

Sebastian Luft: *Subjectivity and Lifeworld in Transcendental Phenomenology*

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As the title suggests, Sebastian Luft's book concerns Husserl's mature thought, from the "transcendental turn" of *Ideas I* to the latest works of the 1930s. Even though its various chapters have been published separately before, it makes up a coherent whole and works well as a book. Transitional passages have been added to tie the chapters together. The book is clearly the work of a thorough and consummate Husserl scholar who has a grasp of all the works, published, posthumously published, and still unpublished. And no wonder: Luft is a true insider, who worked in the Archives at Leuven for a number of years and edited one of the volumes (Hua XXXIV) of *Husserliana*.

First, an aside prompted by the title and what I claim it "suggests:" The title doesn't mention Husserl and there is no subtitle. Further, my copy has nothing on the back cover. So how do we know, before even opening it, that it is about Husserl? It would seem that "transcendental phenomenology" is just another name for Husserl's philosophy. But that would not have pleased Husserl. He thought of phenomenology as a method based on a transformed frame of mind or attitude (*Einstellung*). In today's parlance, he would have called it a "research program." This is a felicitous term Luft uses throughout his book, and it is perfectly appropriate to what Husserl had in mind. Like Moses on Mount Nebo, Husserl thought he had discovered the Promised Land but had to leave it to generations of loyal disciples to cultivate its terrain. It hasn't quite worked out that way. His most gifted followers were thinkers too powerful to be anyone's disciple. The most loyal were less gifted. Are there philosophers out there who are *doing* transcendental phenomenology, according to Husserl's intentions? Perhaps there are, but almost all phenomenologists, even those who follow Husserl closely, have not only applied Husserl's method but also reflected on it and transformed it in some way.

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Unlike many Husserl scholars (recent examples are Mohanty, Moran and Zahavi), Luft does not take a chronological/developmental approach in presenting Husserl's thought. He has very little to say about the *Logical Investigations* or other pre-transcendental works, and he treats Husserl's post-1913 work mostly as a unified whole, describing it even as the "transcendental-phenomenological system." Though individual chapters in some cases focus on particular periods, Luft thinks that Husserl's mature (i.e. transcendental) thought is internally coherent. But as we've seen, its coherence and unity, as Luft quite correctly holds, are those of a "research program" based on a method, not a doctrine.

This non-developmental approach prompts a couple of observations. First, because of Luft's emphasis on method or research program, the word "system" seems to me ill chosen. This may be a quibble about words, but "system" to me suggests precisely a doctrine, an interconnected set of assertions or theories about reality or some portion of it. The term had its heyday, of course, in German idealism. Hegel's crowning achievement was the "System der Wissenschaft," Schelling used the term liberally, and for Fichte it was the equivalent of *Lehre* or doctrine (e.g. *System der Ethik*). Because of this association, the fortunes of the term "system" have declined along with those of German idealism itself. Husserl's view of German idealism was mostly negative, and the term just seems to me altogether at odds with Husserl's approach. This in spite of attempts, like those of Karl Schumann, to link Husserl with Fichte, which seems to me totally misguided, despite Luft's attempt, especially in Chapter 6, to argue for Husserl's systematic concerns, especially in the late work. Of course he can cite textual evidence to support his view, but the will to systematize, even if Husserl occasionally indulged it, seems alien to his deeper concerns.

Luft also points (pp. 161ff.) to Husserl's appropriation of the venerable term "first philosophy" as something like a systematic gesture. But I'm not convinced here. The term has its origin in Aristotle. Did Aristotle have, or even aspire to, a system? Certainly epigones like Aquinas tried to systematize his ideas, but I've always thought something is lost in translation. To me Husserl is indeed like Aristotle, but precisely because of the unsystematic character of his writings. J. N. Findlay made this comparison twice in the early pages of his translation of *Logical Investigations*, because he liked the brilliant but disorganized collection of insights in that work. Luft may want to claim that after the transcendental turn, and the articulation of the full-fledged phenomenological method, Husserl indeed sought to organize his thought in a "systematic" way. He could also point to the unwieldy title of the great (projected) three-volume *magnum opus*, which translates as "ideas toward a pure phenomenology and phenomenological philosophy." I've always wondered at this title: are there two things here—i.e. the phenomenology, and then the philosophy—or just two terms for the same thing? Is there some transition in the text from the one to the other? If there is, it has certainly escaped me. As for this title, I've always been more interested in, and pleased by, the first part of the title, "Ideen zu..." Maybe it's false modesty, but Husserl seems to be saying, somewhat in the spirit of his research manuscripts: Here are some random thoughts, maybe they will add up to something. And though Husserl seems here to be unfurling his

fully articulated method, I find the text sometimes infuriatingly, but also endearingly, disorganized.

