

Is it at all possible to think of transcendental subjectivity in ecological terms?

Specifically here, I mean to ask this question in light of Edmund Husserl's work.

Consequently, the transcendental subjectivity to which I refer is that subjectivity

disclosed by Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction, a subjectivity

which is typically thought of as worldless and solipsistic, who constitutes in its

own immanence others and the world. I believe the answer is yes. It is possible to

think of transcendental subjectivity in ecological terms. Not only is it possible to

think of transcendental subjectivity in these terms, I hold this is the only proper

way to think of "it." But there are serious methodological considerations that

complicate this answer, and I am aware of the controversy of this claim. So this

presentation is a first attempt, really, to lay out the terms of this claim and the

problems that require resolution in order to successfully defend it.

### Transcendental Subjectivity as Disclosed in Husserl's Philosophy

"In the final analysis," Husserl tells us, "everything depends on the initial moment of the method, the phenomenological method" (Husserl, Hua-CW VI, 493). That is to say, in order to understand transcendental subjectivity properly,

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we need to enact the phenomenological method properly. So what is this method? What is its basic procedure? For simplicity's sake, I will, by and large, articulate this as sketched by Husserl in his 1931 lecture, "Phenomenology and Anthropology" (already quoted). The brevity imposed on me in this talk makes the "Phenomenology and Anthropology" lecture a perfect place to situate my argument, for one of Husserl's stated aims in that lecture is (QUOTE) "to sketch out the transcendental philosophical method that has achieved its pure clarification in constitutive phenomenology " (UNQUOTE) (Hua-CW VI, 486). To be clear, though, the sketch I will present here is infused with a number of clarifications that go beyond what Husserl details in the lecture. These additions are necessary in my opinion to focus on my main claim, i.e., that it is possible to think of transcendental subjectivity in ecological terms.

First, the phenomenological method calls for a suspension of judgment that marks the desideratum of the philosophical endeavor. (QUOTE) "I must let no previous judgment, no matter how indisputable it may seem to be, go unquestioned and ungrounded" (UNQUOTE) (Hua-CW VI, 490). This is, of course, a procedural step consonant with Descartes's own meditative turn in his philosophy. Here one proceeds according to the principle of absolute self-responsibility, i.e., to find for oneself the ultimate and self-sufficient grounding of

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all my knowledge. It is this step that leads to the explication of the general thesis of the natural attitude. This universal certitude of the world or, as Husserl also says, "universal belief in being (that) flows through and sustains my entire life" (*ibid.*) lies deeper than any particular belief in the existence of some individual reality or aggregate thereof. For instance, I can quite easily imagine something showing itself in my experience in a way differently from what I take it to be. Future experiences may offer presentations of the objectivity that conflict with certain pre-delineated but implicit expectations of how the objectivity ought to look or to behave. Indeed, the objectivity may show itself to be *utterly* different than I had taken it to be. Yet throughout the transformation of the sense of the object in my experience, my natural belief in the world as such still remains unshaken. Even were I to doubt the existence of the aggregate of things surrounding me, the sense of the world as continually there and on hand for me, as that reality in which things *are*, remains outside the scope of this sort of particularized doubting.

Now it is true that Husserl explicitly entertains the possibility worldlessness in section 49 of *Ideas I*, the section titled "Absolute Consciousness as the Residuum After the Annihilation of the World."

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(QUOTE) In our experiencing it is conceivable that there might be a host of irreconcilable conflicts not just for us but in themselves, that experience might suddenly show itself to be intractable to the demand that it carry on its positings of physical things harmoniously, that its context might lose its fixed regular organizations of adumbrations, apprehensions, and appearances (and that it might actually remain so *ad infinitum*). (UNQUOTE) (Husserl, *Ideas I*-Kersten, 109 modified).

Yet even in this extreme example, in which the experience of irreconcilable conflicts occurs not just for us but *in themselves and ad infinitum*, we should take note that Husserl allows that "crude unity-formations" would come to be nevertheless constituted in experience and these unity-formations would function as "transient supports for intuitions." Consciousness, in other words, would constitute something analogous to world even in this extreme situation, though it would be improper to speak of this as if this were natural reality. One would expect, then, though Husserl never overtly assures us of this, that this sort of thwarted consciousness would nevertheless live, objectivate, judge, feel, and will – to whatever degree it could – within some sort of attitude that is analogous to attitude I take up in my natural life.

