept to another, phenomenology, in a certain

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„Bewusstsein in der Gestalt der Dingheit, der Körper, ist eine notwendige Voraussetzung, dass ein Selbstbewusstsein sich als selbständig bewähren kann.“)

<sup>23</sup> ... or to classify them, as Schnegg (Schnegg, M., op. cit., 11) attempts to do: “Phenomenologists have developed a wide range of concepts, which I group in six approaches.” (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Waldenfels, Schmitz, Stein)

<sup>24</sup> in: Herzog, M. & C. F. Graumann, op. cit., XI.

<sup>25</sup> Husserl himself speaks of an organon, a tool. (Husserl, E., 1927, 196).

<sup>26</sup> Rehding, F.-M. & J. C. Worreschk, 2024, 81 („auf ihre je eigene Weise von Husserls ursprünglichem Programm distanziert“).

<sup>27</sup> Desjarlais, R. & C. J. Throop, op. cit., 88.

<sup>28</sup> Schnegg, M., op. cit., 4.



sense, wants those holes itself in its ontological final phase."<sup>29</sup>

The question remains whether, given the confusion of the various versions, it makes sense at all to engage in a more detailed critical examination of phenomenology, or rather phenomenologies, and attempts to “appropriate” them by anthropology. Too quickly, one could be accused after every half-sentence written of “but Waldenfells wrote something completely different” or “Heidegger does not agree with Husserl at all.” I will therefore try to separate the individual lines of argumentation from each other in such a way that it is clear whose position I am referring to and which points of criticism are aimed at which position. It must always be clear, however, that the discussion of phenomenology at this point cannot, for the most part, satisfy the demand for a truly comprehensive, in-depth critique, which, in Husserl's case, would also have to deal more clearly with the chronological sequence of the various theoretical aspects – after all, the actual goal of this essay is not phenomenology itself, but rather the variant of anthropology that believes it can make use of its “toolbox”.

However, if one wishes to use phenomenology or any kind of phenomenological method for anthropology—and other possible sciences—it seems essential to first clarify whether this philosophy, this “rigorous,” “aprioristic science”<sup>30</sup>, as Husserl says, is based on coherent premises, such as that of “one world”<sup>31</sup> which, especially in anthropology, and with the advent of quantum mechanics, at the latest also in the natural sciences, should no longer be spoken of.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Adorno, T.W., 1970, 41. („Gedacht wird von Husserls Nachfolgern nur noch, um den Gedanken zu entmächtigen und ein gleichwohl verpflichtendes und darum abstraktes Dogma zu kanonisieren. Wenn der kritische Vollzug der zur Phänomenologie geronnenen Motive deren Löcher aufdeckt, die sie durch den Übergang von einem Begriff zum anderen vergebens stopft, so will in gewissem Sinn die Phänomenologie in ihrer ontologischen Endphase jene Löcher selbst.“)

<sup>30</sup> Husserl, E., op. cit., 196.

<sup>31</sup> Husserl, E., op. cit., 130 ff.: „In dieser Weise finde ich mich ... in Beziehung auf die eine und selbe, obschon dem inhaltlichen Bestande nach wechselnde Welt.“ („In this way, I find myself... in relation to one and the same world, even though its content keeps changing.”)

<sup>32</sup> see also: Supp, E., Stranger, quo vadis? Epistemological considerations on culture-confrontational thinking (Fremder, quo vadis? Erkenntnistheoretische Überlegungen zum kulturkonfrontativen Denken), [www.enos-mag.de](http://www.enos-mag.de), 2024

## I – Antinomies of thought

Anyone interested in phenomenology – a term derived from the ancient Greek φαίνόμενον (phainómenon, phenomenon), meaning appearance, that which shows itself or is visible – will find it difficult to ignore the theories of Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician and philosopher born in Moravia, Austria, in the mid-19th century. The term phenomenology had already found its way into German philosophy<sup>33</sup> in the 18th and 19th centuries, for example with Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and is occasionally traced back to the skeptics of the late Middle Ages, but it was Hegel who formulated it in his “Phenomenology of Spirit” at the beginning of the 19th century as one of the foundations of his metaphysical philosophy.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, Husserl and, in a certain sense, his teacher, the German philosopher and psychologist Franz Brentano (1838-1917), are considered the founders of phenomenological philosophy<sup>35</sup>, which is characterized as non- or anti-metaphysical, and thus of the entire phenomenological movement<sup>36</sup>. It is no coincidence that Husserl still called his first attempts at a phenomenological theory “descriptive psychology,” and the spirit of this title flashes up again and again in other works.<sup>37</sup>

In a text he wrote for Encyclopaedia Britannica, Husserl defines his science as follows: “‘Phenomenology’ refers to a novel descriptive method that emerged in philosophy at the turn of the century (from the 19th to the 20th century, E. S.<sup>38</sup>) and an a priori

<sup>33</sup> see also: Pushkareva, M. A., J. G. Fichte als Begründer der Phänomenologie (Fichte as the founder of phenomenology), in: Wissen, Freiheit, Geschichte: Die Philosophie Fichtes im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Band III, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> This refutes all those who dismiss pre-Husserlian phenomenology as undefined or insufficient.

<sup>35</sup> The German philosopher Karl-Heinz Volkmann-Schluck (1914-1981) speaks of the post-metaphysical age (Volkmann-Schluck, K.-H., Die Philosophie Martin Heideggers (Heidegger's philosophy), 1996, 7).

<sup>36</sup> see also: Schütz, A., Collected Papers III Studies in Phenomenological Philosophy, 1966. This movement also includes the German philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels, the German-American publicist Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), the Austro-American sociologist Alfred Schütz (1899-1959), the German philosopher Edith Stein (1891-1942), the German philosopher Hermann Schmitz (1928-2021), and many others, but also scientists who would not claim this affiliation for themselves, but more on that later.

<sup>37</sup> “Practical phenomenological research was first documented a hundred years ago in William James' Principles of Psychology, published in 1890, as a new type of methodological orientation in empirical psychology.” („Praktizierte phänomenologische Forschung hat sich erstmals vor hundert Jahren in den 1890 erschienenen Principles of Psychology von William James als eine neue Art methodischer Orientierung in der empirischen Psychologie dokumentiert.“ [Herzog, M. & C. F. Graumann, op. cit., IX]. The relationship between phenomenology and psychology is still very central in the “fundamental problems” (cf. Husserl, E., 1977 (1992)).

<sup>38</sup> Husserl himself states: “The first philosopher to carry out a phenomenological reduction, albeit only to abandon it again immediately, was Descartes.” („Der erste Philosoph, der eine phänomenologische Reduktion vollzogen hat, freilich sie vollzogen hat, um sie alsbald wieder preiszugeben, war Descartes.“, Husserl, E., op. cit., 54).

science<sup>39</sup> that emerged from it, which is intended to provide the fundamental organon (from the ancient Greek ὄργανον, tool, E. S.) for a strictly scientific philosophy and, as a logical consequence, to enable a methodological reform of all sciences."<sup>40</sup> But that is not the only definition Husserl gives. Holzhey, for example, quotes him from Volume I of his "Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy":

"Phenomenology is ... a purely descriptive discipline that explores the field of transcendently pure consciousness in pure intuition."<sup>41</sup> One wonders, what could be less "purely descriptive" and more determined by social factors and learned patterns of thought than intuition.

The emphasis on the descriptive character<sup>42</sup> of his philosophy also characterizes the demand "(Back) to the things themselves!", which Husserl formulated around 1910<sup>43</sup> and which was later taken up as a maxim by his student Martin Heidegger in his magnum opus "Being and Time"<sup>44</sup>. Heidegger explains: "The title 'phenomenology' expresses a maxim that can be formulated as follows: 'to the things themselves!' ... as opposed to the adoption of only seemingly 'proven concepts' ..."<sup>45</sup>, i. e. prejudices or

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<sup>39</sup> i. e. derived from thought, reason; apriorism is an epistemological school of thought that assumes "that particular, specified knowledge can be justified without reference to experience, or in a narrower sense, that knowledge is possible entirely without experience" („dass bestimmtes Wissen ohne Bezug auf die Erfahrung gerechtfertigt werden kann, oder im engeren Sinn, dass Erkenntnisse gänzlich ohne jede Erfahrung möglich sind“, Wikipedia "Apriorism," [www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki/](http://www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki/)). In "The Idea of Phenomenology," Husserl gives his definition of the a priori: "... a priori (that is, in essence) ..." („... apriori (das ist dem Wesen nach) ...“, Husserl, E., 1986 [2016], 22. Here it would be worth discussing whether defining essence as a priori does not contradict the approach according to which essence is only derived through repeated reductions. It is also interesting that in this text the sequence method-science appears in exactly the opposite order: "Phenomenology: this refers to a science, a connection between scientific disciplines; ... but at the same time and above all a method and a way of thinking: the specifically philosophical way of thinking, the specifically philosophical method." („Phänomenologie: das bezeichnet eine Wissenschaft, einen Zusammenhang von wissenschaftlichen Disziplinen; ... aber zugleich und vor allem eine Methode und Denkhaltung: die spezifisch philosophische Denkhaltung, die spezifisch philosophische Methode.“, *ibid.*)

<sup>40</sup> quoted from Husserl, E., 1927, 196 („Phänomenologie' bezeichnet eine an der Jahrhundertwende in der Philosophie zum Durchbruch gekommene neuartige deskriptive Methode und eine aus ihr hervorgegangene apriorische Wissenschaft, welche dazu bestimmt ist, das prinzipielle Organon für eine streng wissenschaftliche Philosophie zu liefern und in konsequenter Auswirkung eine methodische Reform aller Wissenschaften zu ermöglichen.“).

<sup>41</sup> Holzhey, H., 1991, 6 („Die Phänomenologie ist ... eine rein deskriptive, das Feld des transzendental reinen Bewusstseins in der puren Intuition durchforschende Disziplin.“).

<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty leaves no doubt about the purely descriptive nature of his phenomenology and appears even more radical in this respect than Husserl or Heidegger: "It is a matter of describing, not explaining or analyzing ... Everything I know about the world, even through science, I know through my own perception or through an experience of the world, without which the symbols of science would have no meaning. The entire universe of science is built on the experienced world" ("Il s'agit de décrire, et non pas d'expliquer ni d'analyser ... Tout ce que je sais du monde, même par la science, je le sais à partir d'une vue mienne ou d'une expérience du monde sans laquelle les symboles de la science ne voudraient rien dire. Tout l'univers de la science est construit sur le monde vécu ...), Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945 (2017), 8 f.

<sup>43</sup> cf. Hennigfeld, I., *Phänomenologie und Imagination: Idealisieren und Realisieren*, in: RoSE (Research on Steiner Education, Vol. 0, No. 1, 2018, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Heidegger, M., *Sein und Zeit*, 1927, 27 f.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

preconceptions.<sup>46</sup>

However, “to the things themselves” is not an empiricist or realist statement, but rather a declaration of war on (worldview) ideological philosophy<sup>47</sup>, a term which Husserl uses to describe classical philosophy as a whole, before going on to clarify his efforts to develop a “strictly scientific philosophy”: “The impetus for research must come not from philosophies, but from things and problems,”<sup>48</sup> and further: “To judge things reasonably or scientifically means to orient oneself according to the things themselves, or to go back from words and opinions to the things themselves, to question them in their self-given nature and to set aside all irrelevant prejudices.”<sup>49</sup> What is striking here is the bizarre concept of theory that Husserl develops in this context: “... a piece of pure description before any ‘theory’. Theories, that is to say, preconceptions of every kind...”<sup>50</sup>. Equating theories with preconceptions, perhaps even prejudices, or equating theorylessness with freedom from prejudice, as Husserl postulates, is basically nothing more than an attempt to relativize the entire history of science. However, as will be shown, this ultimately falls back on its author himself.<sup>51</sup>

In stark contrast to Husserl's challenge<sup>52</sup> on classical philosophy, a declaration with an

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<sup>46</sup> Husserl's freedom from prejudice is nothing really new in the history of philosophy: “What Husserl was actually concerned with in his program was by no means a new ideal of philosophy: radically unprejudiced knowledge” (“Worum es Husserl mit seinem Programm eigentlich ging, war ein keineswegs neues Ideal der Philosophie: radikal vorurteilsfreie Erkenntnis“), Held, K., in: Husserl, E. 1927, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Husserl, E., Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft“, in: Logos 1910/11, zitiert nach Hennigfeld, I., 2018, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Husserl, E., Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Psychologie, zitiert nach Hennigfeld, I., 2018, 3 („Nicht von den Philosophien, sondern von den Sachen und Problemen muß der Antrieb zur Forschung ausgehen“).

<sup>49</sup> Husserl, E., Aufsätze und Vorträge (1911-1921), zitiert nach Hennigfeld, I., 2018, 3 („Vernünftig oder wissenschaftlich über Sachen urteilen, das heißt aber, sich nach den Sachen selbst richten, bzw. von den Reden und Meinungen auf die Sachen selbst zurückgehen, sie in ihrer Selbstgegebenheit befragen und alle sachfremden Vorurteile beiseitelegen.“).

<sup>50</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 136 („... ein Stück reiner Beschreibung vor aller ‚Theorie‘. Theorien, das sagt hier Vorurteile jeder Art ...“).

<sup>51</sup> “With the substruction of purely receptive thinking, however, the claim of phenomenology, to which the entire school owed its impact, collapses: that it does not conceive, but rather researches, describes, is not a theory of knowledge, in short, does not bear the stigma of reflective intelligence. The arcane of fundamental ontology, however, being, is the categorical fact reduced to its highest formula, supposedly presenting itself purely ... What is to be disputed is not the immediacy of insight per se, but its hypostasis.” („Mit der Substruktion rein hinnehmenden Denkens jedoch stürzt die Behauptung der Phänomenologie zusammen, der die gesamte Schule ihre Wirkung verdankte: dass sie nicht erdenke, sondern forsche, beschreibe, keine Erkenntnistheorie sei, kurz, nicht das Stigma reflektierender Intelligenz trage. Das Arkanum der Fundamentalontologie aber, das Sein, ist der auf die oberste Formel gebrachte, angeblich rein sich anbietende kategoriale Sachverhalt ... Zu bestreiten ist nicht die Unmittelbarkeit von Einsicht schlechthin, sondern deren Hypostasis.“, Adorno, T. W., 1966, 88).

<sup>52</sup> Adorno comments on this challenge as follows: “The appearance of the concrete is based on the reification of results, not unlike positivist social science, which records the products of social processes as ultimate facts that must be accepted.” („Der Schein des Konkreten beruht auf der Verdinglichung von Resultaten, nicht unähnlich der positivistischen Sozialwissenschaft, welche die Produkte gesellschaftlicher Prozesse als letzte hinzunehmende Tatsachen verzeichnet“, Adorno, T.W., op. cit., 44) And further: “Husserl's attempt to break the spell of reification through philosophical meditation and to ‘get a grip’ on ‘things themselves,’ as the phenomenologists liked to call it, in ‘originary giving intuition’ remains, according to his own intention, ... in agreement with science.” („Husserls Versuch, durch philosophische Meditation den Bann der Verdinglichung zu brechen und in ‚originär gebender

epistemological focus, Heidegger's corresponding definition sounds very different. With his question about the meaning of being<sup>53</sup>, Heidegger moves closer to traditional metaphysics, even though he also takes up Husserl's demand to "go to the things themselves".<sup>54</sup> However, Heidegger then emphasizes: "Phenomenology is a mode of access to and the revealing mode of determination of that which is to become the subject of ontology," and further: "Ontology is only possible as phenomenology. The phenomenological concept of phenomenon means, as that which shows itself, the being of beings, their meaning, their modifications, and their derivatives."<sup>55</sup> Later, with regard to the old philosophical question of the relationship between epistemology and ontology, he states even more decisively: "Taken literally, phenomenology is the science of the being of beings—ontology."<sup>56</sup>

Back to Husserl! Even though the maxim of "things" to which one must return became one of the best-known and apparently most widely accepted formulas in the world of phenomenology, the term remained somewhat ambiguous—ultimately, it remained unclear what "things" actually meant in phenomenological philosophy.

In any case, they are not material "things," as one might assume from the "things" in our everyday language—even if Husserl occasionally uses the term 'things' synonymously

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Anschauung' die ‚Sachen selbst‘, wie die Phänomenologen zu nennen es liebten, ‚in den Griff zu bekommen, bleibt der eigenen Absicht nach ... mit der Wissenschaft einverstanden.“) "Husserl accepts thinking in its reified form ... His program conceives of philosophy as 'rigorous science,' while 'eliminating all natural and human sciences with their entire body of knowledge, precisely as sciences,' ... as well as 'pure logic as mathesis universalis' (Descartes' universal mathematics, E. S.), without which the concept of strict science would have no meaning, to which Husserl nevertheless subjects phenomenology." („Husserl akzeptiert das Denken in seiner verdinglichten Gestalt ... Sein Programm denkt Philosophie als ‚strenge Wissenschaft‘, während der ‚Ausschaltung aller Natur- und Geisteswissenschaften mit ihrem gesamten Erkenntnisbestande, eben als Wissenschaften‘ verfallen, ... ebenso die ‚reine Logik als mathesis universalis‘ (die Descartessche Universalmathematik, E. S.), ohne die jener Begriff strenger Wissenschaft keinen Sinn hätte, dem doch Husserl die Phänomenologie unterwirft“, *ibid.*, 1970, 54 f.).

<sup>53</sup> "The preliminary characteristics of the thematic subject of the investigation (the being of beings, or the meaning of being in general) seem to predetermine its method", („Mit der vorläufigen Charakteristik des thematischen Gegenstandes der Untersuchung (Sein des Seienden, bzw. Sinn des Seins überhaupt) scheint auch schon ihre Methode vorgezeichnet zu sein.“ Heidegger, M., *op. cit.*, 27.)

<sup>54</sup> *op. cit.*, 27 ff.

<sup>55</sup> *op. cit.*, 35 („Ontologie ist nur als Phänomenologie möglich. Der phänomenologische Begriff von Phänomen meint als das Sichzeigende das Sein des Seienden, seinen Sinn, seine Modifikationen und Derivate.“).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 37. Since Husserl and Heidegger, many have attempted to define phenomenology. One such person is the Belgian philosopher Rudolf Bernet, who speaks of a "philosophical current in contemporary philosophy ... that starts from the immediate and intuitive experience of phenomena ..." („philosophischen Strömung in der zeitgenössischen Philosophie ... die von der unmittelbaren und intuitiven Erfahrung von Phänomenen ausgeht ...“) or an attempt "to derive from this the essential characteristics of experience and the essence of what is experienced" without recourse to "certain (...) and ... free from (causal) theories." („daraus die wesentlichen Eigenschaften der Erfahrungen und das Wesen des Erlebten abzuleiten“, ohne Rekurs auf „bestimmte(..) Voraussetzungen aus und .... frei von (kausalen) Theorien“, Bernet, Rudolf, Was kann Phänomenologie heute bedeuten? [What can phenomenology mean today?], [www.information-philosophie.de](http://www.information-philosophie.de), 2023). Rehding and Worreschk, for their part, write: "... phenomenological investigations consider experiences of phenomena with the intention of bringing to light the reason underlying these experiences" („... phänomenologische Untersuchungen betrachten Erlebnisse von Erscheinungen und das mit der Absicht, die diesen Erlebnissen zugrunde liegende Vernunft ans Licht zu bringen“, Rehding, Fynn-Merlin & Johannes C. Worreschk, 2024, 82), which raises the question of whether there really is something like reason behind every phenomenon, a statement that could also be assumed in the realm of religion.

with “objects”<sup>57</sup>—or not solely, and phenomenology is also not a (epistemological) theory out of the theoretical realm of empiricism, realism, or naturalism, as the Wikipedia entry “Husserl” explains: “Husserl's maxim ‘to the things themselves’ must therefore not be misunderstood in a realistic sense, but is Husserl's way of emphasizing transcendentalism in contrast to its interweaving with our everyday attitudes.”<sup>58</sup> For Husserl, memories and fantasies also belong to the ‘things’ or “objects,” which still needs to be explained.

## Things themselves

According to philosopher Holzhey, the question of “things” was and remains controversial even among phenomenologists. Holzhey speaks of a “deep-seated difference in the conception of ‘things themselves’”<sup>59</sup>, whereby for some even during Husserl's lifetime these did not remain “empirical” in themselves, objects of immediate intuition and descriptive perception, but became phenomena whose essence was to be explored ... a “‘philosophy of essence’ – disparagingly referred to by Husserl as ‘picture book phenomenology’ on the one hand,” but which he himself placed at the center of his theory as “essential intuition” (Wesensanschauung)<sup>60</sup>, in which “the analysis of the subjective mode of occurrence receded”.<sup>61</sup> Holzhey describes this as a shift toward the object, whereas Husserl's “things themselves” originally only “appeared in subjective acts of intuitive self-giving, but these acts ... were rooted in human consciousness”<sup>62</sup> We will return to the contradictions in the phenomenological conception of “essence” later – for now, let us simply note that Husserl considers not only things, but also their “eidos,” introduced by Husserl as “essence,” and even products of the imagination to be “originary”, i. e., primordial and not the result of theoretical processes: “If free fiction ... were to lead to the imagination of fundamentally new, e.g., sensory data ... this would not change the originary nature of the corresponding essences: although imagined data

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<sup>57</sup> Husserl, E., *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution und Wissenschaftstheorie sowie das Nachwort zu meinen Ideen*, 1913-2, 150: „Dinge sind wie in der Wahrnehmung, so auch bewusst in Erinnerungen und in erinnerungsähnlichen Vergegenwärtigungen, auch bewusst in freien Phantasien.“ (“Things are as they are perceived, as they are consciously remembered and in memory-like recollections, and also consciously in free fantasies.”)

<sup>58</sup> Wikipedia, „Husserl“, [www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki](http://www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki).

<sup>59</sup> Holzhey, H., 1991, 14 („tiefliegende(n) Differenz in der Auffassung der ‚Sachen selbst‘“).

<sup>60</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-1, 101 f.

<sup>61</sup> Holzhey, H., op. cit. („... die Analyse der subjektiven Gegebenheitsweise zurück[trat]“).