Just one more observation in this vein. Just as I find the term “system” somewhat out of place in relation to Husserl, so I object, in a similar way, to the term “metaphysics.” Of course, this is a notoriously slippery term, and I know that again I may be on shaky *textual* ground, since of course Husserl introduces the term at several junctures, though often with conflicting meanings. Now it’s true that Luft does not push the term “metaphysics” in the same way he does “system,” but sometimes he seems to treat them in similar ways. For me phenomenology is “neutral” with regard to both empirical science and metaphysics, as Husserl says when he introduces it in the second volume (Section 7) of *Logical Investigations*. Metaphysics is traditional philosophy, that is, a naïve positive or mundane science that tries to be universal. When he distinguishes traditional idealism from transcendental idealism, for example, Husserl is not distinguishing between two metaphysical doctrines, but between a metaphysical doctrine and something altogether different, what he calls a “working philosophy”—that is, a method (Hua I, p. 119). Luft says (p. 169) that while phenomenology is first philosophy, “phenomenological metaphysics”—which thematizes *facta* of life—is “second philosophy,” and he refers to a *Beilage* of Hua VII (p. 394), which doesn’t seem to me to back him up. Now I won’t pretend I can trump Sebastian Luft on matters of text, but it seems to me that even this distinction between first and second puts phenomenology and metaphysics too close together, suggesting two versions of the same thing, even if one is subordinate to the other.

Of course, if the term “system” is used merely to suggest the coherence and interrelatedness of the method itself, then it is pretty harmless, and merely reinforces the point of the non-chronological approach. But here is a second observation on that approach itself. It has the great advantage of permitting us to see how coherent Husserl’s thought is, as soon as the transcendental stage is reached. This is one of the great merits of Luft’s book. But of course it comes at a price. There are in fact important developments in Husserl’s thought after 1913, and they reach into the depths of the method, as of course Luft knows very well. The Husserliana volume he edited, *Zur phänomenologischen Reduktion*, documents the changes in the phenomenological reduction in Husserl’s late years, and Luft has written extensively on this. But I don’t want to question the merits of the non-developmental approach. By taking it here, Luft has revealed a great deal about Husserl’s thought that could otherwise not be seen. As in linguistics and other fields, a synchronic approach requires that we avert our eyes from the diachronic dimension. But it allows us to see what may be obscured by the emphasis on changes and developments.

Why is it, we might ask, that so many authors have favored the chronological or developmental approach to Husserl? I consider myself among these, by the way. Though I have not written a book like this, when I have tried to present a full view of Husserl’s work I have always begun by trying to show how it grew out of the *Logical Investigations*. I can’t speak for others, but for me the transcendental-phenomenological stance, the outcome of the reduction and the fruit of Husserl’s mature thought, is so outlandish and even counterintuitive, so hard for me to

understand, after years of trying, that in order to make it presentable for others I have to trace it to something more familiar, i.e., the somewhat more conventional concerns of the early Husserl. My view of the transcendental stance may seem overblown, but it is, after all, in line with Husserl's, who at various times calls it "unnatural" or "artificial" (*künstlich*), always emphasizes its radical character, and in the end, as we know, compares it to a religious conversion, only *moreso*. This is why Husserl, along with Fink, devoted so much thought to the problem of how to gain access to the transcendental domain, and in his late years experimented with several different "ways into." And Husserl also stresses the difficulty of remaining in this radical posture, resisting the gravitational pull of falling back into the natural attitude. But the developmental or genetic approach that I favor is not the only one, and one of the accomplishments of Luft's book is that it shows so convincingly that another approach is possible.

So far I have focused on the way Luft's book sets forth its account of Husserl's thought. But there is much more to it than that. The book is lively and assertive, sometimes even polemical, and it is more than just a presentation of Husserl. It has a further agenda, both negative and positive.

On the negative side, it wants to defend Husserl, as a philosopher of modernity and Enlightenment, against his detractors, or those who would relegate Husserl to the status of merely a precursor to Heidegger. This is, of course, the way Husserl was treated throughout large portions of the twentieth century, at least among mainstream "continental" philosophers. And the "Enlightenment" features of Husserl's thought were rejected because the Enlightenment itself was reviled by many thinkers in the existentialist and post-modern traditions of the middle and late twentieth century. For Luft, Heidegger is a "romantic" (p. 179) and an irrationalist, an enemy of Enlightenment and the progenitor of post-modernism. In other words, Luft shares Husserl's own considered view of his former protégé.

