

A conference was held in Prague, Czech Republic, in November 2002 that was entitled "Issues Confronting the Post-European World" and that was dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977). *The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations* was founded on that occasion. The following essay is published in celebration of that event.

Essay 13

Husserl and the Future: Temporality, Historicity, and Responsibility in His Later Work

© Josef Moural

moural@cesnet.cz

Center for Phenomenological Research, Prague

<http://www.cfb.cuni.cz/>

Abstract

I argue that there was a decisive break in Husserl's work around 1917, consisting in his new view of temporality. The most important element of this new view is the emphasis on protentions and on their role in constitution, manifest e.g. in the *Lectures on the Passive Synthesis*. I show how the later Husserl's turn towards the problem of historicity can be plausibly motivated by this development, as well as his late conception of the task of philosophy as the vehicle of personal renewal, of an attempt to assume responsibility for one's life.

Let me start with a quotation. In December 1931 Husserl wrote in a letter to Albrecht: "I cannot expect any more the joy of seeing how my work transforms the philosophical spirit of the new epoch Today's generation will not be able to understand and will not want to understand. But regarding the future I am absolutely certain."¹ What was it about phenomenology that made Husserl so certain that mankind could not go ahead without it? Are we, the phenomenologists of today, successful in making clear what is was? Do we—and should we—care any more?

I suggest that he thought that the most precious jewel in the treasure he presented to mankind was his doctrine of constitution, understood as sense-bestowal, as *Sinngebung*. In my paper, I shall discuss Husserl's views on constitution with a special emphasis on the role of protentions, of the unthematized future-oriented intentions. I

¹ "Von meiner Lebensarbeit werde ich nicht mehr die Freude haben können, zu beobachten, wie sie den philosophischen Geist der neuen Zeit umwandelt, dass sie eine im wahrsten Sinn neue Zeit erweckt. Die jetzige Generation wird nicht verstehen können und verstehen wollen. Aber der Zukunft bin ich absolut sicher." /an Albrecht, 22. 12. 1931, *Briefwechsel* 9.80/

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shall attempt to show that, for him, this was not just one possible topic of research among others, but rather that this field of research has a very special dignity which has to do with its relevance for life. I shall attempt to show how the peculiar, quasi-moral appeal that radiates from many pages of later Husserl, but also of early Heidegger and of Patočka, can be seen as growing naturally from certain serious, technical phenomenological considerations.

I shall proceed as follows. I shall elaborate a point of view that brings together a number of topics which are not very often treated as interconnected. I would like to persuade you that this point of view opens an important perspective on Husserl's philosophy in general, and throws light on certain features that later Husserl has in common with such younger phenomenologists as Martin Heidegger and Jan Patočka. And, last but not least, I would like to suggest that the research task stemming from that perspective is far from fulfilled, and that it may be important for the future of phenomenology to pursue it more vigorously than it did in the past sixty years.

The topics I am going to deal with are:

—Revision of the customary periodization of Husserl's development: I want to argue that there was a break in Husserl's work which took place probably in 1916 or 1917, and much of my paper can be seen as an attempt to make sense of that break

—Temporality: I want to argue that it was Husserl's view of temporality that changed, and that the core of the change was the recognition of the new role of protentionality, i.e. of the future-oriented non-thematic intentionality

—Historicity: I want to show that Husserl's turn towards historicity in his later period is a natural outcome of the new understanding of temporality

—The task of philosophy: I want to show that the repeated remarks of the later Husserl that the task of philosophy is to try to assume responsibility for one's life is no noble yet idle talk, no well-meant but philosophically irrelevant advice by an old sage, but rather that it is a result connected in a clear and very tight way with the systematic core of Husserl's mature phenomenology.

Due to the nature of this conference, we do not have enough time to go into much detail. Also, I should make clear that what I am presenting is a report about a work in progress, and that some portions of what I am going to say should be seen as a research hypothesis, rather than as an established position. I should be glad if you find my hypothesis plausible and if you help me to clarify and eventually to correct or improve my views.