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* („in subjektiven Vollzügen anschaulicher Selbstgebung zum Vorschein (kämen), diese Vollzüge aber ... im menschlichen Bewusstsein beheimatet (seien)“).

are never, ever real data.”<sup>63</sup>

Incidentally, Husserl's “things themselves” were nothing really new in European philosophy and had already been thoroughly ‘rejected’ by Hegel. “The thing itself,” according to German philosopher and Hegel specialist Georg W. Bertram, “is (in Hegel, E. S.) nothing that an individual can concern themselves with on their own. The thing itself requires interaction between individuals who relate to this thing within the framework of a community, so that the interactions within the community can be understood as the substance of the individual”<sup>64</sup>, and Hegel himself, referring to “things themselves,” speaks of a “deception of himself and others.”<sup>65</sup>

The phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels also warns quite clearly against a too trivial view of “things themselves”: “That one must start from the thing itself and not from preconceived opinions unrelated to the thing ... these are aspects of research that even today are not simply taken for granted. But if phenomenology were nothing more than a school of seeing and letting oneself be seen, ... it would be merely a kind of methodological propaedeutic, and not, as Husserl imagined, a philosophical phenomenology with fundamental implications for the sciences”<sup>66</sup>. Waldenfels is certainly right on the question of “preconceptions” – irrelevant or not – of which anthropology in particular should at least be aware in its theory formation. But more on this and on the question of a priori science in the chapter on the phenomenological method.

The focus on “things themselves” actually suggests that phenomenology is an empiricist theory of knowledge—this misunderstanding is nourished not least by Husserl's statement quoted in the introduction, that phenomenology is a (purely) “descriptive method.” – with its own inherent problem that natural sensory, empirical perception and

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<sup>63</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-1, 105 („Würde die freie Fiktion ... zur Einbildung von prinzipiell neuartigen, z. B. sinnlichen Daten führen ... so würde das an der originären Gegebenheit der entsprechenden Wesen nichts ändern: obschon eingebildete Data nie und nimmer wirkliche Data sind.“).

<sup>64</sup> Bertram, G. W., Hegels ‚Phänomenologie des Geistes‘, 2021, 153 („Die Sache selbst ist nichts, um das es einem Individuum von sich aus gehen kann. Die Sache selbst erfordert eine Interaktion von Individuen, die sich im Rahmen einer Gemeinschaft auf diese Sache beziehen, so dass die Interaktionen im Rahmen der Gemeinschaft als Substanz des Individuums zu verstehen sind“).

<sup>65</sup> Hegel, G. W. F., op. cit., 323 („Betrug seiner selbst und der anderen“).

<sup>66</sup> Waldenfels, B., Phänomenologie unter eidetischen, transzendentalen und strukturalen Gesichtspunkten, in: Herzog, M. & C. F. Graumann, Sinn und Erfahrung – Phänomenologische Methoden in den Humanwissenschaften, 1991, 65 („Um ins Klare zu kommen, suchen wir die letzte Quelle auf, aus der die Generalthese der Welt, die ich in der natürlichen Einstellung vollziehe, ihre Nahrung schöpft ... Offenbar ist diese letzte Quelle die sinnliche Erfahrung. Es genügt aber für unsere Zwecke, die sinnliche Wahrnehmung zu betrachten, die unter den erfahrenden Akten in gewissem Sinne die Rolle einer Urerfahrung spielt, aus der alle anderen erfahrenden Akte einen Hauptteil ihrer begründenden Kraft ziehen.“).

understanding perception<sup>67</sup> are not identical<sup>68</sup>, a question that Husserl at least does not answer when he says: "To clarify this, let us seek out the ultimate source from which the general thesis of the world, which I carry out in my natural attitude, draws its nourishment ... Obviously, this ultimate source is sensory experience. But for our purposes, it suffices to consider sensory perception, which, among the acts of experience, plays in a certain sense the role of a primordial experience from which all other acts of experience draw a major part of their constitutive power."<sup>69</sup>

When reading the various phenomenological approaches, one inevitably notices a certain back-and-forth between ontology and epistemology, between apriorism and freedom from prejudice, between sensory perception and understanding appropriation. And when Waldenfels states that a "phenomenology that no longer builds on a fundamental or even all-encompassing logos ... takes on the characteristics of anthropology, a study of foreignness ..."<sup>70</sup> or even "teleology"<sup>71</sup>, he is right to criticize what appears to be a pre-Hegelian confusion of logic and genesis in phenomenology and among phenomenologists.

In order to arrive at the central tenets of phenomenology, however, many facts and concepts must first be redefined—in contrast to their common everyday meanings—a task to which Husserl and Heidegger devote considerable space. The introduction to this essay already mentioned a striking use of language that is neither a marginal problem nor a product of chance. Without this linguistic peculiarity, this redefinition of terms such as fact, factuality, reality, world, phenomenon, or even "eidos," to which we will return later, the entire field of phenomenology is simply incomprehensible, not to say meaningless. Without taking this into account, we cannot grasp "phenomenon,"

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<sup>67</sup> Hegel speaks of the duality of sensuality and reason, of sensual and rational knowledge, whereby the term sensuality sounds somewhat misleading (cf. Jaeschke, W., 2020, 49 & 57).

<sup>68</sup> see also: Wikipedia "Phenomenology (methodology)," [www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki/](http://www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki/) "If a science is entirely devoted to the description and classification of phenomena or appearances (descriptive science), it proceeds solely according to phenomenological methodology" („Ist eine Wissenschaft gänzlich der Beschreibung und Einteilung der Phänomene oder Erscheinungen gewidmet (deskriptive Wissenschaft), so verfährt sie allein nach phänomenologischer Methodik“), and also Vittorio De Palma: "Husserl's phenomenology can be considered a form of radical empiricism ... since it holds ... that sensuous experience is the foundation and the source of justification of knowledge ..." („Husserls Phänomenologie kann als eine Art radikaler Empirismus gelten ..., da sie daran festhält, dass die sinnliche Erfahrung Grundlage und Quelle des Wissens ist ...“, De Palma, V., Phenomenology as Radical Empiricism, in: *Studia Phaenomenologica* XII, 2012)

<sup>69</sup> Husserl, E. 1913-2, 160 („Um ins Klare zu kommen, suchen wir die letzte Quelle auf, aus der die Generalthesis der Welt, die ich in der natürlichen Einstellung vollziehe, ihre Nahrung schöpft ... Offenbar ist diese letzte Quelle die sinnliche Erfahrung. Es genügt aber für unsere Zwecke, die sinnliche Wahrnehmung zu betrachten, die unter den erfahrenden Akten in gewissem Sinne die Rolle einer Urerfahrung spielt, aus der alle anderen erfahrenden Akte einen Hauptteil ihrer begründenden Kraft ziehen.“).

<sup>70</sup> Waldenfels, B., 1991, 82 (eine „... Phänomenologie, die nicht mehr auf einen grundlegenden oder gar allumgreifenden Logos bauen ... (könne), ... (nehme) Züge einer Ethnologie, einer Fremdeitslehre ...“).

<sup>71</sup> op. cit., 745.



“perception,” “appearance,” or even “essence” in their intended or actual meaning.

## Definition frenzy

Heidegger's favorite dictum in this context seems to be “to call,” or more precisely, “we call.” “That being itself, to which existence can relate in one way or another and always relates in some way, we call existence,” he writes at the very beginning of “Being and Time”<sup>72</sup>. And a little later, it sounds rather voluntaristic: “We call such showing itself ‘appearing’”<sup>73</sup>; whereby Heidegger cannot resolve the antinomy of the real (“showing itself”) and illusion (‘appearing’) even in the instruction, “We assign the title ‘phenomenon’ terminologically to the positive and original meaning of φαινόμενον (phainómenon, E. S.) and distinguish phenomenon from appearance as the privative modification of phenomenon.”<sup>74</sup> He leaves the reader wondering whether this definition is arbitrarily chosen, whether it has explanatory value, or whether it perhaps simply follows the motto “What is not fitting is made fitting!” Occasionally, these definitions seem slightly tautological anyway, as when Heidegger writes: “Being is that which, in its being, relates to this being in an understanding way ...” However, these determinations of existence must now be seen and understood a priori on the basis of the constitution of being, which we call being-in-the-world. It is therefore not surprising that such passages give the impression that phenomenological fare consists of truisms: “Being-in-the-world as the fundamental constitution of existence.”<sup>75</sup>

The secret behind so much wording and definitional effort, not to say definitional frenzy, is difficult to fathom, and one is tempted to assume that it may be nothing more than a seemingly logical but essentially meaningless sequence of statements whose sole purpose is to lead from “things”, passing by “facts,” “factualities,” or ‘realities’ to “phenomena”. The statement “... the actuality of the fact of one's own existence (is) ontologically fundamentally different from the actual occurrence of a type of rock. We call the actuality of the fact of existence, as which every existence is, facticity”<sup>76</sup>, it is

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<sup>72</sup> Heidegger, M., 1927, 12 („Das Sein selbst, zu dem das Dasein sich so oder so verhalten kann und immer irgendwie verhält, nennen wir Existenz“).

<sup>73</sup> op. cit., 12 („Das Sein selbst, zu dem das Dasein sich so oder so verhalten kann und immer irgendwie verhält, nennen wir Existenz“).

<sup>74</sup> op. cit., 29 („Wir weisen den Titel ‚Phänomen‘ terminologisch der positiven und ursprünglichen Bedeutung von φαινόμενον zu und unterscheiden Phänomen von Schein als der privativen Modifikation von Phänomen“).

<sup>75</sup> op. cit., 52 f. („Das In-der-Welt-sein überhaupt als Grundverfassung des Daseins“).

<sup>76</sup> op. citf. („... die Tatsächlichkeit der Tatsache des eigenen Daseins (ist) ontologisch grundverschieden vom tatsächlichen Vorkommen einer Gesteinsart. Die Tatsächlichkeit des Faktums Dasein, als welches jedes Dasein ist, nennen wir Faktizität“).

emphasized that Heidegger's ontological facts have nothing or not much to do with our everyday facts. Irrelevant, one might conclude, were it not for the fact that these apodictic definitions become axioms for further elaboration.

Apodictic and, should be added, apologetic, when Husserl emphasizes: "I find 'reality,' as the word itself suggests, to be existing and accept it as it presents itself to me, also as existing. All doubt and rejection of the facts of the natural world does not change the general thesis of the natural world. 'The' world is always there as reality; at most, it is 'different' here or there than I thought it was, this or that is ... 'appearance' 'hallucination'..."<sup>77</sup> It is the description of the lifeworld as unquestioned (sic!) reality that removes any possibility of criticism from the observation or even the simple perception of this reality: this apologetic character of "reality" becomes particularly problematic in Heidegger, in political terms, as will be shown. Such an attitude is not even acceptable when it comes to nature and the natural sciences – nor was it in Husserl's and Heidegger's time, when quantum physics had already addressed the existence of different natural laws for the "large" and the microscopically "small" (particle) world.<sup>78</sup>

In his examination of Husserl, Adorno aptly characterizes this linguistic frenzy of redefinition: "Husserl, however, does not open up the abandonment of empiricism to an undiminished insight into such connections, but rather repeats with a shrug the hackneyed prejudice that everything depends on one's point of view. The recognition of the factual is not taken so seriously because it remains tainted with the mark of randomness anyway. ... This modesty is as false as its complement, the hubris of the absolute"<sup>79</sup>, whereby he addresses another point that characterizes Husserl's understanding of facts, the randomness of facts<sup>80</sup>: "Individual being is ... 'random' ... But the meaning of this randomness, which is called actuality, is limited in that it is correlatively related to a necessity that does not merely signify the factual existence of a valid rule for the arrangement of spatial-temporal facts, but has the character of

<sup>77</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 137 („Die ‚Wirklichkeit‘, das sagt schon das Wort, finde ich als daseiende vor und nehme sie, wie sie sich mir gibt, auch als daseiende hin. Alle Bezweiflung und Verwerfung von Gegebenheiten der natürlichen Welt ändert nichts an der Generalthese der natürlichen Welt. ‚Die‘ Welt ist als Wirklichkeit immer da, sie ist höchstens hier oder dort ‚anders‘ als ich vermeinte, das oder jenes ist ... ‚Schein‘. ‚Halluzination‘...“).

<sup>78</sup> Elsewhere too, Husserl makes statements that are no longer tenable today, at least, but perhaps were not tenable even during the philosopher's lifetime. For example, when he writes: "A thing that is not spatial, a thing that has no real properties, would be nonsense" (Husserl, E., 1977, [1992], 47), and "All bodies ... are 'extended'" (Husserl, E., 1913-1, 109), which contradicts the discovery of massless and, above all, spaceless elementary particles.

<sup>79</sup> Adorno, T. W., op. cit., 93 („Husserl jedoch eröffnet die Preisgabe der Empirie nicht die ungeschmälerte Einsicht in dergleichen Zusammenhänge, sondern er wiederholt achselzuckend das ausgelaugte Vorurteil, es käme alles auf den Standpunkt an. Mit der Erkenntnis des Faktischen wird es nicht so genau genommen, weil sie ohnehin mit dem Mal der Zufälligkeit behaftet bleibe. ... Diese Bescheidenheit ist falsch wie ihr Komplement, die Hybris des Absoluten“)

<sup>80</sup> This point will be discussed in more detail later. Here is just a note on Husserl's understanding of facts: "... pure essential truths do not contain the slightest assertion about facts, so even from them alone, not the slightest factual truth can be deduced." („... reine Wesenswahrheiten enthalten nicht die mindeste Behauptung über Tatsachen, also ist auch aus ihnen allein nicht die geringfügigste Tatsachenwahrheit zu erschließen“, Husserl, E., 1913-1, 105)

essential necessity and thus relates to essential generality."<sup>81</sup> Husserl had addressed this randomness of the factual early on, giving his philosophy an equally distinct metaphysical touch, as is the case with his description of "eidetic" reality as the isolation (Vereinzelung) of an essential fact.<sup>82</sup>

His attempt to grapple with causal metaphysics thus backfires. If randomness really has the "character of essential necessity," then isn't causality, metaphysical or not, of theories and axioms that Husserl actually wanted to overcome with his philosophy or, as Rehding and Worreschk put it, "detach from epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions"<sup>83</sup>, being reintroduced through the back door? Husserl replaces the old philosophical truths with new ones, at least as unproven, at a time when there is already talk of different coexisting "truths" or "laws" in the natural world. The result is the aforementioned strange mixture of descriptive epistemology and metaphysical ontology.

It is this contradiction between aspiration and result that characterizes Husserl's theory in many respects. When he writes: "The complexes of my manifoldly changing spontaneities of consciousness of inquiring observation, of explicating and conceptualizing ... in short, of theorizing consciousness in its various forms and stages"<sup>84</sup>, is he not reintroducing through the back door precisely that theoretical consciousness, i. e., the theoretical processing of perceptions, which he actually wanted to keep "outside"? It is true that he would like to "exclude" this theoretical questioning—more on that later<sup>85</sup>—but this then proves to be the great illusion of phenomenology and

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<sup>81</sup> op. cit., 100 („Individuelles Sein ist ... ‚zufällig‘ ... Aber der Sinn dieser Zufälligkeit, die da Tatsächlichkeit heißt, begrenzt sich darin, dass sie korrelativ bezogen ist auf eine Notwendigkeit, die nicht den bloßen faktischen Bestand einer geltenden Regel der Zusammenordnung räumlich-zeitlicher Tatsachen besagt, sondern den Charakter der Wesens-Notwendigkeit und damit Beziehung auf Wesens-Allgemeinheit hat.“)

<sup>82</sup> op. cit., 108 f.: "The fact that is posited as real is then a fact insofar as it is an individual reality, but it is an eidetic necessity insofar as it is the isolation of a universal essence." "... every individual object ... (belongs) ... to an essential component (as its essence), just as, conversely, every essence corresponds to possible individuals, which would be its factual isolations ..." („Der als wirklich gesetzte Sachverhalt ist dann Tatsache, sofern er individueller Wirklichkeitsverhalt ist, er ist aber eidetische Notwendigkeit, sofern er Vereinzelung einer Wesensallgemeinheit ist.“ „... jedem individuellen Gegenstand ... (gehört) ... ein Wesensbestand (zu) als sein Wesen, wie umgekehrt jedem Wesen mögliche Individuen entsprechen, die seine faktischen Vereinzelungen wären ...“)

<sup>83</sup> op. cit., 108. f. („Der als wirklich gesetzte Sachverhalt ist dann Tatsache, sofern er individueller Wirklichkeitsverhalt ist, er ist aber eidetische Notwendigkeit, sofern er Vereinzelung einer Wesensallgemeinheit ist.“ „... jedem individuellen Gegenstand ... (gehört) ... ein Wesensbestand (zu) als sein Wesen, wie umgekehrt jedem Wesen mögliche Individuen entsprechen, die seine faktischen Vereinzelungen wären ...“)

<sup>84</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 134 („Auf diese Welt, die Welt, in der ich mich finde und die zugleich meine Umwelt ist, beziehen sich die Komplexe meiner mannigfach wechselnden Spontanitäten des Bewusstseins des forschenden Betrachtens, des Explizierens und Auf-Begriffe-bringens ... kurzum des theoretisierenden Bewusstseins in seinen verschiedenen Formen und Stufen.“)

<sup>85</sup> Just this much in advance: "The universal epoché with regard to the world becoming conscious (its 'bracketing') excludes from the phenomenological field the world that is absolutely real for the subject in question, but in its place comes the world that is conscious (perceived, remembered, judged, thought, evaluated, etc.) world 'as such', the 'world in brackets' or, which is the same thing, the respective sense of consciousness in its various modes (sense of perception, sense of memory, etc.) takes the place of the world or the individual worldly realm par excellence." („Die universale Epoché hinsichtlich der bewusst werdenden Welt (ihre ‚Einklammerung‘) schaltet aus dem phänomenologischen Feld die für das betreffende Subjekt schlechthin seiende Welt aus, aber an ihre Stelle tritt die

the anthropology inspired by it.<sup>86</sup>

Like chance or fact, the “world” of phenomenologists is neither that of our everyday understanding nor that of metaphysical philosophy. It is not a space that exists independently of humans—or, if you will, a space-time continuum—but rather “... the total embodiment of objects of possible experience and experiential knowledge, of objects that are recognizable in correct theoretical thinking on the basis of current experiences”.<sup>87</sup>

This said, it must remain Husserl's secret how he wants to bring “the world in which I find myself” and in which “the complexes of my manifold changing spontaneities of consciousness of inquiring observation, of explicating and conceptualizing ... in short, of theorizing consciousness ...”<sup>88</sup> into harmony with the demand for a “completely ‘theory-free’”<sup>89</sup> experience of the world. With the suggestion to “bracket” all theory, this is difficult to achieve, as will be shown. It also remains unclear whether Husserl only wants to bracket or eliminate theory, theoretical preconceptions, or whether he also wants to eliminate empiricism per se, which he probably considers “impure.” In his “Grundprobleme”, he writes quite explicitly: “The problem of eliminating the empirical as well as the essence of nature” and asks the question: “Can we not adopt an attitude such that the empirical, the peculiarity of the given natural attitude, remains completely excluded, in such a way that its essence as the essence of nature also remains

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so und so bewusste (wahrgenommene, erinnerte, beurteilte, gedachte, gewertete etc.) Welt ‚als solche‘, die ‚Welt in Klammern‘ oder, was dasselbe, es tritt an die Stelle der Welt bzw. des einzelnen Weltlichen schlechthin der jeweilige Bewusstseinsinn in seinen verschiedenen Modis (Wahrnehmungssinn, Erinnerungssinn usw.).“, Husserl, E., 1927, 201 f.)

<sup>86</sup> („In-sein ist ... der formale existenziale Ausdruck des Seins des Daseins, das die wesenhafte Verfassung des In-der-Welt-seins hat. Das ‚Sein bei‘ der Welt ... ist ein im In-Sein fundiertes Existenzial“ und weiter. „Das ‚Sein bei‘ der Welt als Existenzial meint nie so etwas wie das Beisammen-vorhanden-sein von vorkommenden Dingen.“

„Zwei Seiende, die innerhalb der Welt vorhanden und überdies an ihnen selbst weltlos sind, können sich nie ‚berühren‘“, Heidegger, M., 1927, 55.) . Adorno comments in this context: “... Husserl's εἶδη, which then became existentials in Heidegger's ‘Being and Time’ ...” („...die Husserlsche εἶδη (eidos: Art, Spezies, E. S:), aus denen dann beim Heidegger von ‚Sein und Zeit‘ Existenzialien wurden ...“, Adorno, T. W., 1966, 70)

<sup>87</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-1, 99 („... der Gesamtbegriff von Gegenständen möglicher Erfahrung und Erfahrungserkenntnis, von Gegenständen, die aufgrund aktueller Erfahrungen in richtigem theoretischen Denken erkennbar sind.“). Merleau-Ponty puts it this way: “We must not ask ourselves whether we really perceive a world; on the contrary, we must say: the world is what we perceive.” (“Il ne faut donc pas se demander si nous percevons vraiment un monde, il faut dire au contraire : le monde est cela que nous percevons.”, Merleau-Ponty, M., 1945 (2017), 16 f.) And further: “The world is not what I think, but what I live” (“Le monde est non pas ce que je pense, mais ce que je vis, ...”, op. cit., 17), whereby one must first arrive at this contrast between thinking and living, as if we could think without living or live without thinking. Adorno senses where this leads: “... through the form of phenomenological description borrowed from the sciences, which apparently adds nothing to it, it (thinking, E. S.) changes precisely within itself. Thinking is expelled from thinking.” (“... „... durch die den Wissenschaften entlehnte Form der phänomenologischen Deskription, die ihm scheinbar nichts hinzufügt, ändert es sich gerade in sich selber. Denken wird aus Denken ausgetrieben.“ Adorno, T. W., 1970, 56).

<sup>88</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 134 („... die Welt, in der ich mich befinde“ und in der sich „die Komplexe meiner mannigfache wechselnden Spontanitäten des Bewusstseins des forschenden Betrachtens, des Explizierens und Auf-Begriffe-Bringens ... kurzum des theoretisierenden Bewusstseins ...“).

<sup>89</sup> op. cit., 143 („... vollkommen ‚theoriefrei‘ genommen ...“).

excluded, while on the other hand components remain that enter into the essence of nature, or into nature itself in individuo?”<sup>90</sup>

Ergo, for phenomenologists, the world is what humans perceive of it, regardless of and in clear contradiction to the many findings that theoretical physics, for example, has derived from purely abstract (mathematical), often long-standing, non-evidence-based, non-empirically verified and unverifiable trains of thought or theories, i. e., explicitly not from immediate (sensory) perception, and regardless of the fact that Husserl himself recognizes these natural sciences, whose findings he thus ignores, as “sciences of the world”<sup>91</sup> in practically the same breath. We have already quoted Adorno's characterization as “contradictory.”