It must be said, happily, that Husserl has had the last word here. Heidegger has certainly not lost his allure, but the French post-modernism he helped to inspire, like many another shooting star in the intellectual firmament of that country, has had its fleeting day and largely receded. (Friends in Comp-Lit, where things change at breakneck speed, tell me their current students are no longer familiar with Jacques Derrida—*o tempora!*) Meanwhile France has become a center of Husserl studies and of a Husserl-inspired practice of phenomenology; and the same can be said of Denmark, Finland and even the United States, where young scholars are doing serious work in this area. Indeed, one can speak of a Husserl revival that has been under way for decades and shows no signs of abating. And for this, by the way, much credit must go to the Husserliana editions, which have continued to reveal what Donn Welton called the "other Husserl," the thinker of the research manuscripts and lecture courses, who is so different, and in my view so much better, than the Husserl of the published works of Husserl's lifetime. Some people ridicule the Husserliana project as an "industry", now approaching the longevity of the master himself. And I can remember no less a figure than Paul Ricoeur expressing dismay that the editors are simply "emptying the drawers" of material that Husserl never expected or wanted to see the light of day. But the result has been worth it. The story of Husserl's reception is laid out beautifully in the Introduction to Luft's

book, and he of course has played a role in it. It is here that he begins to build his case for Husserl as a “thinker of the Enlightenment.”

In the context of the Enlightenment/anti-Enlightenment debates of the twentieth century, it is certainly correct to put Husserl on the side of the Enlightenment. But it must not be forgotten that the very premise on which the *Crisis* is written is that the Enlightenment has failed. Think of the bittersweet nostalgia with which Husserl invokes the glorious hymn “An die Freude” of Schiller and Beethoven. “It is only with painful feelings that we can understand this hymn today,” he says. “A greater contrast with our present situation is unthinkable” (Hua VI, p. 8). Of course, the “present situation” he refers to is precisely the deadly combination of irrationalism and positivism, strange bedfellows indeed, that are decapitating and eviscerating philosophy in his time. As with the notorious quote, “scientific philosophy—*der Traum ist ausgeträumt*,” (Hua VI, p. 508), Husserl is characterizing his times, not capitulating to them. But the way to respond to this dire situation of crisis is not to attempt to resurrect the Enlightenment as it was but to construct a new rationalism on phenomenological grounds. As Husserl tries to show in the historical sections of the *Crisis*, it was the weaknesses of the original Enlightenment that led to its eventual debasement in the twentieth century. Both Descartes and Kant—for Husserl the greatest of his predecessors—overlooked the significance of their own discoveries: for Descartes it was intentionality and for Kant it was transcendental subjectivity.

Which brings us to the positive side of Luft’s agenda in this book. He wants to demonstrate the links between Husserl’s transcendental philosophy and those of Kant and the neo-Kantians, especially Natorp and Cassirer. For him this is a more fruitful way of illuminating Husserl’s work than other comparisons one might make. Heidegger has been a favorite choice for comparison by many interpreters, whether they side with him or with Husserl. And for those who favor the chronological/developmental approach I spoke of earlier, the usual suspects are Brentano, Dilthey, and perhaps Frege. These work for the earlier periods, but it is fair to say that it was his encounter with Kant that awakened Husserl from his dogmatic slumbers and set him on the path to the transcendental turn. And there is no doubt that his interactions with Natorp also played a major role in this turn. After his transcendental phenomenology was firmly in place, Husserl often acknowledged his debt to Kant, but also combined this with liberal criticisms. But I have always thought that Husserl and Kant were much closer than Husserl admitted or saw, and I have argued this in some of my own work. Luft seems to share my view. Of course, one has to make allowances for the different historical contexts of Husserl and Kant, not to mention differences of terminology and styles of thinking.

Luft’s account of the connections among Husserl, Natorp and Cassirer allows him to give his interpretation of Husserl’s phenomenology a distinctive twist. His last chapter is entitled, somewhat provocatively, “Husserl’s ‘Hermeneutical Phenomenology’ as Philosophy of Culture.” He believes Husserl’s thought is hermeneutical in a much deeper sense than Heidegger’s—and, one might add, Ricoeur’s, though he is not mentioned here. And more so than Gadamer’s, since interpretation, according to Luft, is already incorporated into the phenomenological reduction itself. This is an insight with which I very strongly agree. Husserl is often

characterized as merely describing rather than interpreting—as if his method consisted in simply reading off what is there in front of him. But then why devote so much thought and effort to the phenomenological reduction, which allows us to see and describe things in a new way? The move from the natural to the phenomenological attitude is a profound reinterpretation of our experience, in which we look at the same thing in a new way.