First, the revisionist periodization. Let me begin with a few external indications of a radical break in Husserl's development, taking place somewhere between the *Ideas I* and 1921. Consider Husserl's publication strategy after the World War One. We know he has a periodical founded largely as a medium for publishing his work. In the first volume of his *Jahrbuch* in 1913, there appears *Ideas I*. We know that he has the *Ideas II* manuscript in his shelf, and a portion of *Ideas III*, but he does not want to publish them any more. He also abandons the project of a thorough revision of the 6th Investigation, which finally goes to print in 1921 with only minor changes. Most importantly, we know that, later in his life, he discourages people from reading his pre-WWI works, and

emphasises the need to study the works which represent the later, mature stage of his phenomenology. Thus, we have good reasons to ask what made him to say good-bye to his earlier positions. What are the crucial features of his mature position that mark it, at least for him, as so clearly superior to the earlier ones?

In my opinion, the crucial new insight was the recognition of the role the protentions play in constitution. Husserl does not have much work to do for the protentions in the early layers of the *Lectures on the Internal Time-Consciousness*. The manifest exception is §24, but we know that this portion of the text was written in 1917 specifically for the purpose of being inserted into the manuscript in order to supply what was missing. Let me quote one characteristic claim: “Every process of original constitution is animated by protentions that emptily constitute what is coming as coming, that catch it and bring it towards fulfilment.” (*Hua* X.52, Brough (1991) 54)

Similarly, how very different from the early layers of the *Lectures on the Internal Time-Consciousness* (and also from anything to be found on that topic in the *Ideas*) is the lecture course from the early 1920's, published as *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis* in *Husserliana* XI: the future-oriented intentionality is omnipresent and drives the synthesis in which the relevant objective sense is constituted. Already in the early version of the course from 1920/21 (reconstructed in the same volume), constitution is treated as a dynamic system in which protentions always foreshadow in a partially underdetermined way possible actuality, possible fulfillment, and that everything that can be given in consciousness is co-constituted by the relevant protentions (*Hua* XI, p. 238)). Very roughly, we can characterize the new insight as putting together two previously separate ideas: that of temporality and that of fulfilment of empty intention. All sense is a product of a synthesis, and there is always a system of empty and partially underdetermined protentions which guarantee that the approaching actuality will be synthesized as a part of the unified flow of conscious experience.

Once we recognize the leading role of protentions in the sense-bestowing synthesis, the next question can be: where do they come from, what is their source? The simple—and basically quite plausible—answer is: the material they are built from could not be anything else but the intentional contents accumulated in the past. Thus, if we want to understand our present sense-bestowing, we should pay attention to the accumulated patterns of sense-units and their constellations, because they play—via detour through the protentions—a prominent role in it.

Thus, we can see why it is natural for Husserl to say in 1931 that the proper analysis of consciousness is hermeneutics: there is no actual content without a pre-understanding (*Vordeutung*), and each new pre-understanding depends very largely on past actual contents. Normally, all these complicated structures function in me anonymously, and I do not notice their role in the constitution of the experienced world. However, I can set myself the task of uncovering this anonymous functioning, the task of an active conscious revision and selective appropriation of the intentional patterns that drive the constitution for me.

Let me add further complexity to this picture in the following two respects. First, it is not only the cognitive contents that get co-determined by the future-oriented

intentionality; there is a very similar structure at work in the realm of practical intentionality, in the realm of setting tasks and pursuing them. And, second, the past-originated intentionality from which my protentions are built does not stem only from my first-hand past experience; rather, especially in the civilized environment we happen to inhabit, a great part of our tacit preliminary understanding is based on cultural contents which came to us through hearsay or tradition.

Consequently, the turn of late Husserl towards historicity can be seen as having at least the following two basic levels: one having to do with one's past first-hand experience and the other having to do with sedimented tradition. On the first level, what we find is roughly this: the area of what one can be aware of is significantly co-determined by one's momentary system of protentions. That system of protentions, in turn, is significantly co-determined by what one has been aware in the past experience. In this interlocking system, there are two gates through which a novelty can enter: the degree of liberty in transformation of the past contents into the protentional ones and the degree of transformation of these—typically not yet fully determined—protentional contents in their further determination by actualization. Obviously, this means that the system is historical: in the sense of being very significantly dependent on the past, open for the new, and developing accordingly all the time.