### Originary and meaningful?

But what lies behind these reclassifications and redefinitions? Husserl arrives at his conception of “world”, of reality, by fixing perception and cognition on a first person resp. a first-person-perspective, even if this first person can act as “many” in a social context<sup>92</sup>: “We begin our considerations as human beings of natural life (whatever that may mean for essentially social creatures, E. S.), imagining, judging, feeling, willing.” Husserl proceeds from a “world ... endlessly spread out in space ...”, disregarding the fact that the “endless” as well as other abstractions elude the (sensual) perception or concrete imagination of every first person – i. e., the human mind.<sup>93</sup>

It is therefore probably no coincidence that Husserl's definition of (originary) perception is so vague: “... the originary giving experience is perception, the word understood in the ordinary sense”.<sup>94</sup> Or, as Held puts it: “Everything that can be meaningfully discussed

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<sup>90</sup> Husserl, E., 1977 (1992), 45 („Können wir nicht eine Einstellung gewinnen derart, dass das Empirische, das Eigentümliche der Gegebenheit der natürlichen Einstellung, ganz ausgeschaltet bleibt, und zwar so, dass auch sein Wesen als Wesen von Natur ausgeschaltet bleibt, während andererseits doch Komponenten erhalten bleiben, die in das Wesen von Natur, bzw. in die Natur selbst in individuo eingehen?“).

<sup>91</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-1, 99 („... Wissenschaften von der Welt ...“).

<sup>92</sup> cf. Schütz, A., 1966, XV f.

<sup>93</sup> cf. also: Supp, E., 2024, 11: “Understanding the unfamiliar seems to be one of our most difficult tasks in everyday life and in science, and for good reason, as we shall see. It resembles our inability to comprehend and imagine certain abstract categories that our brain can deal with through abstraction as concrete realities: infinity, for example—a quantity that we even calculate with in mathematical models—or eternity, beginning, end, nothingness, or its counterpart, indeterminate being, which only becomes something through existence in Hegel.”

<sup>94</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-1, 98 („... die originär gebende Erfahrung ist die Wahrnehmung, das Wort in dem gewöhnlichen Sinne verstanden ...“).

must be accessible to me in some specific ways as originary reality”.<sup>95</sup> It remains unclear whether this really refers to sensory perception—the agent being the so-called limbic system (amygdala) of the brain, which “translates” its perceptions into physical feelings—or to understanding through the neocortex with its stored models or simulations<sup>96</sup>; a little more definitional zeal would have been helpful here. This is all the more so since Husserl also describes the result of his “reductions,” i. e., the result of a conscious process of abstraction or elimination of everything transcendental, as “originary”; but we will come back to that later. Heidegger, incidentally, takes a clearer stance on sensory perception, which he alone attests to as having truth content: “‘True’ in the Greek sense is ... the simple, sensory perception of something.”<sup>97</sup>

Adorno reserves some of his harshest criticism for Husserl's concept of the “originary”: “Rather, the supposedly originary concepts, especially those of epistemology, as they appear in Husserl, are all and necessarily mediated or – in traditional scientific parlance – ‘presuppositional’. The concept of the absolute first itself is open to criticism ... Any attempt to assign this right (to be first, E. S.) to a privileged category becomes entangled in antinomies.”<sup>98</sup> And further: “In the principle claimed to be philosophically first, everything is supposed to be subsumed, regardless of whether this principle is called being or thinking, subject or object, essence or facticity ... And every general principle of a first, even that of factuality in radical empiricism, contains abstraction within itself”<sup>99</sup>, i. e., thought processes with the help of the neocortex and thus far more than just perception. To conclude: “Even that empiricism could not claim a single thing existing here and now, no fact as the first, but only the principle of factuality in general. As a concept, the first and immediate is always mediated and therefore not the first.”<sup>100</sup> “In that the first of philosophy must always already contain everything, the mind seizes

<sup>95</sup> in: Husserl, E., 1927, 23 („Alles, wovon sich sinnvoll reden lässt, muss mir in irgendwelchen spezifischen Weisen originärer Gegebenheit zugänglich sein.“).

<sup>96</sup> cf. Barrett, L. F., *How Emotions are Made – The Secret Life of the Brain*, 2017 und Barrett, L. F., *Seven and a Half Lessons about the Brain*, 2021

<sup>97</sup> Heidegger, M., 1927, 33 („Wahr‘ ist im griechischen Sinne ... das schlichte, sinnliche Vernehmen von etwas.“).

<sup>98</sup> Adorno, T. W., op. cit., 14 f. („Vielmehr sind die vorgeblich originären Begriffe, zumal die der Erkenntnistheorie, als welche sie bei Husserl auftreten, allesamt und notwendig vermittelt oder – nach hergebracht wissenschaftlicher Redeweise – ‚voraussetzungsvoll‘. Zur Kritik steht der Begriff des absolut Ersten selber ... Jeglicher Versuch, einer privilegierten Kategorie dies Recht (Erste zu sein, E. S.) zuzuspielen, verfängt sich in Antinomien.“).

<sup>99</sup> op cit., 15. “The process of abstraction, or rather the contradiction between abstraction and eidetic thinking, is discussed in greater detail. Adorno's scathing comment: “The mechanism of abstraction, hidden from itself, tends immanently toward the same ontology that it works against.” [“Der Abstraktionsprozess, eigentlich der Widerspruch zwischen Abstraktion und Eidetik kommt noch ausführlicher zur Sprache. Adornos ätzender Kommentar: “Der sich selbst verborgene Abstraktionsmechanismus neigt immanent zur gleichen Ontologie, der er entgegenarbeitet.“ ] op cit., 29).

<sup>100</sup> op cit., 15 f. („Selbst jener Empirismus könnte kein einzelnes jetzt und hier Seiendes, kein Faktum als Erstes reklamieren, sondern einzig das Prinzip von Faktischem überhaupt. Als Begriff ist das Erste und Unmittelbare allemal vermittelt und darum nicht das Erste.“)

what is not like itself, makes it like itself, makes it its possession."<sup>101</sup> "Untruth of the idea of the first itself. The first must become ever more abstract in the philosophy of origin; but the more abstract it becomes, the less it explains, the less it is suitable as a foundation."<sup>102</sup>

The idea that "reality," "truth," or 'factuality' only have perceived validity, only appear to be "originary," is a bold thesis in any case. Too many are facts or events that we do not (yet) know about, to allow us say that they do not originary exist or at least have no relevance for us. There is no need to speculate about possible asteroids that have not yet been discovered but are already hurtling towards Earth on a collision course. Non-existent? Irrelevant to us?<sup>103</sup> It is enough to think, for example, of (mathematical-physical) phenomena such as infinity, which we calculate with but of which we have no real, concrete idea (and cannot have). Or to the fact that many theories in theoretical physics, especially quantum mechanics, were "proven" mathematically, i. e., purely abstractly, long before they were verified in laboratory experiments. Non-existent? Irrelevant? Anyone who wrote this in the 1920s may claim the mercy of having been born (too) early, but to emphasize this at a time when we are reading that scientists conducting research on quantum entanglement<sup>104</sup> have now discovered a speed beyond human imagination<sup>105</sup> seems very daring.

Evidence, incidentally, is another of the central concepts in phenomenology, referred to by Held as "the fundamental methodological requirement of evidence..." and again classified in a very tautological manner: "Phenomenology as a method is the attempt to bring about evidence through evidence."<sup>106</sup> Science, and especially the "rigorous science" of phenomenology, which represents Husserl's ideal, should be guided by this evidence. How vague this concept is once again becomes clear when the

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<sup>101</sup> op cit., 17 („Indem das Erste der Philosophie immer schon alles enthalten soll, beschlagnahmt der Geist, was ihm nicht gleicht, macht es gleich, zum Besitz.“).

<sup>102</sup> op cit., 21 („Unwahrheit der Idee des Ersten selber. Das Erste muss der Ursprungsphilosophie immer abstrakter werden; je abstrakter aber es wird, desto weniger erklärt es mehr, desto weniger taugt es zur Begründung.“).

<sup>103</sup> Anthropologist Michael Schnegg seems to see it this way when he says that Husserl "... went beyond Kant in two different ways. First, he rejected the idea of the thing-in-itself and emphasized that even if such a 'real world' existed, it was not really relevant. " (Schnegg, M. op. cit., 5)

<sup>104</sup> This refers to the seemingly paradoxical discovery in particle physics that entangled elementary particles assume the same properties in real time, so to speak, even if they are light years apart from each other.

<sup>105</sup> cf. [www.spiritsciencecentral.com/scientists-clock-quantum-magic-measuring-entanglement-in-ridiculously-tiny-time-slices/](http://www.spiritsciencecentral.com/scientists-clock-quantum-magic-measuring-entanglement-in-ridiculously-tiny-time-slices/)

<sup>106</sup> in: Husserl, E. 1927, 18 (The evidence does not sound much more coherent in Merleau-Ponty either. "More generally, we must not ask ourselves whether our evidence is really true or whether, caused by a malfunction of our mind, what is evident to us is illusory in relation to some kind of truth in itself: For when we speak of illusions, we have already recognized illusions, and we could only do so in the name of a perception that proved to be true at the same moment..." ("Plus généralement, il ne faut pas se demander si nos évidences sont bien des vérités, ou si, par un vice de notre esprit, ce qui est évident pour nous ne serait pas illusoire à l'égard de quelque vérité en soi: for if we speak of illusion, it is because we have recognized illusions, and we could only do so in the name of some perception that, at the same moment, proved to be true ...", Merleau-Ponty, M., 1945 [2017], 16 f.)).

phenomenological method is presented as a recourse to evident phenomena “that are given with absolute certainty through intuition”<sup>107</sup>. “Rigorous” science through intuition? Scientific work and absolute certainty based on gut feeling? Understanding through sensory perception? Or is there another way to resolve such antinomies? Adorno apparently knows of none: “The appearance of concreteness was the fascination of the (phenomenological, E. S.) school. The intellectual should be vivid, immediately certain. The concepts are given a sensual tone.”<sup>108</sup>

What emerges here once again is the strongly individualistic and subjective nature of Husserl's theory of knowledge. How else could the recourse to “intuition” be explained? Perhaps through the phenomenon of mass emotions, such as those that poisoned minds in Germany between 1933 and 1945?

The subjectivistic character<sup>109</sup> is particularly evident in the intertwining of evidence with the principle of intentionality. In philosophy, intention or intentionality is a term from 14th-century scholasticism that was revived by Brentano for philosophical discussion. Here, too, however, common usage can be misleading when attempting to understand this intertwining. An intention is actually a purpose, but it would be nothing more than ordinary human hubris to describe every perception, every experience, even if only passive, every recognition, every understanding or learning as purposeful and, above all, deliberate, i. e., intentionally purposeful; the world, including the world of science, is structured and understood by too many chance discoveries, and human ontogenesis is equipped with too many playful, random, but not intentional elements.

## Subjectivistically intertwined

<sup>107</sup> Wikipedia „eidetische Reduktion“, [www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki/2](http://www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki/2)

<sup>108</sup> Adorno, T. W., op. cit., 43 („Der Schein der Konkretion war das Faszinosum der (phänomenologischen, E. S.) Schule. Geistiges sollte anschaulich, unmittelbar gewiss sein. Die Begriffe werden sinnlich getönt.“).

<sup>109</sup> cf. Held, K., op. cit., 14: “Thus, in everything I encounter in my experiences, adventures, or thoughts, I am referred to situations in which what I have experienced, adventured, or thought originary—Husserl says “originary”—appeared in the sphere of my experience, adventure, or thought, or could appear in it in an originary way ... In this sense, everything that appears originary has a subject-relative character ... presenting itself to a ... subject.“ ( „So weiß ich mich bei allem, was mir in meinen Erfahrungen, Erlebnissen oder Gedanken begegnen man, verwiesen auf Situationen, in denen das Erfahrene, Erlebte, Gedachte ursprünglich – Husserl sagt: „originär“ – im Umkreis meines Erfahrens, Erlebens, Denkens aufgetaucht ist oder darin in originärer Weise auftreten könnte ... In diesem Sinne hat alles originär Erscheinende einen subjekt-relativen Charakter ... sich einem ... Subjekt darzubieten.“ ). How little this subjectivist ‘originary’ is suitable as a criterion of knowledge becomes clear in the example of the climate, which Held himself cites: “... the climate of a country comes to me in a completely different way than the content of a mathematical theorem ...” (op. cit., 15) So it is the climate, of all things, and not the weather, that is supposed to be intuitively and originary experienceable? The climate, which, unlike rain and sunshine, heat and cold, etc., is undoubtedly nothing more than a man-made statistical abstraction.



No, this intentionality has nothing to do with “purpose” or “intentionally”; on the other hand, it is ‘more’ than what is often explained in philosophy as “referring to something” or “acting on something”. In phenomenology, it rather refers to the directedness of the consciousness. “In general, it is part of the essence of every actual cogito (thinking, E. S.) to be conscious of something”<sup>110</sup>, writes Husserl, adding: “Any experiences that ... have essential characteristics in common are also called ‘intentional experiences’; insofar as they are conscious of something, they are said to be ‘intentionally related’ to that something.”<sup>111</sup> However, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty differ quite significantly on this point<sup>112</sup>. While for the former, intentionality is concretely and actively directed toward a thing, a phenomenon, for the latter it consists rather in a physical disposition for perceptions of all kinds, which adds another, not very precise definition to the overall system of phenomenology.

If already the concept of intentionality is controversial among phenomenological classics, then it appears even more worth discussing in the light of neuroscientific research conducted over the past decades. Herzog and Graumann, for example, write: “For phenomenology, description basically means intentional description. However, this means ... that human behavior ... is described in terms of how the respective subject experiences its intentional environment ...” and further: “... it should then become clear that this intentional description is guided by the respective experience and not by ... preconceptions.”<sup>113</sup> Leaving preconceptions aside, for example, which seems a reasonable claim of anthropology in the context of the Eurocentrism debate, will have to be discussed in more detail. In the light of the aforementioned neuroscientific research, it is doubtful that this is realistic or feasible to the extent required by phenomenological research that, a research which also raises the question of whether intentionality and freedom from preconceptions as philosophical maxims are not contradictory.

Actually, it would not really be surprising if phenomenology were defined as the science of experiential consciousness, whereby this consciousness would be or would have to

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<sup>110</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, I („Allgemein gehört es zum Wesen jedes aktuellen cogito, Bewusstsein von etwas zu sein“)

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. („Alle Erlebnisse, die ... Wesenseigenschaften gemein haben, heißen auch ‚intentionale Erlebnisse‘; sofern sie Bewusstsein von etwas sind, heißen sie auf dieses Etwas ‚intentional bezogen‘.“).

<sup>112</sup> cf. Wikipedia, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” [www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki](http://www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki). The fact that Herzog and Graumann see intentionality as “... the lowest common denominator, under which even heterogeneous methodological approaches can be interpreted in a phenomenological perspective that connects them” (Herzog, M. & C. F. Graumann, op. cit., XI) is, in this context, a thesis that is at least worth discussing.

<sup>113</sup> Herzog, M. & C. F. Graumann, op. cit., XIV f. („Für die Phänomenologie heißt Beschreibung prinzipiell intentionale Beschreibung. Das bedeutet aber ... dass menschliches Verhalten ... so beschrieben wird, wie das jeweilige Subjekt seine intentionale Umwelt ... erfährt“, und weiter: „... dann soll damit deutlich werden, dass sich diese intentionale Deskription von der jeweiligen Erfahrung leiten lässt und nicht von ... Vorannahmen.“).

be directed toward something such as “things”.<sup>114</sup> This would not differ greatly from Hegel's approach in his “Phenomenology of Spirit,” where he states: “... consciousness is, on the one hand, consciousness of the object and, on the other hand, consciousness of itself; consciousness of what is true to it and consciousness of its knowledge of it”<sup>115</sup>, which at least implies an act of consciousness originating from the human, cognizing subject. With a little chutzpah, one could even attest to the statement that “consciousness is always ‘consciousness-of-something’” as a truism (except for the ridiculously proliferating hyphens).

Hegel, however, went further on this point, since he recognized not only object-like “things” as the goal of directed consciousness, but also, qua self-consciousness, the perceiving subject itself. Or, as Adorno puts it: “Hegel knew, despite the doctrine of the absolute spirit, to which he attributed philosophy, that it was merely a moment in reality ... and thus limited it.”<sup>116</sup>

Phenomenology only becomes complicated when the focus shifts from “things” to “phenomena”<sup>117</sup>. Through reflection, says Husserl, “instead of things per se, we grasp ... the corresponding subjective experiences in which they become ‘conscious’ to us, ‘appear’ to us in the broadest sense. They are therefore also called ‘phenomena’; their general essential character is to be ‘consciousness of’, ‘appearance of’ ... The ... expression for that basic character of being as consciousness, as appearance of something, is intentionality. In the unreflective awareness of any objects, we are ‘directed’ towards them, our ‘intentio’ is directed towards them. The phenomenological shift in perspective shows that this directness is an essential feature inherent in the experiences in question; they are ‘intentional’ experiences.”<sup>118</sup>

Quasi under the table, a subject-object shift is announced here, according to which it is no longer the perceiving or reflecting human being, but rather “things” in the form of

<sup>114</sup> vgl. Hennigfeld, I., 2018, 1 („... das Bewusstsein ist einerseits Bewusstsein des Gegenstandes, andererseits Bewusstsein seiner selbst; Bewusstsein dessen, was ihm das Wahre ist, und Bewusstsein seines Wissens davon ...“).

<sup>115</sup> Hegel, S. W. F., TWA 3, 1970, 77 („... das Bewusstsein ist einerseits Bewusstsein des Gegenstandes, andererseits Bewusstsein seiner selbst; Bewusstsein dessen, was ihm das Wahre ist, und Bewusstsein seines Wissens davon“).

<sup>116</sup> Adorno, T. W., 1966, 16 („Hegel wusste, trotz der Lehre vom absoluten Geist, dem er die Philosophie zurechnete, diese als bloßes Moment in der Realität ... und schränkte sie damit ein.“).

<sup>117</sup> In „Die Idee der Phänomenologie“ definiert Husserl noch zwei Arten von Phänomenen: die naturwissenschaftlichen („Das also ist das Phänomen im Sinne der Naturwissenschaft, die wir Psychologie nennen.“) und die phänomenologischen, (vgl. Husserl, E., 1986 [2016], 44).

<sup>118</sup> Husserl, E., 1927, 198 f. (Durch Reflexion, „erfassen wir statt der Sachen schlechthin ... die entsprechenden subjektiven Erlebnisse, in denen sie uns ‚bewusst‘ werden, uns in einem allerweitesten Sinne ‚erscheinen‘. Sie heißen daher auch ‚Phänomene‘, ihr allgemeiner Wesenscharakter ist es, zu sein als ‚Bewusstsein von‘, ‚Erscheinung von‘ ... Der ... Ausdruck für jenen Grundcharakter des Seins als Bewusstsein, als Erscheinung von etwas ist Intentionalität. In dem unreflektierten Bewussthaben irgendwelcher Gegenstände sind wir auf diese ‚gerichtet‘, unsere ‚intentio‘ geht auf sie hin. Die phänomenologische Blickwendung zeigt, dass dieses Gerichtetsein ein den betreffenden Erlebnissen immanenter Wesenzug ist, sie sind ‚intentionale‘ Erlebnisse.“).

“phenomena” that become the actual agents of perception. It is as if “things” possessed their own inner vitality, which they naturally do not possess in the real world, at least as far as recognition and understanding are concerned—unless one is a follower of animistic religions. Here, too, Heidegger insists that a strict distinction must be made between everyday and phenomenological meaning.

We saw at the beginning that a phenomenon is something that appears, something that shows itself or is visible. “The meaning of the term ‘phenomenon’,” according to Heidegger, “can therefore be defined as that which shows itself, that which is revealed. The φαινόμενα, ‘phenomena’, are then the totality of what lies in the open or can be brought to light, what the Greeks sometimes simply identified with τὸ ὄντα (being).” But such a definition is not enough for Heidegger. He insists that phenomenon can only mean that which “shows itself”<sup>119</sup>: “The confusing diversity of ‘phenomena,’ which are called phenomenon, appearance, manifestation, mere appearance, can only be untangled if the concept of phenomenon is understood from the outset: that which shows itself in itself.”<sup>120</sup>

For: “Appearance as the appearance ‘of something’ therefore does not mean showing oneself, but rather the manifestation of something that does not show itself through something that does show itself. Appearance is a ‘not showing oneself’”<sup>121</sup>. And when Heidegger continues: “Although ‘appearance’ is not and never is a showing of itself in the sense of phenomena, appearance is only possible on the basis of something showing itself. But this showing of itself, which makes appearance possible, is not appearance itself. Appearance is the announcement of something that shows itself ... with the word ‘appearance’ we refer to something in which something appears without being an appearance itself ...”, the question must be asked whether he is not just abandoning one of the central maxims of phenomenology, namely that of immediate, “pure” perception.

In contrast to Kant, for whom, according to Heidegger, phenomena are “objects of empirical perception”<sup>122</sup>, even if the phenomenon can become mere appearance, for example, in the case of an interpretable phenomenon or an illusion, that which appears

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<sup>119</sup> Heidegger, M., 1927, 28 („Als Bedeutung des Ausdrucks ‚Phänomen‘ ist daher festzuhalten: das Sich-an-ihm-selbst-zeigende, das Offenbare. Die φαινόμενα, ‚Phänomene‘, sind dann die Gesamtheit dessen, was am Tage liegt oder ans Licht gebracht werden kann, was die Griechen zuweilen einfach mit τὸ ὄντα (das Seiende) identifizierten.“)

<sup>120</sup> op. cit. 30 „Die verwirrende Mannigfaltigkeit der ‚Phänomene‘, die mit den Titeln Phänomen, Schein, Erscheinung, bloße Erscheinung genannt werden, lässt sich nur entwirren, wenn von Anfang an der Begriff von Phänomen verstanden ist: das Sich-an-ihm-selbst-zeigende.“ ( ).