The influence of Cassirer is seen in Luft's attempt to cast the life-world as cultural world and phenomenology as a philosophy of culture. Here I am less than convinced, since I think Husserl's concept of the life-world is broader. While the life-world encompasses culture it also includes "nature"—and underlies both. The nature/culture distinction, which underlies the distinctions between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, presupposes, according to Husserl, a lifeworld pregiven before all such distinctions, including the theoretical and the practical.

So far I have not mentioned what Luft calls the "Thesis of this book:" the thoroughgoing correlation between constituting subject and constituted world, as disclosed through the reduction (p. 12). This is the "one structure" (p. 14) that underlies all of Husserl's work. I will conclude with a few comments on this.

First, there is no doubt that the term *Korrelationsapriori* assumes a central position on Husserl's formulations of phenomenology, especially in later years. "Correlation" gradually and for the most part takes the place, in my view, of "constitution," which is too transitive and unidirectional. Correlation suggests a unified but two-sided structure, in which every feature of one side corresponds to a feature on the other. Now, in what sense does this constitute a "thesis?" Is it simply Luft's thesis that this correlation is central to Husserl's thought? Or is the correlation somehow itself a thesis, put forward by Husserl? Is Husserl asserting, "There is a thoroughgoing correlation between our experience and the experienced world"? To me this is less a thesis than a methodological stipulation of the reduction itself. In other words, the reduction amounts to this: let's exclude all transcendent references and restrict ourselves to this perspective. This sets the parameters for the phenomenological descriptions that follow. It sets the ground-rules for what can be and what cannot be included in a phenomenological account. It is the adoption of an attitude. This is the "research program" sense of the reduction. To make more of it risks transforming it into a metaphysical thesis.

Basically Luft seems to agree with me on this formulation, but some of his expressions trouble me nevertheless. On p. 12 he states that on the basis of the reduction "what is forever eliminated is the idea of a world independent of experience." "Boldly stated, it is impossible to leave the contents of our minds." This is a little too bold, for my taste, and sounds to me too much like old-fashioned metaphysical idealism. The idea of a world independent of experience, what Kant called empirical realism, belongs to the thesis of the natural attitude as described by Husserl in *Ideas I*. This thesis is not *denied* by the phenomenological reduction; as Husserl insists, it is not doubted or refuted but only suspended or bracketed. And we bracket it not in order to "forever eliminate" it, but, on the contrary, in order to understand it. In a sense, as Husserl also says, it is still there, if not exactly intact. This is something that has always seemed obvious to me, and with which Luft seems to agree (see Chapter 1): that we bracket the natural attitude not in order to go

off somewhere else, but to understand the natural attitude itself in a way that it cannot understand itself. What our phenomenological description reveals is not that “it is impossible to leave the contents of our minds.” On the contrary, it reveals a consciousness that is forever transcending itself toward the world. It was the idealists and empiricists, the representationalists, who condemned the mind to be forever occupied only with its own contents. And it is the great merit of the notion of intentionality that it breaks once and for all, as if cutting the Gordian knot, with this tradition.

At one point (Hua I, p. 65) Husserl gives us a valuable explanation of what he means by correlation. He explains his use of the term “transcendental” by appealing to the *transcendence* of the world. It belongs to the “intrinsic sense” of the world that it is transcendent, that is, not a real part of consciousness. Consciousness, for whom the world has that sense, is called transcendental, getting its name from that with which it is pre-eminently occupied. “Accordingly the philosophical problems arising from this correlation are called transcendental-philosophical.” The correlation, in his passage, is between the transcendental and the transcendent. The transcendence of the world is neither affirmed nor denied by phenomenology. That is simply not its job. Instead it tries to understand the meaning of this transcendence for us.

In these last remarks I’ve tried to outline a conception of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology which is metaphysically neutral and pre-eminently methodological. This is phenomenology, that is, as a research program. I think this is a conception that is mostly in line with Sebastian Luft’s in this fine book. If I’ve brought out a few passages that make me uneasy, it’s only because I want him to reassure me that he is not straying from the over-all presentation of Husserl’s that I find so persuasive in his book.

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