But there is also the second level of historicity: besides the first-hand experience, the self-giveness of the content in an intuitive fulfilment, there are other modes of presentation which lack the self-giveness of the content, as when we hear someone to formulate a mathematical theorem but do not perform the series of intuitions that would bring us to seeing that it is true. As we know, Husserl was obsessively worried by the emptying power of such circulating ready-made cultural contents. Thus, on the second level, his concern with historicity was the concern with re-activation of the sedimented contents, of the tacitly functioning traditional commonplaces that we take for granted in our everyday life as well as in our scientific activity.

We can see that, in this view, the study of constitution or intentional analysis emerges as not just one possible activity among others, not just one more or less interesting option in the supermarket of philosophical schools and research programs, but rather as the option which has to be pursued if we want to live responsibly. If we agree with Husserl that it is our protentionality what co-determines how we see the world and how we set our goals and projects, and if we agree with him that this is going on largely anonymously and without our notice, the very first step towards assuming responsibility for the lives we live should be to try to uncover these anonymous, tacitly functioning intentional structures. Thus, Husserl's turn towards cultural criticism in his later years is no caprice and no stepping off the straight path caused by historical circumstances; on the contrary, it is rooted directly in the very core of his mature position, in his doctrines of temporality and constitutional analysis.

Now there is a lot in common between this position and that of early Heidegger. I do not wish to open the complicated question of the authorship of various new ideas of the great phenomenology of the 1920's. It seems quite clear that the decisive step, the discovery of the key role of the future-oriented intentions, comes from Husserl, since we

can see it clearly present in texts from 1917, when any influence from Heidegger is practically out of question. But it is quite possible that it was the quickly-learning and brilliant Heidegger who combined Husserl's view of temporality with the Aristotelian doctrine of fulfilling one's potentialities and emphasized the urgency of the critical appropriation of traditional concepts in the practical realm, i.e., in that of leading one's life and becoming who one is. Perhaps one could safely bet that it was Heidegger who added to the picture the quasi-religious idea of the awful danger of missing one's proper potentiality, of not fulfilling one's own true task. But one should not forget that Husserl was also inclined to speak in similar terms, to use formulations like "tragic failure of modern psychology," like "danger that we let our own truth slip out of our hands," or like "the struggle for one's own truth, for one's own authentic being." It would be instructive to follow the comparison with Heidegger and Patočka in some detail, but given the limits of this presentation I abstain from it.

Accordingly, the expressions used in Husserl's notorious quasi-moralizing, almost preaching-like passages, such as "renewal," "self-clarification," or "responsibility," seem to point out at the crucial task that he sets by his doctrine of temporality and constitution: the call for responsibility is the call for uncovering the layers of sedimented sense that, nearly entirely anonymously, substantially determine how I understand the world and my role and aspirations within it. Responsibility would thus mean to appropriate actively one's own protentional systems. But here we have to face a series of difficult questions:

1. What can we really do with passive synthesis? Does it have any transforming effect simply to gain knowledge of the formerly hidden structure? And even if it brings out some transformation, is it one that we can say we are responsible for? Also, is it necessarily a transformation towards the good or towards the rational?

2. Do we have some other ways to influence the protentional systems? What are they like? Are they efficient in a consistent or only in a haphazard way?

3. What are the intentionality structures of other activities than perceptions? Specifically, what are the intentional structures of thinking and action?

4. Is the approach of intentional analysis compatible at all with the demands of rationality? Are we not confined to the descriptive on this path? How can anything normative ever be found in the intentional structures?

I have not gotten very far in dealing with these questions. What I wanted to show today is that we have inherited from Husserl a very ambitious research program only the first steps of which he managed to fulfill. While it is possible that we shall prefer to drop some of Husserl's claims, it seems to me that his tools are still among the most promising I know of with regard to the difficult tasks I have spoken about. Thus, Husserl was possibly not entirely wrong when he wrote to Ingarden in 1932: "The future generations will discover me."²

² "Die künftige Generationen werden mich schon entdecken." / *Briefwechsel* 3.287/