<sup>121</sup> op. cit., 29 („Erscheinung als Erscheinung ‚von etwas‘ besagt demnach gerade nicht: sich selbst zeigen, sondern das Sichmelden von etwas, das sich nicht zeigt, durch etwas, was sich zeigt. Erscheinen ist ein „Sich-nicht-zeigen“.“).

<sup>122</sup> op. cit., 30 („Gegenstände der empirischen Anschauung“).

(referring, reporting) must reveal itself in order to be a phenomenon. "Phenomena are never appearances, but every appearance is dependent on phenomena."<sup>123</sup> This definition still leaves room for a formal or vulgar concept of phenomenon: Only "... these things that reveal themselves in this way ('forms of perception') are phenomena of phenomenology."<sup>124</sup> This does not refer to things, objects, or events, but rather to the "how" of their appearance: "The objects in the how of their appearance in assigned modes of existence are the 'phenomena' ... 'nothing other than that which exists 'in itself' in the world, but purely as it shows itself in the situational particularity of the subjective 'for me'", Held had postulated in his introduction to Husserl's "phenomenological method."<sup>125</sup>

## Apriorisms

We have already discussed Husserl's definition frenzy, and in Heidegger's case, one can assume that much of what he postulates is difficult to scrutinize or question: It is probably the axioms of what Husserl still wanted to conceive as "rigorous," "unconditional" science that cause problems due to their inconsistency. Even in Husserl's definition of phenomenology quoted at the beginning, it is striking that the philosopher writes not only of a "descriptive method" but also of an "a priori science that emerged from it." Apriorisms!<sup>126</sup>

"Aprioric" means derived solely from reason, found exclusively through thought and thus independent of experience, without any reference to experience, but also to immediate knowledge or perception, purely through logical deduction. Held, in his introduction to Husserl, outlines what such a priori axioms might look like. He speaks there of the "correspondence between the type of object and the mode of occurrence," a "law that can be formulated with unconditional generality in advance of all experience, i. e., 'a priori'"<sup>127</sup>. Heidegger, too, in "Sein und Zeit", assumes necessary a priori deductions: "Every question is a search. Every search has its prior guidance from what is sought ... Questioning is the cognitive search for what is in its being and its being-there ... As a

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.* („Phänomene sind nie Erscheinungen, wohl aber ist jede Erscheinung angewiesen auf Phänomene.“).

<sup>124</sup> *op. cit.*, 31 („... dieses Sich-so-an-ihm-selbst-zeigende („Formen der Anschauung“) sind Phänomene der Phänomenologie“).

<sup>125</sup> Held, K., *op. cit.*, 16 („Die Gegenstände im Wie ihres Erscheinens in zugeordneten Gegebenheitsweisen sind die ‚Phänomene‘ ... „nichts anderes, als das in der Welt ‚an sich‘ Seiende, aber rein so, wie es sich in der situativen Jeweiligkeit des subjektiven ‚für-mich‘ zeigt.“).

<sup>126</sup> Husserl, E., 1927, 196.

<sup>127</sup> Held, K., *op. cit.*, 15 f. (einem „Gesetz, das sich mit unbedingter Allgemeinheit vorab zu aller Erfahrung, also ‚apriori‘ formulieren lässt.“).

search, questioning requires prior guidance from what is sought. The meaning of being must therefore already be available to us in a certain way.”<sup>128</sup>

This prompts Adorno to speak of novel ontologies that are more abstract than any neo-Kantian methodology<sup>129</sup>, of a hubris of the mind<sup>130</sup>. Even if one does not agree with this criticism, it remains undeniable that there is a striking contradiction between this type of “aprioric” science and the freedom from prejudice, from concepts, and from theory required for phenomenology. Aporias, in fact!

Such undeduced, unquestioned a priori assumptions also include two frequently recurring attributes that appear inconspicuous at first glance and have escaped the frenzy of redefinition, but only at the price of a strange vagueness: “pure” and “natural.” Whereas we had suspected a deliberate shift from “things” to “phenomena” in the linguistic reclassifications of Husserl and Heidegger, in the case of these two attributes a more ideology-critical interpretation seems appropriate.

Let us begin with “natural.” Husserl defines the term as an attribute of cognition as follows<sup>131</sup>: “Natural cognition begins with experience and remains within experience”<sup>132</sup>, a statement from which one could conclude what is not (!) natural—namely, that which is neither rooted in sensory perception nor in understanding thought. This would then mean that “experience” in Husserl's work does not have the same connotation as we

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<sup>128</sup> Heidegger, M., op. cit., 5 („Jedes Fragen ist ein Suchen. Jedes Suchen hat sein vorgängiges Geleit aus dem Gesuchten her ... Fragen ist erkennendes Suchen des Seienden in seinem Da- und Sosein ... Als Suchen bedarf das Fragen einer vorgängigen Leitung vom Gesuchten her. Der Sinn von Sein muss uns daher schon in gewisser Weise verfügbar sein.“).

<sup>129</sup> Adorno, T. W., op. cit., 71.

<sup>130</sup> Adorno, T. W., 1970, 35.

<sup>131</sup> In “The Idea of Phenomenology,” this definition of ‘natural’ thinking is found in contrast to philosophical thinking: “Natural thinking, unconcerned with the difficulties of epistemological possibility (i. e., ”off the cuff,“ E. S.) in life and science—philosophical thinking, determined by its position on the problems of epistemological possibility.” („Natürliches, um die Schwierigkeiten der Erkenntnismöglichkeit unbekümmertes Denken n Leben und Wissenschaft – philosophisches Denken, bestimmt durch die Stellung zu den Problemen der Erkenntnismöglichkeit.“, Husserl, E., 1986 (2016), 3) And he adds: “The natural mindset is still unconcerned with epistemological criticism. In the natural mindset, we are turned toward things in a contemplative and thoughtful manner...” (op. cit., 17) And further: “This is how natural cognition progresses. It takes hold of reality, which exists and is given from the outset as a matter of course and only needs to be explored in more detail in terms of scope and content, elements, relationships, and laws. This is how the various natural sciences develop and grow, the natural sciences as sciences of physical and psychological nature, the humanities, and, on the other hand, the mathematical sciences, the sciences of numbers, multiplicities, relationships, etc. The latter sciences do not deal with real realities, but with ideal possibilities that are valid in themselves, but which are also unquestionable from the outset („So schreitet die natürliche Erkenntnis fort. Sie bemächtigt sich in immer weiterem Umfang der von vornherein selbstverständlich existierenden und gegebenen und nur nach Umfang und Inhalt, nach Elementen, Verhältnissen, Gesetzen näher zu erforschenden Wirklichkeit. So werden und wachsen die verschiedenen natürlichen Wissenschaften, die Naturwissenschaften als Wissenschaften von der physischen und psychischen Natur, die Geisteswissenschaften, andererseits die mathematischen Wissenschaften, die Wissenschaften von den Zahlen, den Mannigfaltigkeiten, den Verhältnissen usw. In den letzteren Wissenschaften handelt es sich nicht um reale Wirklichkeiten, sondern um ideale, an sich gültige, im übrigen aber auch von vornherein fraglose Möglichkeiten“, op. cit., 18).

<sup>132</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-1, 98 („Natürliche Erkenntnis hebt an mit der Erfahrung und verbleibt in der Erfahrung“).

had assumed in our initial considerations of the English term “experience.” If, following Merleau-Ponty in a certain way, we were to focus on physicality, this would result in a view which – in accordance with modern neuroscience – would understand physical (sensory) perception in the so-called limbic system as “natural,” while understanding perception, which takes place on the basis of models or simulations stored in the neocortex, would belong more to the realm of (theoretical) thinking.

However, this would contradict Husserl's statement, who sees the “... general thesis of the natural attitude ...” as “... a piece of pure description before any ‘theory’ (i. e., theories, which here means preconceptions of any kind ...)”<sup>133</sup>. If we disregard this bizarre conception of theory—which should not be a preconception prior to research and theory formation, but rather their result—it remains that “natural” in the cognitive process is everything that is still ‘burdened’ with the transcendental and is not “pure,” as he explains in “Die Idee der Phänomenologie.”<sup>134</sup>

### **Ideologically „pure“**

Husserl's second “ideological” attribute is used much more extensively in his writings. For the philosopher, “pure” refers to a whole range of different things, objects, conditions, or other phenomena. He speaks of the “pure ego”<sup>135</sup>; of “pure intuition”<sup>136</sup>; of “pure essence”<sup>137</sup> of “experiences, pure in their essence”<sup>138</sup>; of the “pure particularity of beings”<sup>139</sup>; of “pure consciousness”<sup>140</sup>; of “pure experience”<sup>141</sup>; and “pure

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<sup>133</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 136 ().

<sup>134</sup> Husserl, E., 1986 (2016), 34 f.: “All natural knowledge, pre-scientific and especially scientific, is transcendent objectifying knowledge; it posits objects as existing, claims to encounter facts that are not ‘given in the true sense’ in it, are not ‘immanent’ to it.” And a little later: “... all these are transcendences and are epistemologically zero. Only through a reduction, which we will also call a phenomenological reduction, do I gain an absolute given that no longer offers anything of transcendence.” („Alle natürliche Erkenntnis, die vorwissenschaftliche und erst recht die wissenschaftliche, ist transzendent objektivierende Erkenntnis; sie setzt Objekte als seiend, erhebt den Anspruch, Sachverhalte erkennend zu treffen, die in ihr nicht ‚im wahren Sinne gegeben‘ sind, ihr nicht ‚immanent‘ sind.“ Und wenig später: „... das alles sind Transzendenzen und sind als das erkenntnistheoretisch Null. Erst durch eine Reduktion, die wir auch schon phänomenologische Reduktion nennen wollen, gewinne ich eine absolute Gegebenheit, die nichts von Transzendenz mehr bietet.“, op. cit., 44)

<sup>135</sup> cf. Micali, Stefano, Der Ich-Begriff in Der Husserlschen Phänomenologie, in: Überschlüsse Der Erfahrung. Phänomenologica, vol 186, 2008, 9

<sup>136</sup> quoted from Holzhey, H., 1991, 6.

<sup>137</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-1, 101 f.

<sup>138</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 152.

<sup>139</sup> op. cit., 106.

<sup>140</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 159.

<sup>141</sup> Husserl, E., 1927, 197

phenomenology”<sup>142</sup>; alternatively “phenomenological”<sup>143</sup> or “eidetic purity”<sup>144</sup> and “pure phenomena”<sup>145</sup> and then again of “pure objectivity of research”<sup>146</sup>; a colorful mixture of both concrete and abstract concepts.

Those who are not completely blinded by so much purity might begin to ask themselves, for example, what constitutes the purity of the self, to which one is tempted to respond: “He cast the first stone.” If purity, as will be shown, is for phenomenologists the result of a mental (eidetic) process of abstraction, then it must also be clear that the further this process progresses, the further one moves away from any “I”; to the point where all subjectivity is expelled from the “I” and nothing more than an empty shell remains.

As with “naturalness,” there is a suspicion here that “purity” plays only the role of an emotionally positive figure of identification in Husserl's work, lacking a slightly more clear definitional determination. It is probably no coincidence that little to nothing can be found under the keywords “pure” or “purity” in Hegel<sup>147</sup>; the terms were probably too irrelevant or even suspect to the “grandmaster”; it is also probably no coincidence that both were among the preferred targets of Adorno's criticism.

He sees Husserl's “purity” as a relapse into pre-phenomenology. “... and finally, ” he sums up, “ontology has returned to him, remorsefully but bashfully, by elaborating a ritual of the pure concept which denies that it is one”<sup>148</sup>. In his reflections on Husserl's “originary” essence, he had already analyzed that these were “... pure ... forms of thought from which the memory of abstraction had been erased as a separate ‘reality.’”

One senses that the inconspicuous “pure,” even more so than the obviously ideological “natural,” has a lot to answer for, to put it bluntly. “The detachment from existence gives Husserl's doctrine of logical absolutism far greater significance than that of a mere variation on the interpretation of formal logic. The logical axioms elevated to propositions in themselves offer the model of fact-free, pure entities, whose justification and description the entire phenomenology chose as its task and equated with the concept of philosophy ... Phenomenological purity, idiosyncratic against all contact with the factual, remains as obsolete as a floral ornament. Essence was the favorite word of Art Nouveau for the consumptive soul, whose metaphysical splendor springs solely from nothingness, from the renunciation of existence. Its sisters are Husserl's essences,

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<sup>142</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-1, title

<sup>143</sup> Husserl, E. op. cit., 204, where he speaks of phenomenologically pure psychology.

<sup>144</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 147.

<sup>145</sup> Husserl, E., 1927, 201.

<sup>146</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 143.

<sup>147</sup> cf. Hegel, G. W. F., TWA Index, 1979

<sup>148</sup> Adorno, T. W., op. cit., 43 („... und schließlich ist die Ontologie reumütig, aber verschämt, zu ihm zurückgekehrt, indem sie ein Ritual des reinen Begriffs ausarbeitete, der leugnet, dass er einer ist.“).

phantasmagorical reflections of a subjectivity that hopes to be extinguished in them, as their 'meaning'"<sup>149</sup>, writes Adorno.

Husserl's ideal, according to the co-founder of the Frankfurt School, "Husserl's model at all levels is mathematics," that is, the ultimate abstraction of everything perceived or experienced, which "in terms of form, pervades Husserl's entire thinking to the end, even where he no longer confines himself to the 'clarification' of logic, but aims at the critique of logical reason. Husserl may have 'excluded' the natural world of things from his phenomenological reductions"<sup>150</sup>, but his philosophizing itself has never been defined in any other way than by a sublimated conception of the material world, as it is preordained in the relationship of consciousness to insight into mathematical 'facts'." The question of what this sublimation or abstraction still has to do with a "purely descriptive"<sup>151</sup> philosophy or philosophical method remains to be answered.

## Backwards ahead towards ontology

On the subject of "ideological" terminology, there are at least two more terms worth mentioning here, which make one wonder how unquestioningly some phenomenological anthropologists seem to accept them. The first is the attribute "universal"<sup>152</sup>, which, in the context of cultural considerations, should have been banned or at least marked as such<sup>153</sup> since the Eurocentrism debate of recent decades at the latest. The second is the term "disorder", borrowed from psychology, of which Heidegger diagnoses three different types, with the help of which the uselessness or the "handiness of stuff"<sup>154</sup>

<sup>149</sup> op. cit., 96 f. („Die Lossage vom Dasein verleiht der Husserlschen Lehre vom logischen Absolutismus weit größere Tragweite als die einer bloßen Spielart der Interpretation der formalen Logik. Die zu Sätzen an sich erhobenen logischen Axiome bieten das Modell der faktenfreien, reinen Wesenheiten, deren Begründung und Beschreibung die gesamte Phänomenologie sich als Aufgabe wählte und dem Begriff der Philosophie gleichsetzte ... Die phänomenologische Reinheit, idiosynkratisch gegen alle Berührung mit Faktischem, bleibt doch hinfällig wie ein Blumenornament. Wesen war das Lieblingswort des Jugendstils für die schwindstüchtige Seele, deren metaphysischer Glanz einzig dem Nichts, der Abkehr vom Dasein entspringt. Ihre Schwestern sind die Husserlschen Wesenheiten, phantasmagorische Spiegelungen einer Subjektivität, die in ihnen, als ihrem ‚Sinn‘, zu erlöschen hofft.“).

<sup>150</sup> see the methodology section of this essay.

(„Husserls Modell auf allen Stufen ist die Mathematik ...“, die „der Form nach das gesamte Denken Husserls bis zum Ende (durchherrscht), auch dort noch, wo er sich nicht mehr bei der ‚Klärung‘ der Logik bescheidet, sondern es auf die Kritik der logischen Vernunft abgesehen hat. Mag immer der Husserl der phänomenologischen Reduktionen die natürliche Dingwelt ‚ausgeklammert‘

<sup>151</sup> Holzhey, H., 1991, 6.

<sup>152</sup> cf. my essay „Fremder, quo vadis“, Supp. E., 2014

<sup>153</sup>

<sup>154</sup> cf. Denker, Merlin, Wieso sieht Heidegger gerade in der Störung eine Offenbarung von Zeug?, [www.merlindenker.de](http://www.merlindenker.de), 2021, 1.



could reveal itself in a special way: he lists conspicuousness, intrusiveness, and rebelliousness<sup>155</sup>, names which to critical ears might sound less like philosophy than like a pedagogical compendium for dealing with difficult children right out of the so-called “Third Reich.” Is it a coincidence that Heidegger was a fervid member of Hitler’s NSDAP from 1933 to 1945?

But back to the heart of the matter. Adorno believed that ontology had returned to Husserl, which could be supplemented by the observation that it was never absent in Heidegger, but always present. For even though it is often reported otherwise, phenomenology focuses not only on perception and description, but above all on essence and being, and the meaning of both. These concepts have already been mentioned several times; their meaning will be the focus of consideration in the next chapter.

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<sup>155</sup> cf. Schnegg, M., op. cit., 14.

## II – Essence, meaning and being

So far, this essay has focused primarily on epistemological aspects of phenomenology: things and phenomena, perception and cognition, the a priori and the intentional. But that is only one side of the coin; the things to which we are supposed to return are not the final authority on cognition (processes). We have already discussed the back-and-forth between epistemology and ontology, quoted Adorno's statements about an ontological end phase of phenomenology, and noted that ontology is more evident in Heidegger's *Being and Time* than in Husserl's work, as is already apparent from the title of his magnum opus.

Of course, the relationship between epistemology and ontology is not one of “either/or” – neither in classical (metaphysical) philosophy nor in the anti-metaphysical attempts of Husserl & Co. They belong together like hammer and nail, like light and shadow, since both strive for knowledge of the world and reality, and this is an approach that phenomenology also pursues in a certain way, for which, however, only perceived reality counts. Epistemology is often regarded as a prerequisite for ontology, but, as the philosopher Karl Bärthlein (1929-1989) writes, it is difficult to “subordinate ontology with its claim to universality to epistemology”<sup>156</sup>.

The misconception of viewing phenomenology as an empiricist theory of knowledge has already been mentioned and will be taken up again in the penultimate chapter where we look at phenomenologically oriented anthropology. The fact that there is also a comprehensive ontological approach behind the epistemological aspects of philosophy is often overlooked, but it is actually hard to miss. It is not without reason that Heidegger repeatedly refers to phenomenology as a fundamental ontology: “Sciences are modes of being in which being also relates to beings that it does not need to be itself. But being in a world is essential to existence ... Ontologies that deal with beings of a non-existential nature are therefore grounded and motivated in the ontic structure of existence itself, which encompasses the certainty of a pre-ontological understanding of being. Therefore, the fundamental ontology from which all others can spring must be

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<sup>156</sup> cf. Bärthlein, Karl, Zum Verhältnis von Erkenntnistheorie und Ontologie in der deutschen Philosophie des 18. Und 19. Jahrhunderts, in: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 56/3, 2009 ().

sought in the existential analysis of existence.<sup>157</sup>

Fact is that even if one does not regard the epistemological as a prerequisite for the ontological, phenomenological “epistemology,” the branch of philosophy that deals with perception and understanding, can hardly be understood without the corresponding ontological aspects. Moreover, it is about much more than perception and experience: “All the essential characteristics of experience and consciousness that we have gained are necessary sub-stages for us to achieve the goal that constantly guides us, namely to gain the essence of that ‘pure consciousness’ with which the phenomenological field is to be determined.”<sup>158</sup>

It is therefore a question of the essence of things and phenomena, not just their descriptively seizable properties. The question of this essence, which in classical metaphysics lies behind the appearances<sup>159</sup>, is the central ontological question of Husserl, who defines this essence as just as “originary” as the things and phenomena themselves, while Heidegger, for whom everything revolves around “being” (ancient Greek τὸ ὄν, to on) per se and its “meaning”, defines his problem level more like that of classical metaphysics: “With the preliminary characterization of the thematic object of the investigation (being of beings, or meaning of being in general), its method also seems to be predetermined.”<sup>160</sup>

Unlike Husserl, for whom the question of essence and appearance resembles that of the chicken and the egg—things and essences are equally “originary”—Hegel had a clearer answer. For him, essence was “the abstract”<sup>161</sup>, the “absolute essence ... all reality”<sup>162</sup>. It was thus both the last and the first stage in the dual movement of

<sup>157</sup> Heidegger, M., op. cit., 13 („Wissenschaften sind Seinsweisen des Daseins, in denen es sich auch zu Seiendem verhält, das es nicht selbst zu sein braucht. Zum Dasein gehört aber wesentlich: Sein in einer Welt ... Die Ontologien, die Seiendes von nicht daseinsmäßigem Seinscharakter zum Thema haben, sind demnach in der ontischen Struktur des Daseins selbst fundiert und motiviert, die die Bestimmtheit eines vorontologischen Seinsverständnisses in sich begreift. Daher muss die Fundamentalontologie, aus der alle andern erst entspringen können, in der existenzialen Analytik des Daseins gesucht werden.“). Adorno comments as follows: “Fundamental ontology eludes us not least because it upholds an ideal of ‘purity’ derived from the methodologicalization of philosophy—the final link being Husserl—as a contrast between being and existing, yet at the same time philosophizing about substantive matters.” („Die Fundamentalontologie entzieht sich nicht zuletzt darum, weil von ihr ein der Methodologisierung der Philosophie entstammendes Ideal von ‚Reinheit‘ – das letzte Bindeglied war Husserl –, als Kontrast des Seins zum Seienden, aufrecht erhalten, dennoch aber gleichwie über Sachhaltiges philosophiert wird.“, Adorno, T. W., 1966, 82).

<sup>158</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 159 („All die Wesenscharakteristiken von Erlebnis und Bewusstsein, die wir gewonnen haben, sind für uns notwendige Unterstufen für die Erreichung des uns beständig leitenden Zieles, nämlich für die Gewinnung des Wesens jenes ‚reinen Bewusstseins‘ mit dem sich das phänomenologische Feld bestimmen soll.“).

<sup>159</sup> Kocyba, H., Wesenslogik und Gesellschaftskritik: Karl Heinz Haag und Hans-Jürgen Kahl, in: Kern, Peter, Kritische Theorie als Metaphysik: Karl Heinz Haag - Studien und Kommentare, 2025, 140.

<sup>160</sup> Heidegger, M., op. cit., 27 („Mit der vorläufigen Charakteristik des thematischen Gegenstandes der Untersuchung (Sein des Seienden, bzw. Sinn des Seins überhaupt) scheint auch schon ihre Methode vorgezeichnet zu sein.“).

<sup>161</sup>

<sup>162</sup>

contemplation that he elaborates on, above all, in his “Phenomenology of Spirit.” This movement proceeds, on the one hand, from the concrete to the abstract, then back again from the abstract to the concrete – first, if you want, from an epistemological perspective, then again from a logical perspective. In any case, however, concrete and abstract concepts cannot be “originary” in the same way, i. e., equally “primordial,” as Husserl postulates when he writes of “essential relationships that can be grasped through immediate insight”<sup>163</sup>. And, unlike Husserl, for whom essence is the result of a pure movement of thought – the so-called “reduction” will be the subject of further consideration – for Hegel, essence has a certain, at least metaphysical, life of its own. One can criticize this or, as Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) attested to the young Karl Marx (1818-1883), turn it upside down.<sup>164</sup>

## Essence and form

However, Husserl does not introduce his “essence” as such, but again makes use of one of those linguistic devices we have already become familiar with. He speaks of “eidos,” which he translates as “pure essence”<sup>165</sup>, and of “eidetic” (essential) axioms<sup>166</sup>, sciences<sup>167</sup>, and insights<sup>168</sup>. However, the ancient Greek “εἶδος,” “eidos,” does not stand for essence, but for “that which is to be seen”, “shape”, “form”, “appearance”, “image”, or – in Plato, for example – “idea,” as the “antipode” to Aristotelian matter (ὑλη, hyle), while “essence” in ancient Greek is more “οὐσία” (“ousia”), also translated as “being” or “substance.” It is probably no coincidence that “eidetics” is considered the science of what is seen.

As in the cases discussed above, it is difficult to imagine that this is merely a coincidence, arbitrariness, or even due to ignorance, especially since there is no trace of such an “eidos” in Hegel's 20-volume collected works, which deal extensively with “essence” and “form”<sup>169</sup>, if one is to believe the index<sup>170</sup>. Rather, it can be assumed that

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<sup>163</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-1, 110. It is no coincidence that Herzog and Graumann emphasize that “phenomenology ... in its early days understood itself as a science of essence, distinct from the factual sciences.” (Herzog, M. & C. F. Graumann, op. cit., X).

<sup>164</sup> cf. Engels, F., *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie*, 1895.

<sup>165</sup> Husserl, E., op cit., 101 f.

<sup>166</sup> op cit., 110.

<sup>167</sup> op cit., 111.

<sup>168</sup> op cit., 113.

<sup>169</sup> cf. Hegel, G. W. F., TWA 3, 203 und TWA 9, 288 und 419 ff.

<sup>170</sup> The author cannot imagine having simply overlooked the “eidos” when, at the end of the 1970s, he “keyworded” a good third of the 20 TWA volumes, including the three-volume encyclopedia, for the register.

this “equating” of form and essence is intended to underpin the phenomenological claim that “things” or “phenomena” on the one hand and ‘essence’ on the other are equally “originary” from an epistemological perspective.

Let us take a closer look at this “eidos” essence: “Initially, ‘essence’ referred to that which is found in the very being of an individual”<sup>171</sup>, with which Husserl comes close to Hegel’s “general/universal” or “substance.” This alone would significantly relativize the statement “The essence (eidos) is a novel object.”<sup>172</sup> What is really striking are the statements about the relationship between “things” and ‘essence’: “The eidos, the pure essence, can be intuitively exemplified in experiential givens, in those of perception, memory, etc., but just as well in mere fantasy events. Accordingly, in order to grasp a being itself and in its original form, we can start from corresponding experiential perceptions, but also from non-experiential, non-existent perceptions, or rather ‘mere imaginings’.”<sup>173</sup> What then did it mean that the essence could be “exemplified” in experiential circumstances?

Another one of Husserl’s statements points into the same direction: “The fact posited as real is then a fact insofar as it is an individual reality, but it is an eidetic necessity insofar as it is the isolation (Vereinzelung, E. S.) of a universal essence.”<sup>174</sup> And a little later he writes: “... every individual object ... (belongs) ... to an essential constitution as its essence, just as, conversely, every essence corresponds to possible individuals that would be its factual isolations ...”<sup>175</sup>

Now the fact is suddenly anything but “originary”; instead, it is merely the “isolation of a universal essence”, which not only comes suspiciously close to Hegelian metaphysics, in which the concept “materializes” into the world, but also calls into question the concept of “reduction,” which is yet to be analyzed. But more on that later; for now, it suffices to note that instead of “back to things”, it is now more a case of “back to metaphysics.” Husserl’s anti-idealism calls itself into question, and this is not changed by the fact that a little later he takes the “essential relationships to be grasped in

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<sup>171</sup> Husserl, E., op. cit., 101 f. („Zunächst bezeichnete ‚Wesen‘ das im selbsteigenen Sein eines Individuum(s) als sein Was Vorfindliche“).

<sup>172</sup> op. cit., 101 f. („Das Wesen (eidos) ist ein neuartiger Gegenstand“).

<sup>173</sup> op. cit., 104 („Das Eidos, das reine Wesen, kann sich intuitiv in Erfahrungsgegebenheiten, in solchen der Wahrnehmung, Erinnerung usw., exemplifizieren, ebenso gut aber auch in bloßen Phantasiegegebenheiten. Demgemäß können wir, ein Wesen selbst und originär zu erfassen, von entsprechenden erfahrenden Anschauungen ausgehen, ebensowohl aber auch von nicht-erfahrenden, nicht-daseinerfassenden, vielmehr ‚bloß einbildenden‘ Anschauungen.“).

<sup>174</sup> op. cit., 108 („Der als wirklich gesetzte Sachverhalt ist dann Tatsache, sofern er individueller Wirklichkeitsverhalt ist, er ist aber eidetische Notwendigkeit, sofern er Vereinzelung einer Wesensallgemeinheit ist.“).

<sup>175</sup> op. cit., 109 („... jedem individuellen Gegenstand ... (gehört) ... ein Wesensbestand (zu) als sein Wesen, wie umgekehrt jedem Wesen mögliche Individuen entsprechen, die seine faktischen Vereinzelungen wären, ...“).

immediate insight”<sup>176</sup> out of the drawer again. Contradictions wherever you look, in which the supposed anti-idealism of phenomenology dissolves almost without a trace<sup>177</sup>, which Husserl also explicitly states for the record: “Every factual science (empirical science) has essential theoretical foundations in eidetic ontologies.”<sup>178</sup>

The indulgence in ontological abstractions also continues from an epistemological perspective: “We follow our general principle that every individual occurrence has its essence, which can be grasped in eidetic purity...” and “(we) fix... in adequate ideation the pure essences that interest us. The singular facts, the factuality of the natural world in general, thus disappear from our theoretical view—as everywhere where we conduct purely eidetic research.”<sup>179</sup> And all of this is theory- and preconception-free phenomenology? An unanswered question that cannot be resolved within the framework of Husserl's philosophy. Anti-idealism was only a facade; in truth, Husserl probably always had a firm grasp on metaphysics – and his student and colleague Heidegger along with him.

## From „eidós“ to Being

While Husserl's ontology is, so to speak, imposed from behind via his epistemological “things” and “phenomena,” Heidegger marches straight toward ontology, the doctrine of being or the logic of being. As already pointed out, this is revealed by the title “Sein und Zeit”. Only from there does Heidegger return to things and phenomena. Whereas Husserl posits things and phenomena a priori, even apodictically and by definition (and

<sup>176</sup> op. cit., 110 („in unmittelbarer Einsicht zu erfassenden Wesensverhalte“).

<sup>177</sup> Adorno comments on this as follows: “By suppressing the subjective element, thinking, as a condition of logic, Husserl also conceals the objective element, the matter of thinking that is indissoluble in thinking. In its place comes thinking that is unenlightened and therefore stretched to the point of objectivity: logical absolutism is, without realizing it, absolute idealism from the outset. Only the equivocation of the term ‘object in general’ allows Husserl to interpret the propositions of formal logic as objects without a concrete element. Thus, the mechanism of forgetting becomes that of reification. It is useless to invoke Hegelian logic, in which abstract being becomes nothingness, as in Husserl's ‘object in general’. Hegel's ‘being, pure being, – without any further determination’ is not to be confused with the highest category of subtraction, ‘object in general’.” („Indem Husserl das subjektive Element, Denken, als Bedingung der Logik unterschlägt, eskamotiert er auch das objektive, die in Denken unauflösbare Materie des Denkens. An ihre Stelle tritt das unerhellte und darum zur Objektivität schlechthin aufgespreizte Denken: der logische Absolutismus ist, ohne es zu ahnen, von Anbeginn an absoluter Idealismus. Einzig die Äquivokation des Terminus ‚Gegenstand überhaupt‘ erlaubt es Husserl, die Sätze der formalen Logik, als Gegenstände ohne gegenständliches Element zu interpretieren. So wird der Mechanismus des Vergessens zu dem der Verdinglichung. Nutzlos die Berufung auf die Hegelsche Logik, der das abstrakte Sein zum Nichts werde, so wie beim Husserlschen ‚Gegenstand überhaupt‘. Das Hegelsche ‚Seyn, reines Seyn, – ohne alle weitere Bestimmung‘ ist nicht mit der obersten Substraktionskategorie ‚Gegenstand überhaupt‘ zu verwechseln“, Adorno, T. W., 1970, 74)

<sup>178</sup> op. cit., 113.

<sup>179</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 147

redefinition), Heidegger takes a detour via the ontological question of the meaning of being in order to arrive at them. Needless to say, something like “meaning,” the “meaning of meaning,” or the “meaning of being” have only marginal significance in Hegel, for example.<sup>180</sup>

Heidegger does not hesitate and opens his discourse with the question, “Do we today have an answer to the question of what we actually mean by the word ‘being?’” to which he immediately provides the answer: “Not at all. And so it is necessary to ask the question about the meaning of being again. Are we today even in the awkward position of not understanding the term ‘being?’”<sup>181</sup> Not at all. And so it is necessary first of all to reawaken an understanding of the meaning of this question.” Awakening an understanding of the meaning of the question about meaning? This again sounds very tautological, a little like Husserl's quoted attempt to determine the evidence about evidence. Shouldn't such introductory questions of philosophical consideration be self-explanatory, because otherwise there is a risk of constantly going round in circles of mutually supportive definitions? Just like the hen and the egg quoted above?

Now, one could question not only the meaning of meaning, but also the meaning of existence. However, in order to do so without resorting to answers from the realm of religious considerations, one would first have to accept that there is a world that, together with its genesis, exists independently of our perceptions and concepts of meaning (and our omniscient hubris). As we have seen, this is apparently difficult for phenomenologists.

Instead, Heidegger emphasises: “With the guiding question of the meaning of being, the investigation addresses the fundamental question of philosophy itself. The phenomenological approach is the way to deal with this question.”<sup>182</sup> ... and immediately evades answering it by resorting to the epistemological level: “The term ‘phenomenology’ primarily refers to a methodological concept.” “The more genuine a methodological concept appears and the more comprehensively it determines the course of a science, the more originally it is rooted in the examination of things themselves, the further it distances itself from what we call a technical manoeuvre ... The title “phenomenology” expresses a maxim that can be formulated as follows: ‘to the things themselves! ... contrary to the adoption of only seemingly “proven” concepts

<sup>180</sup> Hegel uses the term “meaning” in the first volume of his lectures on aesthetics, where he describes the genuine contemplation of beauty in nature as a meaningful view of natural phenomena. (Hegel, G. W. F., TWA 13, 173)

<sup>181</sup> Heidegger, M., op. cit., 1 („Keineswegs. Und so gilt es denn, die Frage nach dem Sinn von Sein erneut zu stellen. Sind wir denn heute auch nur in der Verlegenheit, den Ausdruck ‚Sein‘ nicht zu verstehen Keineswegs. Und so gilt es denn vordem, allererst wieder ein Verständnis für den Sinn dieser Frage zu wecken.“).

<sup>182</sup> op. cit., 21 f. („Mit der leitenden Frage nach dem Sinn des Seins steht die Untersuchung bei der Fundamentalfrage der Philosophie überhaupt. Die Behandlungsart dieser Frage ist die phänomenologische.“).

..."<sup>183</sup> This would successfully conceal the ontological question in an epistemological one and in Husserl's "old" maxim. Now one could question not only the meaning of meaning, but also the meaning of being. However, if one does not want to resort to answers from the realm of religious considerations, one would first have to accept that there is a world that, together with its genesis, exists independently of our perceptions and concepts of meaning (and our omniscient hubris). As we have seen, this is apparently difficult for phenomenologists.

Adorno is quite categorical regarding at Heidegger's question of the meaning of being: "In this respect, he is a descendant of deductive systems. Their history is rich in concepts that are produced by intellectual progress, even if no finger can be pointed at the facts that correspond to them."<sup>184</sup> And further: "The philosophy of being fails as soon as it claims a meaning in being that, according to its own testimony, has been dissolved by that thinking which is still attached to being itself as conceptual reflection since it has been thought. The meaninglessness of the word being ... cannot be attributed to insufficient thinking or irresponsible thinking on the fly. It reflects the impossibility of grasping or generating positive meaning through thought, which was the medium of the objective evaporation of meaning. If one seeks to carry out Heidegger's distinction between being and its extensional logical concept, then, after deducting both the beings and the categories of abstraction, one is left with an unknown quantity that has nothing over the Kantian concept of the transcendent thing-in-itself as the pathos of its invocation. This, however, renders the word "thinking", which Heidegger cannot do without, as meaningless as that which is to be thought: thinking without concept is nothing."<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> *ibid.* („Je echter ein Methodenbegriff sich auswirkt und je umfassender er den Duktus einer Wissenschaft bestimmt, umso ursprünglicher ist er in der Auseinandersetzung mit den Sachen selbst verwurzelt, umso weiter entfernt er sich von dem, was wir einen technischen Handgriff nennen ... Der Titel ‚Phänomenologie‘ drückt eine Maxime aus, die also formuliert werden kann: ‚zu den Sachen selbst!‘ - ... entgegen der Übernahme von nur scheinbar ‚ausgewiesenen‘ Begriffen ...“).

<sup>184</sup> Adorno, T. W., 1966, 104 f. („Insofern ist er Nachfahre der deduktiven Systeme. Deren Geschichte schon ist reich an Begriffen, die vom gedanklichen Fortgang gezeitigt werden, auch wenn kein Zeigefinger auf den Sachverhalt sich legen lässt, der ihnen entspräche.“).

<sup>185</sup> *op. cit.*, 105 („Die Seinsphilosophie scheitert, sobald sie im Sein einen Sinn reklamiert, den nach ihrem eigenen Zeugnis jenes Denken auflöste, dem noch Sein selber als begriffliche Reflexion verhaftet ist, seitdem es gedacht wird. Die Sinnlosigkeit des Wortes Sein ... ist nicht einem zu wenig Denken oder einem unverantwortlichen Drauflosdenken aufzubürden. In ihr schlägt die Unmöglichkeit sich nieder, positiven Sinn durch den Gedanken zu ergreifen oder zu erzeugen, der das Medium der objektiven Verflüchtigung von Sinn war. Sucht man die Heideggersche Unterscheidung des Seins von seinem umfangslogischen Begriff zu vollziehen, so behält man, nach Abzug des Seienden ebenso wie der Abstraktionskategorien, eine Unbekannte in Händen, die nichts voraussetzt vor dem Kantischen Begriff des transzendenten Dinges an sich als das Pathos seiner Invokation. Dadurch jedoch wird auch das Wort Denken, auf das Heidegger nicht verzichten mag, so inhaltslos wie das zu Denkende: Denken ohne Begriff ist keines.“).



## Obscure terms

Heidegger seems to have been somewhat aware of this dilemma when he states: "If one says, therefore, that 'being' is the most general concept, this cannot mean that it is the clearest and requires no further discussion. The concept of "being" is, in fact, the most obscure."<sup>186</sup> And further: "'Being" cannot be understood as something that exists ... it cannot be determined that it is attributed to something that exists ... "Being" is not something like something that exists ... This average comprehensibility alone demonstrates the incomprehensibility ... the meaning of being (is) ... shrouded in darkness ..." This is a view that would be unthinkable for Hegel and his positioning of being as the highest level of abstraction (indefiniteness) within his logic – and therefore, in this quality, identical with nothingness. And if 'Being and Time' is about 'repairing' the "forgetting" of time (in the determination of being) by classical philosophy, then this certainly does not apply to Hegel, for his 'being' is, as the absolute abstraction of everything material and everything immaterial, far removed from both space and time.

If Heidegger's "being" is not comparable to Hegel's most abstract, indeterminate concept of the logical system, then it is just as little identical to Husserl's "eidos", that "essence" which, on the one hand, is the result of the process of abstraction/reduction, but on the other hand is also supposed to be 'originary' like the result of immediate, i. e. sensory perception. Heidegger's 'being' is often described as that which is common to all (or everything) that exists, whereby the definition in this description is not set, but only shifted from one definition to the next, similarly unsatisfactory. "'Being" is not something like beings",<sup>187</sup> writes Heidegger, which, however, "does not (dispense from) the question of its meaning."<sup>188</sup> After all, this is one of the fundamental questions of phenomenology.

Although Heidegger's "Sein und Zeit" initially revolves around 'being,' "existence" is often cited as the more important category in his phenomenology. Heidegger introduces the new concept as follows: "Existence (Dasein) is a being that does not merely occur among other beings. Rather, it is ontically distinguished by the fact that this being in its

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<sup>186</sup> Heidegger, M., op. cit., 3 („Wenn man demnach sagt: ‚Sein‘ ist der allgemeinste Begriff, so kann das nicht heißen, er ist der klarste und aller weiteren Erörterung unbedürftig. Der Begriff des ‚Seins‘ ist vielmehr der dunkelste.“ „‚Sein‘ kann ... nicht als Seiendes begriffen werden ...., nicht zur Bestimmtheit kommen, dass ihm Seiendes zugesprochen wird ... ‚Sein‘ ist nicht so etwas wie Seiendes ... Allein diese durchschnittliche Verständlichkeit demonstriert nur die Unverständlichkeit ... der Sinn von Sein (ist) ... in Dunkel gehüllt ...“).

<sup>187</sup> op. cit., 4 („‚Sein‘ ist nicht so etwas wie Seiendes“).

<sup>188</sup> ibid. („von der Frage nach seinem Sinn“).

being is concerned with this being itself"<sup>189</sup>, and he goes on to write: 'The being itself, to which existence can relate in one way or another and always relates in some way, we call existence.'<sup>190</sup> On closer inspection, it becomes clear that this does not really fit with the definition of 'being' that has been introduced. One then discovers that for Heidegger there is not just one 'being,' but two – an ontological one, the 'being of being,' and an ontic one, the 'being of beings' – a doubling of terms of the kind that is even more common in Husserl.

Incidentally, the aforementioned "forgetting" of time, which Heidegger seeks to abolish in his "fundamental ontology"<sup>191</sup> could, if one were to understand 'space' and "time" as entities that actually exist independently of human experience, not really be attributed to 'being' at all, whether ontically or ontologically, had Heidegger not tied existence so closely to the human subject, which, however, also reads as contradictory. 'Existence' refers, on the one hand, to everything that exists, when he writes: "Everything we talk about, everything we relate to in this or that way, is existence; what and how we ourselves are is also existence. Being lies in thatness and suchness, in reality, presence, existence, validity, in "it exists"<sup>192</sup>, only to then explicitly refer not to any "being" whatsoever, but only to that "which I myself am"<sup>193</sup>, i. e. to human beings as "being" – not "in being", but explicitly as 'being': "Being (Dasein) is that which, in its being, relates to this being in an understanding way."<sup>194</sup>

This ambiguity could stem from the fact that Heidegger, like Husserl<sup>195</sup> before him in a certain sense, understands the subject (human) existence not simply as the perceiving consciousness of things (or phenomena) in the world, but as transcendental, transcending experience, i. e. ontological, understanding the world not as the empirical world, but as the transcendental determination of existence.

Heidegger goes further than Husserl in this regard. He does not merely define existence as human beings, as exclusively human existence in contrast to things/objects, but also

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<sup>189</sup> op. cit., 12, (Das Dasein ist ein Seiendes, das nicht nur unter anderem Seienden vorkommt. Es ist vielmehr dadurch ontisch ausgezeichnet, dass es diesem Seienden in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht“).

<sup>190</sup> ibid. („Das Sein selbst, zu dem das Dasein sich so oder so verhalten kann und immer irgendwie verhält, nennen wir Existenz.“).

<sup>191</sup> cf. Holzhey, H., 1991, 4.

<sup>192</sup> Heidegger, op. cit., 6 f. („Seiendes ist alles, wovon wir reden, wozu wir uns so und so verhalten, seiend ist auch, was und wie wir selbst sind. Sein liegt im Dass- und Sosein, in Realität, Vorhandenheit, Bestand, Geltung. Dasein, im ,es gibt““).

<sup>193</sup> cf. Wikipedia, „Sein und Zeit“, [www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki](http://www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki)

<sup>194</sup> Heidegger, op. cit., 52 f. („Dasein ist Seiendes, das sich in seinem Sein verstehend zu diesem Sein verhält.“).

<sup>195</sup> „Unter immanent gerichteten Akten (intentionalen Erlebnissen, E. S.) ... verstehen wir solche, zu deren Wesen es gehört, dass ihre intentionalen Gegenstände, wenn sie überhaupt existieren, zu demselben Erlebnisstrom gehören wie sie selbst. ... Transzendent gerichtet sind intentionale Erlebnisse, für die das nicht statthat; wie z. B. alle auf Wesen gerichteten Akte ...“ (Husserl, E., 1913-2, 157) Reines Bewusstsein ist für Husserl ausschließlich das transzendente. (op. cit., 142 ff.)

endows it with a 'basic constitution' when he speaks of "being-in-the-world as the basic constitution of existence (Dasein)"<sup>196</sup>: "These determinations of being must now be seen and understood a priori on the basis of the constitution of being, which we call being-in-the-world."<sup>197</sup> However, Heidegger immediately qualifies this by saying that 'being-in-the-world' must not be "thought of (as) ... the presence of a physical thing (human body) "in" an existing being. Being-in does not mean a spatial "inter-being" presence, just as "in" does not originary mean a spatial relationship of the kind mentioned ..."<sup>198</sup>

## Hyphen philosophy

At this point, we are not interested in the linguistic level, and we will leave aside the meaningless, manneristic flood of hyphenated terms. What is more important is what lies behind them. From an anthropological perspective, as well as from the political perspective referred to in the last chapter, what is particularly interesting is "being-in-the-world", which Heidegger introduces as follows: "Being-in is ... the formal existential expression of the being of existence, which has the essential constitution of being-in-the-world. Being-with-the-world in the sense of being absorbed in the world is an existentialism based on being-in"<sup>199</sup>, ergo an essential characteristic of human existence in contrast to the categories he reserves for the non-human world. In this way, he has created a consistent sequence of stages from human existence to "being-in" to "being-with-the-world", i. e. to the ultimately passive, dependent subject – if this term is appropriate at all, since human existence has been deprived of its actual human subjectivity.

The consequence, the conclusion of the entire construct, is in a sense the 'thrownness' with which Heidegger ultimately qualifies the entire human existence: "But thrownness is the mode of being of a being that is always its own possibilities, in such a way that it understands itself in and from them (projects itself onto them). [...] But the self is initially and mostly inauthentic, the "one's self". Being-in-the-world is always already decayed. The average everyday nature of existence can therefore be defined as decayed-

<sup>196</sup> Heidegger, op. cit., 52 f. („In-der-Welt-sein überhaupt als Grundverfassung des Daseins“).

<sup>197</sup> ibid. („Diese Seinsbestimmungen des Daseins müssen nun aber a priori auf dem Grunde der Seinsverfassung gesehen und verstanden werden, die wir das In-der-Welt-sein nennen.“).

<sup>198</sup> op. cit., 54 f. („... gedacht werden (als) ... das Vorhandensein eines Körperdinges (Menschenleib) ,in‘ einem vorhandenen Seienden. Das In-Sein meint so wenig ein räumliches ,Ineinander‘ Vorhandensein, als ,in‘ ursprünglich gar nicht eine räumliche Beziehung der genannten Art bedeutet ...“).

<sup>199</sup> ibid. („In-sein ist ... der formale existenziale Ausdruck des Seins des Daseins, das die wesenhafte Verfassung des In-der-Welt-seins hat. Das ,Sein bei‘ der Welt in dem ... Sinne des Aufgehens in der Welt ist ein im In-Sein fundiertes Existenzial“).

unfolded, thrown-projecting being-in-the-world, which in its being with the world and in being with others is concerned with its own very ability to be."<sup>200</sup>

This undoubtedly apologetic term – which encompasses inevitability, arbitrariness, opacity and, ultimately, a morbid teleology – thus culminates Heidegger's entire elaboration of more or less comprehensible determinations and definitions. It characterises human beings as beings 'towards death', a determination against which Heidegger allows no recourse or appeal. Being thrown towards death is, practically from the outset, the teleological fate of existence, in that this existence immediately raises the question of the meaning of being, which is answered, or at least should be answered, by being-in-the-world and being-towards-death.

It comes to this conclusion because Heidegger, unlike Hegel, whose philosophy distinguishes between phenomenology and logic, does not recognise or make such a clear distinction. The same lack of distinction can also be found in Husserl, in whom Waldenfels, who speaks of an "eidetic difference between fact and essence", even defines it as "the strength ... of the project", which lies in the fact that "no finished ideal(ity) is advocated ..." <sup>201</sup>. However, he does not arrive at the same death wish as student, colleague and successor Heidegger<sup>202</sup> – not to mention Merleau-Ponty or Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and their fundamentally life-affirming existentialism.

After this examination of Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenological ontology, we return to the actual goal of this essay: the most recent attempts to utilise the phenomenological method for anthropology. This method, also referred to by Husserl as eidetic, has only been mentioned in passing so far, although Husserl, as quoted at the beginning, considers it the basis of his phenomenological science. It is time to take a closer look.

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<sup>200</sup> quoted from Wikipedia, „Terminologie Heideggers“, [www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki](http://www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki) („Die Geworfenheit aber ist die Seinsart eines Seienden, das je seine Möglichkeiten selbst ist, so zwar, dass es sich in und aus ihnen versteht (auf sie sich entwirft). [...] Das Selbst aber ist zunächst und zumeist uneigentlich, das Man-selbst. Das In-der-Welt-sein ist immer schon verfallen. Die durchschnittliche Alltäglichkeit des Daseins kann demnach bestimmt werden als das verfallend-erschlossene, geworfen-entwerfende In-der-Welt-sein, dem es in seinem Sein bei der Welt und im Mitsein mit anderen um das eigenste Seinkönnen selbst geht.“).

<sup>201</sup> Waldenfels, B., 1991, 76

<sup>202</sup> We will return to their personal and political relationship in the fifth chapter.

### III – Back to things: with a method

The previous chapters have shown that phenomenology is not just some kind of (epistemological) “method” that can be “applied” to any science, but rather a philosophical system with a wide variety of forms and variants, some of which make it difficult to discover a common denominator behind them, as we have shown in the prededent chapters. It was, btw, the phenomenologists themselves who ensured that this classification of their theory as a method could spread.

The false trail towards this “method” was first laid by Husserl himself in the article for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*<sup>203</sup> already cited. With regard to its “applicability” in the various sciences outside philosophy, the philosopher in a certain way claims this for his phenomenology in the last part of the passage cited: “.. to enable a methodical reform of all sciences as a consistent consequence ...”. The fact that the collection of essays published by Held is entitled “The Phenomenological Method” unfortunately did not provide much clarity on this issue either, but this cannot be blamed on Husserl himself, whose articles in this collection have completely different titles – for example, “Fact and Essence”, “The Phenomenological Fundamental Consideration” or “Refutation of Psychologism”<sup>204</sup>. The focus on this whatsoever method probably is therefore mainly due to the fact that Husserl always sought to distinguish himself above all from classical metaphysical philosophy.

On the other hand, the philosopher writes extensively and very specifically about what he considers to be the actual methods – methods, not method – of his philosophical system, namely the ‘epoché’ (emphasis in contrast to the epoch or period in the history or ideas, on the final ‘e’) and (eidetic) reduction. Both are at the centre of this chapter and, to some extent, the following one. It will also become apparent that, if deprived of their ontological context, these methods lose everything phenomenological and thus their actual content, becoming rather trivial-sounding, ultimately contradictory and, especially for anthropology, not really useful or at least helpful “user manual”.

However, one caveat must be made right at the outset: In fact, it is primarily reduction, or more precisely the process of repeated reductions, that is an “applicable” method.

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<sup>203</sup> “Phenomenology” refers to a novel descriptive method that emerged in philosophy at the turn of the century and an a priori science that arose from it, which is intended to provide the fundamental organon for a strictly scientific philosophy and, as a logical consequence, to enable a methodological reform of all sciences. (Husserl, E., 1927, 196).

<sup>204</sup> op. cit., 98, 131, 33

Although Husserl explicitly refers to “epoché” as a method<sup>205</sup>, it could be seen more as a prerequisite, a kind of mental attitude<sup>206</sup> when carrying out reduction, as an integral part of it, in the form of a step or stage, which is how Husserl also identifies it.<sup>207</sup>

## Epochal bracketing

The term “epoché” (ancient Greek ἐποχή, pause, restraint, from ἐπέχειν, épéchein to pause, to restrain, in modern Greek more commonly meaning era, time), borrowed from ancient Greek and defined by Husserl as ‘bracketing’ or “suspension”<sup>208</sup> which he understands as a phenomenological response to the “universal attempt at doubt” by the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650), means for the phenomenologist: “All sciences relating to this natural world, however firmly established they may be, however much I admire them, however little I think of objecting to them in the slightest, I switch off, I make absolutely no use of their validity. I do not adopt a single one of the propositions belonging to them, even if they are perfectly evident”<sup>209</sup>, and he specifies: “I may only accept it after I have bracketed it.”<sup>210</sup> Unlike skepticism, this is not an absolute doubt about reality, but only a bracketing, whereby “... the truly experienced (world), clearly evident in the context of experience,” is to be perceived “untested, but also uncontested”<sup>211</sup>, “pure,” i. e., without prejudices or preconceptions and without the transcendental.

Husserl arrives at the necessity of doubt (and bracketing) through the difficulties that “natural” thinking cannot resolve<sup>212</sup>. “With the awakening of reflection on the relationship between cognition and object, abysmal difficulties arise. Cognition, the most self-evident thing in natural thinking, suddenly appears as a mystery”<sup>213</sup>, which raises new

<sup>205</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 142.

<sup>206</sup> In “The Idea of Phenomenology,” Husserl himself refers to his method as a way of thinking. (Husserl, E., 1986 [2016], 22)

<sup>207</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 146.

<sup>208</sup> op. cit., 140.

<sup>209</sup> op. cit., 1442 („Alle auf diese natürliche Welt bezüglichen Wissenschaften, so fest sie mir stehen, so sehr ich sie bewundere, so wenig ich daran denke, das mindeste gegen sie einzuwenden, schalte ich aus, ich mache von ihren Geltungen absolut keinen Gebrauch. Keinen einzigen der in sie hineingehörigen Sätze, und seien sie von vollkommener Evidenz, mache ich mir zu eigen“).

<sup>210</sup> ibid., („Ich darf ihn nur annehmen, nachdem ich ihm die Klammer erteilt habe.“).

<sup>211</sup> op. cit., 143 („... die wirklich erfahrene, sich im Zusammenhange der Erfahrungen klar ausweisende (Welt)“ „ungeprüft, aber auch unbestritten“).

<sup>212</sup> The German philosopher Walter Jaeschke (1945-2022) interprets Hegel as follows: “As is well known, mere observation does not constitute science.” (Jaeschke, W., 2020, 58)

<sup>213</sup> Husserl, E. 1986 (2016), 18 f. („Mit dem Erwachen der Reflexion über das Verhältnis von Erkenntnis und Gegenstand tun sich abgrundtiefe Schwierigkeiten auf. Die Erkenntnis, im natürlichen Denken die allerselbstverständlichste Sache, steht mit einem Mal als Mysterium da“).

questions: “But how can cognition be certain of its correspondence with the objects it cognizes, how can it reliably transcend itself and its objects?”<sup>214</sup> “How do I, the knower, know, and can I ever know with certainty, that not only are my experiences these acts of cognition, but also that what they cognize exists, indeed that there is anything at all that could be opposed as an object of cognition?”<sup>215</sup> Even “... the real meaning of logical lawfulness, which is beyond question for natural thinking, now becomes questionable and even doubtful.”<sup>216</sup>

There is a need to resolve these epistemological mysteries. The first step is to “question all knowledge”<sup>217</sup>, which presents the difficulty that “nothing can be taken for granted”<sup>218</sup>, as we have already learned from our consideration of “epoché,” “... nothing of the ambiguity and doubtfulness ... that otherwise provide all knowledge of its enigmatic, problematic character”<sup>219</sup>. As shown, it is the transcendental nature of “natural” experience that must consequently be excluded.

As an attitude, as a kind of epistemological or even moral claim, this bracketing out of and thus exclusion from “pure science” and “pure consciousness” of “preconceptions,” i. e., preconceived concepts and terms, this “epoché” is entirely understandable and comprehensible. How this should be done in practice, or whether such a “disconnection” is even possible in light of the aforementioned neuroscientific research, is a question to which phenomenology largely fails to provide an answer. The approach taken in the already mentioned essay “Fremder, Quo Vadis”<sup>220</sup> seems more promising. In anthropology, this approach consists of always being aware of “preconceptions,” i. e., culturally influenced, Eurocentric imprints on one's own thinking, and making them transparent in the process of cognition or in scientific work. To believe that one can switch such cultural influences on or off in one's understanding, as if with a light switch, would be tantamount to wanting to shut down the neocortex of the brain, along with all the stored (social) models and simulations<sup>221</sup>. It is doubtful whether such an enterprise

<sup>214</sup> op. cit., 20 („Wie kann nun aber die Erkenntnis ihrer Übereinstimmung mit den erkannten Objekten gewiss werden, wie kann sie über sich hinaus und ihre Objekte zuverlässig treffen?“).

<sup>215</sup> ibid. („Woher weiß ich, der Erkennende, und kann ich je zuverlässig wissen, dass nicht nur meine Erlebnisse diese Erkenntnisakte sind, sondern auch dass ist, was sie erkennen, ja dass überhaupt irgend etwas ist, das als Objekt der Erkenntnis gegenüberzusetzen wäre?“).

<sup>216</sup> op. cit., 21 („... die reale Bedeutung der logischen Gesetzlichkeit, die für das natürliche Denken außer aller Frage steht, wird nun fraglich und selbst zweifelhaft.“).

<sup>217</sup> op. cit., („das In-Frage-stellen jeglichen Wissens“).

<sup>218</sup> op. cit., („nichts als vorgegeben“).

<sup>219</sup> op. cit., („... nichts von der Unklarheit und Zweifelhaftigkeit ..., die Erkenntnissen sonst den Charakter des Rätselhaften, Problematischen verleihen.“).

<sup>220</sup> Supp, E., 2024

<sup>221</sup> cf. Barrett, L.F., 2017, Barrett, L.F., 2021 sowie Hawkins, J. und R. Dawkins, A Thousand Brains: A New Theory of Intelligence, 2021.

could work.<sup>222</sup>

It should therefore come as no surprise that Adorno<sup>223</sup>, in his typically strict diction, considers the entire “epoché” to be an illusion, and even among phenomenologists there are statements on this subject, such as those by Herzog and Graumann, which go precisely in this direction of “maintaining awareness” and “making transparent”: “We have known for some time that science, strictly speaking, cannot be practiced ‘without presuppositions’.... This makes critical reflection on our own assumptions, traditions, and habits of thought all the more important.”<sup>224</sup> And this is perfectly possible without imaginary bracketing or exclusion.

Even a recourse to one's own consciousness does not really help, a recourse to which the philosopher and educator Friedrich Kümmel (1933-2021) refers when he states that Husserl accomplishes “an explicit return of consciousness to itself with the epoché”<sup>225</sup>. If he were right, Husserl would be assuming an extreme subjectivism of (scientific) perception, which would contradict his explicit claim to develop a “method for discovering the truth”<sup>226</sup>, the truth about reality, about the world. It should only be noted here that this extreme subjectivism does indeed shine through in Husserl himself, but this discussion would require a much more fundamental, chronologically ordered examination of his philosophy than can be achieved here.

Let us note: conscious retention rather than elimination or ostensible elimination would be a recipe for any science, not just philosophy, but it would not be a truly new claim, nor a new “method.” To illustrate this, it suffices to pick up Thomas Kuhn's classic work on the structure of scientific revolutions<sup>227</sup>, but basically this maxim also applies to non-scientific work such as journalism—restraint toward preconceived concepts should be part of any solid basic training—medicine, or even technical development work. Prejudices and preconceived opinions do not make us smart, but blind, and recognizing this requires neither phenomenology nor phenomenologists, nor inflated, supposedly oh-so-new and innovative methods or concepts<sup>228</sup>, whereby phenomenological theory

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<sup>222</sup> “Nothing immediate, not even anything factual, in which philosophical thought hopes to escape through itself, is granted to thinking reflection other than through thought.” („Keine Unmittelbarkeit, auch kein Faktisches, in dem der philosophische Gedanke der Vermittlung durch sich selbst zu entrinnen hofft, wird der denkenden Reflexion anders zuteil denn durch den Gedanken.“, Adorno, T. W.: 1970, 16)

<sup>223</sup> Adorno, T. W., op. cit., 35 f.

<sup>224</sup> Herzog, M. & C. F. Graumann, op. cit., XV („Wir wissen seit geraumer Zeit, dass Wissenschaft, streng genommen, nicht ‚voraussetzungsfrei‘ betrieben werden kann.... Umso wichtiger wird dann die kritische Reflexion, die sich auf unsere eigenen Annahmen, Traditionen und Denkgewohnheiten richtet.“).

<sup>225</sup> Kümmel, F., Zum Verhältnis von Phänomenologie und Hermeneutik, 2003, 6. („mit der Epoché eine ausdrückliche Rückwendung des Bewusstseins auf sich selber“).

<sup>226</sup> Husserl, E., 2021, 12. („Verfahren zur Erkenntnis der Wahrheit“).

<sup>227</sup> Kuhn, T., The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 1962.

<sup>228</sup> see the already quoted text of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Husserl, E., 1927, 196



ultimately only contradicts itself when it attempts to realize a theory- and concept-free approach with the overall very theoretical and a priori methodological concept of “epoché.”

## Eidetically reduced

This brings us to the most important point of phenomenological philosophy that is relevant in this context. It concerns the aforementioned “reduction,” which is repeatedly referred to as the actual phenomenological method. But beware! Anyone who thinks that phenomenology is now finally becoming concrete and comprehensible, that Husserl is finally “getting to the point,” may be disappointed. For Husserl knows—once again, one might say—not just one, not just THE reduction, but two: a “phenomenological” and an “eidetic” one<sup>229</sup>, whereby the meaning of the two types may have shifted over the years, an assertion which, as already emphasized, would require a more thorough examination.

Paradoxically, Husserl does not explain (at least not consistently) the phenomenological reduction – as one would expect from the “inventor” of the philosophical system of the same name – but rather the eidetic<sup>230</sup> reduction to the heart of the matter, stating: “We follow our general principle that every individual occurrence has its essence, which can be grasped in eidetic purity...” and “(we) fix... in adequate ideation the pure essences that interest us. The singular facts, the factuality of the natural world in general, thus disappear from our theoretical view – as everywhere where we carry out purely eidetic research.”<sup>231</sup>

In contrast, he defines elsewhere: “This method of ‘phenomenological reduction’ is ... the basic method of pure psychology, the prerequisite for all of its specific theoretical methods.” He then goes on to define the difference between the two in the “epoché”: “A consistent ἐποχή (epoché) is required of the phenomenologist if he wants to gain

<sup>229</sup> Waldenfels also attests to this: “... whereby reduction is to be understood literally as reducing xxx to xxx. Eidetic reduction answers the question of “how” something is to be thought of “as something,” while transcendental reduction explains how the difference between ‘something’ and “as something,” between what and how, can be thought of in turn ... Eidetic reduction means reducing what is actually given to its eidos, its essence, that is, reducing it to a basic form that can itself be derived from experience.” (Waldenfels, B., 1991, 72)

<sup>230</sup> At this point, Merleau-Ponty's statement that every reduction is necessarily transcendental and eidetic seems at least worth being discussed. (cf. Merleau-Ponty, M., 1945, 15)

<sup>231</sup> Husserl, E., 1913-2, 147 („Wir folgen unserem allgemeinen Prinzip, dass jedes individuelle Vorkommnis sein Wesen hat, das in eidetischer Reinheit fassbar ist ...“ und „(wir) fixieren .. in adäquater Ideation die reinen Wesen, die uns interessieren. Die singulären Fakta, die Faktizität der natürlichen Welt überhaupt entschwindet dabei unserem theoretischen Blicke – wie überall, wo wir rein eidetische Forschung vollziehen.“).

consciousness as pure phenomenon ...”<sup>232</sup>. And he continues: "The universal epoché with regard to the world becoming conscious (its 'bracketing') excludes from the phenomenological field the world that is absolutely real for the subject in question, but in its place comes the world that is conscious (perceived, remembered, judged, thought, evaluated, etc.) world 'as such', the 'world in brackets' or, which is the same thing, the respective sense of consciousness in its various modes (sense of perception, sense of memory, etc.) takes the place of the world or the individual worldly realm par excellence.”<sup>233</sup> "If phenomenological reduction", he continues, "created access to the 'phenomena' of real and then also possible inner experience, the method of 'eidetic reduction' based on it provides access to the invariant essential forms of the purely spiritual sphere as a whole.”<sup>234</sup>

## Phenomenological freestyle

"Eidetic" reduction occurs when, through repeated bracketing or elimination, the transcendental nature of "natural," empirically experienceable things (objects, the world) is disregarded, revealing their "eidos", their essence. In a sense, it is therefore a process of abstraction that takes place in various steps or stages – whereby Husserl makes a clear distinction between abstraction and eideticism, but more on that in a moment – from the empirical world, the result of which, however, is not the absolutely indeterminate being of Hegelian logic, but an essence, an "eidos," which represents the fundamental property of the still 'originary' thing or "originary" phenomenon.<sup>235</sup>

The problem arises once again, in a slightly modified form, in Husserl's methodological

<sup>232</sup> Husserl, 1927, 201 („Es bedarf ... einer konsequenten ἐποχή (Epoché) des Phänomenologen, wenn er sein Bewusstsein als reines Phänomen gewinnen will ... „Die(se) Methode der ‚phänomenologischen Reduktion‘ ist ... die Grundmethode der reinen Psychologie, die Voraussetzung aller ihrer spezifisch theoretischen Methoden.“).

<sup>233</sup> ibid. („Es bedarf ... einer konsequenten ἐποχή (Epoché) des Phänomenologen, wenn er sein Bewusstsein als reines Phänomen gewinnen will ... Die universale Epoché hinsichtlich der bewusst werdenden Welt (ihre ‚Einklammerung‘) schaltet aus dem phänomenologischen Feld die für das betreffende Subjekt schlechthin seiende Welt aus, aber an ihre Stelle tritt die so und so bewusste [wahrgenommene, erinnerte, beurteilte, gedachte, gewertete etc.] Welt ‚als solche‘, die ‚Welt in Klammern‘ oder, was dasselbe, es tritt an die Stelle der Welt bzw. des einzelnen Weltlichen schlechthin der jeweilige Bewusstseinsinn in seinen verschiedenen Modis [Wahrnehmungssinn, Erinnerungssinn usw.].“).

<sup>234</sup> op. cit., 204 („Schuf die phänomenologische Reduktion den Zugang zu den ‚Phänomenen‘ wirklicher und dann auch möglicher innerer Erfahrung, so verschafft die in ihr fundierte Methode der ‚eidetischen Reduktion‘ den Zugang zu den invarianten Wesensgestalten der rein seelischen Gesamtsphäre.“)

<sup>235</sup> Adorno, as already quoted: "By suppressing the subjective element, thinking, as a condition of logic, Husserl also conceals the objective element, the matter of thinking that is indissoluble in thinking. In its place comes thinking that is unenlightened and therefore stretched to the point of objectivity: logical absolutism is, without realizing it, absolute idealism from the outset. Only the equivocation of the term 'object in general' allows Husserl to interpret the propositions of formal logic as objects without a concrete element. Thus, the mechanism of forgetting becomes

approach of free eidetic variation, which he uses in the context of reduction to recognize the essence of things. This free variation, which Husserl apparently developed quite late – in the 1920s<sup>236</sup> –, i. e., in comparison to “eidos” and “epoché,” serves him to recognize the essence or essential vision, which in turn is already explained in texts from the early 20th century without the “free variation”<sup>237</sup>. However, Husserl makes a strict distinction between empirical and eidetic variation, a kind of doubling of the concepts we repeatedly encountered, for example, in Heidegger’s ‘being’ and Husserl’s definition of “phenomenon.”

According to Husserl, “empirical generalities” “... have an extent of real and actual details. Obtained initially on the basis of the repetition of identical objects and then of merely similar objects given in factual experience, they refer not only to this limited and, so to speak, countable extent of real details from which they were originally obtained, but they also generally have a horizon that presumptively refers to further experience of details ... When it comes to the realities of the given infinite world, we can imagine any number of further transferable details that encompass this empirical generality as a real

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that of reification. It is useless to invoke Hegelian logic, in which abstract being becomes nothingness, as in Husserl’s ‘object in general’. Hegel’s ‘being, pure being, – without any further determination’ is not to be confused with the highest category of subtraction, ‘object in general’.” („Indem Husserl das subjektive Element, Denken, als Bedingung der Logik unterschlägt, eskamotiert er auch das objektive, die in Denken unauflösbare Materie des Denkens. An ihre Stelle tritt das unerhellte und darum zur Objektivität schlechthin aufgespreizte Denken: der logische Absolutismus ist, ohne es zu ahnen, von Anbeginn an absoluter Idealismus. Einzig die Äquivokation des Terminus ‚Gegenstand überhaupt‘ erlaubt es Husserl, die Sätze der formalen Logik, als Gegenstände ohne gegenständliches Element zu interpretieren. So wird der Mechanismus des Vergessens zu dem der Verdinglichung. Nutzlos die Berufung auf die Hegelsche Logik, der das abstrakte Sein zum Nichts werde, so wie beim Husserlschen ‚Gegenstand überhaupt‘. Das Hegelsche ‚Seyn, reines Seyn, – ohne alle weitere Bestimmung‘ ist nicht mit der obersten Substraktionskategorie ‚Gegenstand überhaupt‘ zu verwechseln.“, Adorno, T. W., op. cit., 74). And then again: “All prima philosophia up to Heidegger’s claim of ‘destruction’ was essentially residual theory; truth is supposed to be what remains ... the most hollow thing of all. The ‘content’ of Husserl’s phenomenological residue is also quite meager and empty and is revealed as such as soon as philosophy, as in the sociological excursions of the Cartesian Meditations, dares to take even the smallest step to return from the prison of the residue to free life.” („Alle prima philosophia bis zu Heideggers Anspruch der ‚Destruktion‘ war wesentlich Residualtheorie; Wahrheit soll sein, was übrig bleibt ... das Allerschälste. Der ‚Inhalt auch von Husserls phänomenologischem Residuum ist ganz dürrig und leer und wird dessen überführt, sobald die Philosophie, wie in den soziologischen Exkursen der Cartesianischen Meditationen, auch nur den kleinsten Schritt wagt, um aus dem Gefängnis des Residuums ins freie Leben sich zurückzugeben.“, Adorno, T. W., op. cit., 23, similarly in Adorno, T. W., 1966, 79). Cf. Husserl’s “insight that consciousness has an inherent being in itself, which in its absolute essence is not affected by phenomenological elimination. Thus, it remains as a ‘phenomenological residue,’ as a fundamentally unique region of being that can indeed become the field of a new science—phenomenology.” („Einsicht, dass Bewusstsein in sich selbst ein Eigensein hat, das in seinem absoluten Eigenwesen durch die phänomenologische Ausschaltung nicht betroffen wird. Somit bleibt es als ‚phänomenologisches Residuum‘ zurück, als eine prinzipiell eigenartige Seinsregion, die in der Tat das Feld einer neuen Wissenschaft werden kann – der Phänomenologie.“, Husserl, 1913-2, 145).

<sup>236</sup> cf. Husserl, E., *Wesenserschauung durch eidetische Variation* (Erfahrung und Urteil, 1-4, 86-89), 1938, in: Husserl, Edmund, 2021 (2024)

<sup>237</sup> Husserl, E., op. cit., 101 ff.

possibility."<sup>238</sup>

For Husserl, the catch with this type of empirical generality, the process of abstraction from the details of the real world, the result of which is often confused in literature with eidetic insight, lies in the randomness of the selected or selectable details: "The scope is then infinitely open, and yet the unity of the empirically obtained species and higher genus is a 'random' one."<sup>239</sup> He then continues: "The opposite concept of this randomness is the aprioric necessity"<sup>240</sup>, for which, instead of "those empirical concepts, pure concepts must be formed whose formation is therefore not dependent on the randomness of the factually given starting point and its empirical horizons, and which do not merely encompass an open scope retrospectively, as it were, but rather in advance: a priori."<sup>241</sup> Whether the whole then still satisfies the claim of epoché, the pre-opinion and theory-free (scientific) acquisition of knowledge qua bracketing, may be doubted, especially when one reads that "they (the pure concepts, E. S.) must be capable of prescribing rules for all empirical details"<sup>242</sup>.

Doubts also arise when Husserl goes into detail about "essential vision" and the acquisition of "pure concepts." "From what has been said, it has already become clear that empirical comparison is not sufficient for obtaining pure concepts or essential concepts, but that special precautions must be taken to free the general, which initially stands out in the empirical given, from its character of randomness."<sup>243</sup> Husserl believes that he can achieve this by "modifying an experienced or imagined objectivity into an arbitrary example, which at the same time takes on the character of a guiding 'model', the starting point for the creation of an open-ended number of variants, i. e., a variation. In other words, we allow ourselves to be guided by the fact as a model for its transformation into pure imagination. In this process, new similar images are to be obtained as afterimages, as fantasy images, all of which are concrete similarities to the

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<sup>238</sup> Husserl, E. 1938, 255 („Empirische Allgemeinheiten haben einen Umfang wirklicher und realer Einzelheiten. Gewonnen zunächst auf Grund der Wiederholung gleicher und dann weiter bloß ähnlicher, in faktischer Erfahrung gegebener Gegenstände, beziehen sie sich nicht nur auf diesen begrenzten und sozusagen auszählbaren Umfang von wirklichen Einzelheiten, aus denen sie ursprünglich gewonnen wurden; sondern sie haben in der Regel einen Horizont, der präsumptiv verweist auf weitere Erfahrung von Einzelheiten ... Wir können uns, wenn es sich um Realitäten der vorgegebenen unendlichen Welt handelt, eine beliebige Anzahl weiter gebbarer Einzelheiten denken, die diese empirische Allgemeinheit als reale Möglichkeit mit umgreift.“).

<sup>239</sup> *ibid.* („Der Umfang ist dann ein unendlich offener, und doch ist die Einheit der empirisch gewonnenen Spezies und höheren Gattung eine ‚zufällige‘.“).

<sup>240</sup> *ibid.* („Der Gegenbegriff dieser Zufälligkeit ist die apriorische Notwendigkeit“).

<sup>241</sup> *ibid.* (statt „jenen empirischen Begriffen reine Begriffe zu bilden sind, deren Bildung also nicht von der Zufälligkeit des faktisch gegebenen Ausgangsgliedes und seiner empirischen Horizonte abhängig ist, und die einen offenen Umfang nicht gleichsam bloß im Nachhinein umgreifen, sondern eben vorweg: a priori“).

<sup>242</sup> *op. Cit.*, 256.

<sup>243</sup> *ibid.* („Aus dem Gesagten ist bereits klar geworden, dass zur Gewinnung der reinen Begriffe oder Wesensbegriffe empirische Vergleichung nicht genügen kann, sondern dass durch besondere Vorkehrungen das im empirisch Gegebenen zunächst sich abhebende Allgemeine vor allem von seinem Charakter der Zufälligkeit befreit werden muss.“).

original image. In this way, we freely and arbitrarily create variants, each of which, like the entire process of variation itself, occurs in the subjective mode of experience of 'arbitrary'. It then becomes apparent that a unity runs through this diversity of recreations, that in such free variations of an original image ... an invariant necessarily remains as the necessary general form ..."<sup>244</sup>

With what great success, then, the randomness of the abstraction process from empiricism, from the "details," would be replaced by the arbitrariness of the a priori "archetype," selection, and mental reproduction in the examination of character! A gain in knowledge? Everyone can judge that for themselves.

A possible concrete example of this type of essential observation could be the attempt to determine the "essence" of a brown horse. Empirical generality poses no difficulties, since when we look at a number "n" of real or imagined brown horses, we quickly identify the common features: brown color, four legs, pointed ears, and whatever else comes to mind. The process of infinitely repeated bracketing with subsequent reduction does not really get us any further either. If we chose the color "brown" when bracketing, the horse would remain; in the opposite case, we would have to bracket the "horse" and end up with the form rather than the substance, even though for Hegel<sup>245</sup> this form is an inherent part of the essence, which would make the whole bracketing process seem obsolete anyway. "Precisely because form is as essential to essence as essence itself, it cannot be grasped and expressed merely as essence, i. e., as immediate substance ... but equally as form and in all the richness of developed form ...," writes the philosopher, specifying that, unlike Husserl, he does not regard essence as the ultimate abstraction of thought anyway: "Absolute essence is therefore not exhausted in the definition of being the simple essence of thought, but is all reality, and this reality is only as essence; ..." <sup>246</sup>

If, following Husserl, we bracket everything that belongs to the horse or constitutes its

<sup>244</sup> op. cit., 256 f. („Abwandlung einer erfahrenen oder phantasierten Gegenständlichkeit zum beliebigen Exempel, das zugleich den Charakter des leitenden ‚Vorbildes‘ erhält, des Ausgangsgliedes für die Erzeugung einer offen endlosen Mannigfaltigkeit von Varianten, also auf einer Variation. M. a. W. wir lassen uns vom Faktum als Vorbild für seine Umgestaltung in reiner Phantasie leiten. Es sollen dabei immer neue ähnliche Bilder als Nachbilder, als Phantasiebilder gewonnen werden, die sämtlich konkrete Ähnlichkeiten des Urbildes sind. Wir erzeugen so frei willkürlich Varianten, deren jede ebenso wie der ganze Prozess der Variation selbst im subjektiven Erlebnismodus des ‚beliebig‘ auftritt. Es zeigt sich dann, dass durch diese Mannigfaltigkeit von Nachgestaltungen eine Einheit hindurchgeht, dass bei solchen freien Variationen eines Urbildes ... in Notwendigkeit eine Invariante erhalten bleibt als die notwendige allgemeine Form ...“).

<sup>245</sup> Hegel, G. W. F., TWA 3, 24.

<sup>246</sup> op. cit., 442 („Gerade weil die Form dem Wesen so wesentlich ist als es sich selbst, ist es nicht bloß als Wesen, d. h. als unmittelbare Substanz ... zu fassen und auszudrücken, sondern ebensosehr als Form und im ganzen Reichtum der entwickelten Form ...“, schreibt der Philosoph und präzisiert, dass er das Wesen, anders als Husserl, ohnehin nicht als die letztendliche Abstraktion des Denkens betrachtet: „Das absolute Wesen ist daher nicht in der Bestimmung erschöpft, das einfache Wesen des Denkens zu sein, sondern es ist alle Wirklichkeit, und diese Wirklichkeit ist nur als Wesen; ...“).

characteristics, then we must ultimately renounce all of its concrete or abstract properties: brown, four-legged, odd-toed ungulate, mammal, means of transport, living creature, and all that remains of our beautiful horse is a vague, conceptless perception, perhaps at best an ego-related functional definition when I am riding it or having it pull a cart for me. Whether this is then the essence, the fundamental nature, the substance of our brown horse is doubtful, just as it is doubtful whether the “thing” can be such at all without the culturally influenced category concept of “horse.” I remove everything transcendental and arrive at the essence—that was Husserl's “recipe,” but that is not how one arrives at the essence, but rather at philosophical nothingness.

The problem, as already mentioned above, is that the final possible bracketing, elimination, purification, i. e., the final abstraction of the transcendental, is not, as in Hegel's Being, a category of the logical system, but one of the cognitive process, the final result of which is supposed to be just as “originary” as the “things themselves” or, better said, the phenomena themselves. And what is more: if, as noted, the “epoché” is basically based on an illusion, then this naturally also applies to reduction, which is based on the “epoché.” What is confusing at this point—as so much else is—is that Husserl then wants to eliminate both the empirical and the essence at the same time: “Now I ask,” he writes, “can we not gain an attitude such that the empirical, the peculiarity of the given natural attitude, remains completely excluded, and in such a way that its essence as the essence of nature also remains excluded, while on the other hand components remain that enter into the essence of nature, or into nature itself in individuo? A question that is initially incomprehensible.”<sup>247</sup>

With “free eidetic variation,” on the other hand, we don't even end up with a complete, undefined abstraction, but remain stuck in arbitrariness from the outset. What should or do we want to choose as the “archetype” of our brown horse to be reproduced? The brown color? But then that would also include all brown cats, brown briefcases, brown tree trunks. Would the “eidos” of all these brown “things” then be that they are brown? Apart from the fact that the “magic wand” of eidetic variation basically makes reduction superfluous, since one can already ‘see’ the essence through simple mental reproduction of an “archetype”. And isn't it simply tautological to inevitably arrive at “brown horses” when answering the question about the essence of a brown horse? Questions upon questions that phenomenology would have to answer, and which should at least be discussed when attempting to make phenomenology the “organon” of

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<sup>247</sup> Husserl, E., 1977 (1992), 45 („Nun frage ich: Können wir nicht eine Einstellung gewinnen derart, dass das Empirische, das Eigentümliche der Gegebenheit der natürlichen Einstellung, ganz ausgeschaltet bleibt, und zwar so, dass auch sein Wesen als Wesen von Natur ausgeschaltet bleibt, während andererseits doch Komponenten erhalten bleiben, die in das Wesen von Natur, bzw. in die Natur selbst in individuo eingehen? Eine zunächst unverständliche Frage.“).

anthropology?

## IV – Phenomenal anthropology

Returning to the actual topic of this essay, namely the relatively recent attempts by anthropologists, barely 30 years old, to appropriate and utilize the so-called phenomenological method, which dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, for its own research! If there has been much talk of Husserlian or Heideggerian philosophy and significantly less of anthropological theory, it is because phenomenology, or rather the many different phenomenologies, present so many contradictions and points worth of being discussed that a number of questions need to be clarified before any attempt can be made to access what Husserl called the “organon,” the tool or toolbox.

There are slightly differing opinions as to when exactly the first attempts in this direction were made, particularly by anthropologists from the English-speaking world. While Schnegg states that the foundations for this were laid in the 1990s and that the full potential of phenomenological concepts has only come to light in recent years<sup>248</sup>, Desjarlais and Throop date the beginning to the mid-1980s. However, in the introduction into anthropology<sup>249</sup> published by Frankfurt anthropologist Karl-Heinz Kohl in 1993, neither phenomenology nor the most important authors of the new trend, Zigon, Desjarlais, or Throop appear, which in turn conforms the fact that German-speaking anthropology was late to jump on the phenomenological “bandwagon”, even though phenomenology itself clearly is of German origin and has been around for roughly a century.

Furthermore, quite independently of the aforementioned anthropological theory, a certain skepticism is warranted with regard to such a reception of phenomenology for all possible sciences. Herzog and Graumann make such skepticism appear appropriate when they write: “Phenomenology, or rather its reception, has occasionally been attributed with functions that it has or could have for the human sciences. The most important of these are discussed as being heuristic (opening up one's own cognition and learning, E. S.), critical (critical of all current theories, E. S.), and descriptive (in the sense of phenomenology, intentionally descriptive, E. S.). In fact, when properly understood, these attributes refer to necessary, though not sufficient, elements of a phenomenological orientation in the human sciences. Properly understood means in

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<sup>248</sup> Schnegg, M., op. cit., 4.

<sup>249</sup> Kohl, K.-H., *Ethnologie – die Wissenschaft vom kulturell Fremden*, 1993 (2000)



their phenomenological intention."<sup>250</sup> Particularly with regard to the latter attribute, the intentionally descriptive one, caution is more than advisable, as it means that any reference to the so-called phenomenological method is obsolete if one attempts to leave the ontological side of phenomenology out of the equation.

The problems begin with the question of who among contemporary anthropologists can be identified as a follower of the phenomenological approach or sees themselves as such. This is regardless the necessity for every self-proclaimed phenomenologist to make clear on which of the many, highly contradictory variants of the school they are basing their work – on Husserl's or Heidegger's, Merleau-Ponty's or Waldenfels' – essential for being able to discuss and decide on the plausibility and meaningfulness of the phenomenological method applied. Failure to clarify this, exposes the scientist, at best, to accusations of cherry-picking, which, given the contradictions with which Husserl or Heidegger themselves repeatedly cause confusion, might even seem understandable.

Some anthropologists have also recognized the necessity of clear (self-)identification and critically noted this, such as Desjarlais and Throop, who were already cited: „Given that Husserl viewed phenomenology as a philosophy of continual beginnings, it is quite possible to argue, however, that there are as many phenomenologies as there are phenomenologists.”<sup>251</sup> However, it is doubtful whether this justifies the two authors' assertion or makes it seem reasonable to have identified phenomenological ideas in Buddhism and Hinduism as well.<sup>252</sup>

When Robert Bernet writes that the phenomenological “... method ... consists of a series of reductions proposed by Husserl ... (but that) later phenomenologists ... do not always adhere to these reductions ...”<sup>253</sup>, then, given this abandonment of THE phenomenological methodology par excellence, the question of the meaningfulness of the label “phenomenology” is obvious. The impression that such phenomenology is perhaps little more than a fashionable buzzword cannot be entirely dismissed.

Some of those who were elevated to the status of phenomenologists in the anthropological-philosophical debate may have been wide-eyed with “delight” if they

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<sup>250</sup> Herzog, M. & C. F. Graumann, op. cit., XIII ff. („Man hat der Phänomenologie oder besser deren Rezeption gelegentlich Funktionen zugeschrieben, die sie für die Humanwissenschaften habe bzw. haben könne. Als deren wichtigste werden diskutiert die heuristische, die kritische und die deskriptive. Tatsächlich verweisen diese Attribute, recht verstanden, auf notwendige, wenn auch nicht zureichende Elemente einer phänomenologischen Orientierung in den Humanwissenschaften. Recht verstanden, soll hier heißen, in ihrer phänomenologischen Intention.“).

<sup>251</sup> Desjarlais, R. & J. C. Throop, a. op. cit., 95.

<sup>252</sup> op. cit., 96.

<sup>253</sup> Bernet, R., 2023.

were still alive. This could apply, for example, to the German philosopher and sociologist Max Ferdinand Scheler (1874-1928), whom Schnegg identifies as an important phenomenological author<sup>254</sup>, but whom the Encyclopaedia Britannica knows for having had, “although remembered for his phenomenological approach”, not only little sympathy for Husserl, but for also having been a staunch opponent of Husserl's methodology, of his “Logical Investigations” and “Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy”. Whether phenomenology without the method makes more sense than the phenomenological method without the ontological system, as has already been discussed, is something everyone can decide for themselves.

Another case is that of the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), whom Desjarlais and Throop describe as having made only occasional and ambivalent forays into phenomenology, but at the same time characterize as an anthropologist who attempted to apply phenomenology to anthropological questions.<sup>255</sup> At best, Geertz, who denies any close affinity with the phenomenological system in the interview – “I don't deal with systems”<sup>256</sup>, he declares, and “phenomenological analysis is not at the center of my thinking”<sup>257</sup> – could be interpreted phenomenologically with his concept of “thick description”. But that would mean, as already explained, to reduce phenomenology and its method to the descriptive aspects, and does not sound very convincing, especially since Geertz equates his “applied phenomenology” with “applied hermeneutics”<sup>258</sup> in the same interview, an aspect that will not be discussed further here.<sup>259</sup>

Geertz emphasizes that the same “phenomenalistic” – not phenomenological (!) – observation<sup>260</sup> cannot recognize the essential difference between two phenomena that appear identical at first glance – his example, a wink, is sometimes a nervous tic, sometimes a conspiratorial sign among insiders. This presupposes that the essence of

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<sup>254</sup> „Phenomenology developed in Germany at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the works of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Edith Stein, Max Scheler, and others...” (Schnegg, M., op. cit., 2)

<sup>255</sup> Desjarlais, R. & C. J. Throop, op. cit., 89: „Despite Geertz's occasional (and ambivalent) forays into phenomenology, he was not the only, or even the first, anthropologist to attempt to apply phenomenology to ethnographic concerns.”

<sup>256</sup> Micheelsen, A., “I don't do systems” – An Interview with Clifford Geertz, in: *Method and Theory in the study of Religion*, 2002: „I don't do systems“ und „phenomenological analysis ... is not the focus of my concern.”

<sup>257</sup> Geertz, C., *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973 (2016), 454.

<sup>258</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> see Bernet, R. 2023, who makes an interesting distinction between the phenomenological variants: Transcendental phenomenology (Husserl, Fink, Tymieniecka, Zahavi), existential phenomenology (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre), hermeneutic phenomenology (Gadamer, Ricoeur), ethical phenomenology (Levinas, Derrida), and linguistic phenomenology (Derrida, Foucault).

<sup>260</sup> Geertz, C., op. cit., 6: “I-am-a-camera, ‘phenomenalistic’ observation.” American anthropologist Richard Allan Shweder rightly states: “Geertz's approach is empirical ...”—in other words, anything but phenomenological—and shows in his essay that other “schools” would also have liked to incorporate Geertz. (Richard A. Shweder, *The Resolute Indecisiveness of Clifford Geertz*, in: Franz Gmainer-Pranzl, Barbara Schellhammer (eds.), *Culture - a life of learning*, 2023)

things precedes their appearance, which seems difficult to reconcile with most interpretations of the phenomenological idea.

## Cherry picking

In order to use concepts or methods of phenomenology profitably for anthropology, one would first have to receive them in their entirety and not just selectively, in bits and pieces, so to speak—keyword: “cherry picking”—and then also critically examine them. Because, as shown before, the internal contradictions are obvious. Instead, anthropologists often strive to reproduce the contradictions—euphemistically referred to as the wide variety of variants—of the philosophical discussion more or less unquestioned, and in doing so, one need not even dwell on statements that are questionable in terms of philosophical history and exegesis, such as Schnegg's assertion that that Husserl introduced the term, pardon, the German term “Wesen” (essence) in order to arrive at “things as they appear”<sup>261</sup>. And then to go on to explain that one arrives at essence by observing the phenomenon from all possible perspectives. Husserl had clearly stated that, in his view, empirical variation and abstraction from all details do not lead to the “eidos.”

The problems already start with the definition of what phenomenology is, or should be, and what it aims to achieve. Zigon and Throop, for example, include Husserl's “intuitively” comprehensible experience in this definition: „Phenomenology is thus, as Husserl maintained, not a philosophy of individual subjectivity but an eidetic philosophy, a philosophy that reveals essential structures of experience ...” ... and which „... has as its exclusive concern, experiences intuitively seizable and analyzable in their pure essential generality, not experiences empirically perceived and treated as real facts.”<sup>262</sup> However, the two authors owe us an explanation of what exactly intuitive perception in essential generality is supposed to be, as well as a justification for why they speak here of intuitive perception, but not of the knowledge of the essence of “things” that can be achieved through reduction.

In contrast, Desjarlais & Throop interpret the essence of phenomenology as the subjectivity of experience, regardless of whether it is individual or collective: „Phenomenology: the study of phenomena as they appear to the consciousnesses of an

<sup>261</sup> Schnegg, M., op. cit., 8: „... how do we then get to the things as they appear? To get there, Husserl introduces the German term *Wesen* (essence).”

<sup>262</sup> Zigon, J. & C. J. Throop, op. cit., 4.

individual or a group of people, the study of things as they appear in our lived experiences.”<sup>263</sup> Like Zigon and Throop's definition, this can always be traced back to one or another fragmentary agreement with the texts of the philosophers, but it never reflects the overall picture—not even that of a single phenomenologist. The discrepancy with Heidegger, for example, is obvious and becomes clear when one recalls the passages quoted above on the problem of (non-)appearing phenomena.<sup>264</sup>

Skepticism regarding the reception of phenomenological texts by anthropology is particularly appropriate where these texts openly contradict the theoretical statements of the “grandmasters” Husserl and Heidegger. Desjarlais and Throop, for example, show little understanding for the intellectual ramifications of phenomenology when they write, in connection with the postulated „... great utility in phenomenological methods in anthropological inquiry”<sup>265</sup>, that the focus was on „... the call for radical empiricism ... and the bracketing of cultural and natural attitudes ...”<sup>266</sup>. As we have seen, nothing lies further from Husserl and Heidegger's than any kind of empiricism, let alone “radical” empiricism, and as far as the question of “bracketing”, cultural and natural perceptions are also Husserl and Heidegger further from any kind of empiricism, and to put, when it comes to “bracketing”, cultural and natural perceptions, preconceptions, or interpretations side by side, in the context of what Husserl understands as “natural”, does not seem really helpful either.

Now, such interpretations—which one might call incomplete or flawed—are by no means unique to Anglo-Saxon authors, even if our initial considerations on linguistic problems might suggest otherwise. Michael Schnegg, for example, makes himself assailable when he takes up Husserl's method of reduction, which he associates with the question, „...how do we then get to the things as they appear? To get there, Husserl introduces the German term *Wesen* (essence) ...”<sup>267</sup>. In doing so, he not only waives the problematic translation of “*eidos*” to “essence” rather than “form”, but also the fact that, for Husserl, “essence” cannot be revealed by abstracting from immediate appearance, as Schnegg claims: “If we consider the phenomenon from all possible perspectives and take into account all possible modes of appearance, some fundamental characteristics remain unchanged: These represent its essence or the core

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<sup>263</sup> Desjarlais, R. & C. J. Throop, op. cit., 88

<sup>264</sup> As already quoted: “Appearance as the appearance ‘of something’ therefore does not mean showing oneself, but rather the manifestation of something that does not show itself through something that does show itself. Appearance is a ‘not showing oneself’.” („Erscheinung als Erscheinung ‚von etwas‘ besagt demnach gerade nicht: sich selbst zeigen, sondern das Sichmelden von etwas, das sich nicht zeigt, durch etwas, was sich zeigt. Erscheinen ist ein „Sich-nicht-zeigen“.“, Heidegger, M., op. cit., 29)

<sup>265</sup> „Many anthropologists have found great utility in phenomenological methods in anthropological inquiry.”

<sup>266</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>267</sup> Schnegg, M., op. cit., 8.

of its identity."<sup>268</sup>

## Antinomies

What Schnegg identifies as Husserl's phenomenological method(s) is also striking: instead of reduction—based on “epoché”—he names “epoché” and “free imaginative variation”<sup>269</sup>. The former is only a method to a limited extent, but rather, as Husserl himself says, a basic attitude; the latter, as shown, is introduced by the philosopher as a component of essential insight, whereby he makes a clear distinction between the frequently referred to empirical and eidetic variations and can only insufficiently or not at all answer the question of where the sought-after essence of things is hidden, instead in doing so repeatedly collides with his own claims, such as the one for a science free of preconceptions and theories.<sup>270</sup>

Doubts are also appropriate about Schnegg's reception of phenomenology where he attempts to transfer the so-called phenomenological method into the theoretical work of the anthropologist. As already discussed in my essay “Fremder, quo vadis”<sup>271</sup>, his “hammer” example is in any case far removed from phenomenological theory. „Without hammering to get nails into the wall, we have no hammers”<sup>272</sup>, he writes, thus elevating not the “form” (“eidos” originally) or any kind of substance, but the (one of the possible) function(s) to “essence” of the hammer. As any craftsman can confirm, the problem with this is that this strict and one-dimensional functional relationship is not consistent: on the one hand, the hammer is already a hammer when it is still in the toolbox, and it can also be used for various other purposes than hammering nails (into the wall); on the other hand, nails can also be hammered into the wall with other tools, which do not immediately undergo a metamorphosis into hammers. There is no need to reiterate at this point that Schnegg might also have difficulty grasping the essence of our brown horse cited as an example.

As already noted, there are fundamental reasons for this: if “essence” is to be a

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<sup>268</sup> *ibid.* (“If we look at the phenomenon from all possible perspectives and take into account all possible appearances, some basic characteristics remain unchanged, these constitute its essence or core of identity”)

<sup>269</sup> „While Husserl's techniques are laborious practices to get rid of assumptions (epoché) and to work towards the essence of things (free imaginative variation), Heidegger proposes a more relaxed methodology“ (*ibid.*)

<sup>270</sup> Herzog and Graumann refer to at least six different phenomenological methods: description, intuition, introspection, experiment, ideation ... The specific nature of phenomenology is difficult to grasp (Herzog, M. & C. F. Graumann, *op. cit.*, X).

<sup>271</sup> Supp, E., 2024.

<sup>272</sup> Schnegg, M., 2023, 263.

meaningful concept at all, then it has nothing immediate or “originary” about it, but consists of a culturally influenced and correspondingly meaningful terminology. Adorno already addressed this: “The harmless scientific maxim of Husserlian phenomenology, which seeks to discern the essence of concepts in descriptively accurate analyses of meaning, as if each individual concept had an unshakably fixed essence, already encourages kind of mock concreteness.”<sup>273</sup>

If the relationship between essence and empiricism or immediate perception was already contradictory among the phenomenologists themselves, then for many of the “phenomenological” anthropologists, the conflict has not been resolved, but simply pushed aside. What remains of phenomenology as a method after a critical examination of “eidos,” “variation,” “reduction,” or “epoché” is basically little more than a little care in dealing with perceptions, the call or scientific ethos not to let biases in the form of blind prejudices dominate the interpretation of empirical data, and finally a little scientific deontology, which should actually belong in the toolbox of every anthropologist, whether phenomenologically oriented or not.

One might have assumed that the epoché, the bracketing of preconceptions, was a sound approach, one that was also critical of Eurocentrism, which Geertz had already pursued: „... what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to...”<sup>274</sup>. Might have, because in reality, both phenomenology, which is supposedly so free of prejudice, and its anthropological reception contain a great deal of Eurocentric thinking.<sup>275</sup>

Desjarlais and Throop rightly argue that anthropologists need to eliminate Eurocentric prejudices, or more precisely, those “assumptions that come from their own cultural and theoretical heritages”<sup>276</sup>. However, as already noted in relation to ontology, Eurocentrism marches in through the back door as soon as it has been shown out the front. Thus, when Desjarlais and Throop write: “The facts that, on the one hand, the world that lies before us is regarded as a world we share, as one we inhabit together, and that, on the other hand, others are recognized as beings who experience this world as the same world to be shared, who orient themselves to it and live in it just as we do ... the facts that the world before us is held to be the same shareable world that we

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<sup>273</sup> Adorno, T. W., 1970, 44 („Die harmlos-szientifische Maxime der Husserlschen Phänomenologie, in deskriptiv getreuen Bedeutungsanalysen das Wesen der Begriffe zu erschauen, als ob jeder einzelne ... ein unerschütterlich festes Wesen hätte, ermuntert schon zur Scheinkonkreteion.“. And also as already quoted, op. cit., 45: “The appearance of concreteness is based on the reification of results, not unlike positivist social science, which records the products of social processes as ultimate facts that must be accepted”).

<sup>274</sup> Geertz, C., op. cit., 9.

<sup>275</sup> For Schnegg, the problem of prejudice sounds more like a harmless, subjective aberration. He speaks of “more or less implicit presuppositions” and “beliefs and presuppositions” (Schnegg, M., op. cit., 7).

<sup>276</sup> Desjarlais, R. & C. J. Throop, op. cit., 89.

mutually inhabit, that others are recognized as experiencing beings who orient and abide to the same shareable world as we do ...”<sup>277</sup>.

Even if Schnegg writes, “Phenomenology provides universal concepts for theoretically processing experiences (or experience)”<sup>278</sup>, this represents a clear step backward from the demand for freedom from prejudice. Universal cultural or theoretical concepts are not universal because they arise and can be observed in the same way in all cultures around the world, but rather because they are always the concepts of a single human culture among many that are imposed onto different, foreign cultures and have been imposed on them, not only in the age of colonialism. Geertz too is not entirely free from falling into this trap: “Analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification.”<sup>279</sup>

Attempting to attribute a tendency toward Eurocentrism criticism to phenomenology overlooks the fact that it is—like the ethnography of the same era—itself a completely Eurocentric philosophy, born in a Western, European world, in a European philosophical environment, directed against European metaphysics, and so on. And this will remain true as long as no one discovers a non-European culture in which people, like Heidegger, are engaged in the search for the meaning of the meaning of being.

Given what has been said so far, it is not surprising that attempts to use phenomenology for anthropology suffer from a more or less pronounced lack of clarity in their interpretation. Schnegg's statement, for example, that phenomenology is a „theoretical approach to explore a phenomenon from the myriad perspectives of those who have experienced it”<sup>280</sup>, is one example of this. It seems inconsistent, especially in light of what has already been said in the passages on “free variation”. Two things were at stake here: on the one hand, the process of abstraction (empirical variation) from countless details in order to find their “generality” – the actor, the human subject – and, on the other hand, the choice of an originary detail and its mental multiplication (eidetic variation), The actor is still the human subject or the phenomenologically working scientist.

Because phenomenological anthropology does not address the antinomies of phenomenological thinking, or at least not thoroughly enough, it adds its own errors and confusions to those already inherent in it. Zigon and Throop postulate, regardless of the claim of intentionality of the perceiving consciousness: „... Husserl's famous call to return ‚back to the things themselves’ ... was a commitment to examine any and all

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<sup>277</sup> op. cit., 91.

<sup>278</sup> Schnegg, M., op. cit., 18.

<sup>279</sup> Geertz, C., op. cit., 9.

<sup>280</sup> Schnegg, M., 2021, 261.

phenomenona as they show themselves.”<sup>281</sup> And Schnegg adds to the phenomenological confusion of Husserlian and Heideggerian provenance with his statement that „... what things appear as in a situation ist a combination of how they appear and the societal context”<sup>282</sup>.

Perhaps Clifford Geertz hit the nail when he stated what could sound like an implicit criticism of ignoring such phenomenological contradictions: “... scientific explanation does not consist ... in the reduction of the complex”<sup>283</sup>. In light of the above, the knowledge gained from such an adaptation of phenomenological thinking for anthropology appears modest, to say the least. And this is all the more true given that anthropology has only just begun to attempt to leave behind the last traces of colonial-Eurocentrism.

The last word in this context belongs once again to Theodor Adorno: “Fundamental ontology eludes us not least because it upholds an ideal of ‘purity’ derived from the methodologicalization of philosophy—the last link being Husserl—as a contrast between being and existing, yet at the same time philosophizing about substantive matters.”<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Zigon, J. & J. Throop, op. cit.

<sup>282</sup> Schnegg, M., 2023, 5 f.

<sup>283</sup> Geertz, C., op cit.

<sup>284</sup> Adorno, T. W., 1966, 82 („Die Fundamentalontologie entzieht sich nicht zuletzt darum, weil von ihr ein der Methodologisierung der Philosophie entstammendes Ideal von ‚Reinheit‘ – das letzte Bindeglied war Husserl –, als Kontrast des Seins zum Seienden, aufrecht erhalten, dennoch aber gleichwie über Sachhaltiges philosophiert wird.“).



## V – Thoughts gone astray

As we have seen, there is much to discuss and criticize about the philosophical positions of phenomenology—and this also applies to what anthropology believes it can adopt from phenomenologists as a “method” for its own purposes. This also and above all concerns terms such as “pure” or “natural,” which should first and foremost be viewed critically as an ideology before being adopted for one's own theoretical considerations. Both terms, found in connection with processes of cognition in phenomenology and anthropology alike, have already been discussed in this essay, and should be left “in parentheses” at this point. To attribute them uncritically and indiscriminately to the emerging Nazi rhetoric of the era would be premature, not only because they also occupy central positions in the writings of a Jewish phenomenologist such as Edmund Husserl, a philosopher who experienced the terror of Nazi rule firsthand until his death in 1938.

Far more problematic are the political implications of Heidegger's work, which can only be overlooked with a considerable degree of self-deception. There is now virtually no doubt that from 1933 until the end of the regime in 1945, he was a supporter of the Nazis and a member of the NSDAP, even though he apparently tried, after the war, to backdate the end of his party membership. Without success!

First a student of Edmund Husserl, who was 30 years his senior, at the Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg, Heidegger became his assistant in 1919 and succeeded him as chair of philosophy in 1928. The relationship between the two is described as close, which is also reflected in a dedication – “Edmund Husserl, with admiration and friendship” – in the first edition of Heidegger's magnum opus “*Sein und Zeit*”, published in 1927. However, the friendship was not to last long. The dedication was already removed from the second edition of “*Sein und Zeit*”, and Heidegger, who was appointed rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933, the year he joined the NSDAP, was thus at least partly responsible for Husserl – he had officially retired in 1928 already – definitely having his teaching license revoked. In 1936 – Heidegger had resigned from the post of rector two years earlier (allegedly for personal reasons) – Husserl's name completely disappeared from the university records. Even his death two years later was not officially acknowledged; the notable absentee at the funeral was his former friend and

confidant Martin Heidegger.

Given these brief biographical details, it seems at least worth discussing whether it is appropriate to dismiss the issue of Heidegger's Nazi past so nonchalantly in favor of the latter's "pure consciousness"-doppelganger, as Schnegg attempts to do: „Critics claim that his political inclinations reveal inherent problems in his philosophy, whereas supporters argue that political and philosophical engagements can be separated. Keeping in mind the problematic aspects of his thinking, I nevertheless wish to critically engage and develop another aspect of his work, namely our being-in-the-world.“<sup>285</sup>

As already shown, it is precisely this "being-in-the-world" that represents one of the most problematic points of Heidegger's thinking, especially where it is associated with the "thrownness" of Heidegger's philosophy, a 'thrownness' that is ultimately a "... thrownness to death". Being-in-the-world is much more than, as one might assume from everyday usage, a kind of "having both feet firmly on the ground." It is a "thrownness" into facticity, an apologetic fatalism that ultimately also means the absence of a reason for any reality – including that of any kind of being. This is, in a sense, at odds with Heidegger's search for the meaning (of meaning) of being, which earned the philosopher – and thus phenomenology as a whole – the accusation of being-oriented and belief in being on the part of Adorno.<sup>286</sup>

Did this philosophy really have nothing to do with the Nazis' way of thinking? Nothing to do with the fact that Heidegger publicly supported Hitler in 1932, even before the latter came to power, proclaiming "the complete transformation of our German existence"<sup>287</sup>? That he had long been sympathetic to Hitler's inspirer Ernst Jünger (1895-1998)? Is the philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologist Árpád-Andreas Sölter completely "off base" when he "... explains Heidegger's commitment to National Socialism in terms of his cultural criticism and thinking about alienation, which extends the critique of the modern condition already laid out in his magnum opus "Sein und Zeit" ... into a theory of the contemporary age and is responsible for serious misperceptions in the political sphere."<sup>288</sup> When he concludes that "Heidegger styled himself as the philosophical advisor to the Führer state, which he believed he could shape and possibly tame intellectually in a kind of self-aggrandizement."<sup>289</sup> Was it perhaps just a coincidence that Heidegger was explicitly rated positively and classified as a Nazi philosopher in the

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<sup>285</sup> Schnegg, M., 2023, 13.

<sup>286</sup> Adorno, T. W., op. cit., 76

<sup>287</sup> cf. Wikipedia „Philosophie im Nationalsozialismus“, [www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki](http://www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki)

<sup>288</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>289</sup> Sölter, A.: Mirrors of Evil. Cultural Criticism, critique of modernity, and Anti-Semitism in Heidegger's Thought. In: Pedersen, Daniel: Cosmopolitanism, Heidegger, Wagener – Jewish Reflections, 2017, quoted from Wikipedia, op. cit.

“Dossiers on Philosophy Professors” of the “Security Service Leader SS of the Reich”?<sup>290</sup>

The question that phenomenologically oriented anthropology must ask itself is: Can the philosophy of a Nazi, whom Adorno openly accused of sympathizing with barbarism<sup>291</sup>, really be the guiding principle or even only the “organon” of a critical, post-colonialist anthropology? These are questions that one would have liked to see clarified before attempting to make use of phenomenology—not only Heidegger's—and its methods. At this point, however, it is only fair to note that among the thinkers influenced by Heidegger, who is still considered one of the most important German philosophers of our time, there are plenty of names that are not suspected of Nazi sympathies: Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), as well as Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), and the French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), and Michel Foucault (1926-1984).

For someone like the author, who personally experienced the “long haul” of the Nazi era—not least as a high school student under a principal who more or less openly boasted about his time in the Waffen-SS—this proselytizing behaviour is somewhat incomprehensible. At best, one can surmise that the century of crimes against humanity has obscured many ideological signposts. One can get an idea of this by watching the video of Heidegger's 1951 speech entitled “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”<sup>292</sup>, which is available on the Internet and, with its gloomy diction, gives a good picture of the zeitgeist of the era. It may sound harsh, but the bigoted attempts to justify the Nazi regime with arguments such as “but the autobahns...” inevitably come to mind. One is tempted to speak of the “dark side of the Force” (Star Wars, George Lucas).

The bigoted zeitgeist was by no means limited to Heidegger's philosophy or phenomenology per se. The conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler (1886-1954), for example, also enjoyed a similar resurrection after the Nazi era, as media sociologist Siegfried Weischenberg writes. Furtwängler was an orchestra conductor whose style was

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<sup>290</sup> Wikipedia, op. cit.

<sup>291</sup> Adorno, T. W., op. cit., 79. See also. “Fascism sought to realize the philosophy of origins. The oldest, that which has been around the longest, should rule directly, literally. This brought the usurping nature of the first into stark relief. Blood and soil, which the fascists made concrete ... became the butt of children's jokes even in Hitler's Germany. The identity of originality and rule boiled down to the idea that whoever has power should not only be the first, but also the original. As a political program, absolute identity turns into absolute ideology, which no one believes anymore.” (“Der Faschismus suchte die Ursprungsphilosophie zu verwirklichen. Das Älteste, das was am längsten da ist, sollte unmittelbar, buchstäblich herrschen. Damit rückte das Usurpatorische am Ersten grell ins Licht. Blut und Boden, die faschistisch konkretisierten ... wurden selbst schon in Hitlers Deutschland zum Kinderspott. Die Identität von Ursprünglichkeit und Herrschaft lief darauf hinaus, dass wer die Macht hat, nicht bloß der Erste, sondern auch der Ursprüngliche sein sollte. Als politisches Programm geht die absolute Identität über in die absolute Ideologie, die keiner mehr glaubt.“ Adorno, T. W., 1970, 28).

<sup>292</sup> „Bauen, Wohnen, Denken“, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqSSzgg5eio>

described by Austrian writer Hilde Spiel (1911-1990) as “resounding images beyond all logic” – “But ‘the mass hysteria he created in his audience’ was full of warning signs” – and whom she characterized as someone “in whose conception of music (she) saw embodied precisely that arrogant claim to otherworldliness and eternity ... that disregards not only all logic, but all reason itself: the German “essence” (character) that is supposed to heal the world.”<sup>293</sup>

Adorno had already analyzed this longevity of the ideas of (not only) philosophers and artists sympathetic to Nazism as inherent in Heidegger's ontology: “Ontologies in Germany, especially Heidegger's, continue to exert their influence without the traces of the political past causing any alarm.”<sup>294</sup> In a way, this longevity has been extended once again by the recent trend of anthropological theory toward phenomenology. And it contrasts with an astonishing forgetfulness, also not limited to philosophy, when it comes to its victims. Husserl editor Held writes: “The silence surrounding Husserl remains a shameful posthumous triumph of National Socialism for the German cultural scene of the economic miracle years...”<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Weischenberg, S., Schuld und Geheimnis – Bekenntnisse von ‚Medien-Legenden‘ in der Welt von gestern, quoted from the manuscript 2025, 472.

<sup>294</sup> Adorno, T. W., 1966, 69 („Die Ontologien in Deutschland, zumal die Heideggersche, wirken stets noch weiter, ohne dass die Spuren der politischen Vergangenheit schreckten.“).

<sup>295</sup> Held, K., op. cit., 6 („Das Schweigen über Husserl bleibt ein für die deutsche Kulturszene der Wirtschaftswunderjahre beschämender posthumer Triumph des Nationasozialismus ...“).

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