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However, I do not want to push this too far here, since its defense goes well beyond the parameters of this presentation. Suffice it to say that Husserl presents us this extreme possibility in *Ideas* 49, first and foremost, so as to provide the clearest example by which to demarcate immanental from transcendent being. Immanental being is indubitably absolute; "the world of transcendent 'res' is (on the contrary) entirely referred to consciousness" (*Ibid.*). And I would add that though Husserl asserts the possibility of a consciousness beset with irreconcilable conflicts arising in themselves and ad infinitum in experience, I believe we have here a rare instance in Husserl's writing where argument outweighs intuition. Husserl advances no phenomenological evidence to substantiate the description he presents as a possibility here, and even if we were willing to accept it as legitimate – which to be honest, I am – I see little reason to accept his understanding of it. Regardless, his basic point in introducing this possibility is an important one, i.e., that the sense of that which shows or evinces itself in experience may – in future experiences – come to be partially or entirely overthrown. Yet immanental being as such is not subject to such provisionality.

To return to my argument, the natural attitude is that universal belief in being which anchors every encounter with the things in my surrounding world. This attitude, ironically, remains transparent to itself in the natural attitude. While it is

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relatively easy to understand how a course of experiences may nullify the sense

of x or y intended in consciousness, the practicalities motivating my everyday

endeavors prohibit the attempt to universalize doubt to the world as such.

However, I, the meditating philosopher, am absolutely free to inaugurate a

radically distinct kind of doubt than that enacted in life. "As autonomous ego I

must pursue to the ultimate grounding exclusively in my own evidence what to

others traditionally holds as science and scientific foundation" (Hua-CW VI, 490

*modified*). In my philosophical attitude, in other words, motivated purely by the

desideratum of absolute self-responsibility, my attempt at doubting may take on,

and must take on, a universal scope. For me, "this certitude can *no longer serve as*

*the basis* for forming judgments" (Hua-CW VI, 490-91). So establishment of the

philosophical desideratum to absolute self-responsibility demands a universal

epoché or world-epoché.

Two remarks before I continue. First, clearly, this universal attempt at doubt is

not unlike Descartes methodological doubt. But a fundamental difference ought

not to be overlooked here. Descartes famously denied the validity of the faculty

of sensation in his *Meditations*. The method of doubt as performed by the

phenomenologizing philosopher aims, in contradistinction, neither to affirm nor

deny any ground of givenness. This is the very meaning of the principle of all

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principles articulated by Husserl in section 24 of *Ideas I*. This is to say, Husserl does not, as does Descartes, "suppose, then, that all the things I see are false."<sup>1</sup>

(QUOTE) The world continues to appear the way it had been appearing; world-life [*Weltleben*] is not interrupted. But the world is now a bracketed "world," a mere phenomenon, and precisely a validity-phenomenon of the stream of experience, of consciousness as such. However, this consciousness is now transcendently reduced consciousness. World, this validity-phenomenon "world" is manifestly inseparable from transcendently reduced consciousness (UNQUOTE) (Hua-CW VI, 492 modified).

Second, Husserl, it seems, has moved surreptitiously and perhaps even illicitly from the sphere of acts, particularly from acts of judgment, on the one hand, to, on the other, an objective domain, i.e., the state of affairs as judged. Yet, for Husserl, this alternating focus on both thesis and theme in his method is neither underhanded nor illegitimate. As we suspend judgment, that which is judged undergoes a modification of sense. The unique suspension of the general thesis by the phenomenologist entails a bracketing or parenthesizing of its general

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<sup>1</sup> René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross. In *The Philosophical Works of Descartes, Volume I*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 149.

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theme, i.e., the world. The phenomenological method of doubt deliberately orients the phenomenologizing ego toward the act-sphere of consciousness, on the one hand, and the object sphere, on the other. This oscillation between thesis and theme is, in point of fact, fundamental to phenomenological method. Indeed, Husserl employs a language consciously chosen to express this methodological aspect. In section 33 of *Ideas I*, he explains: (QUOTE) "When the metaphor of parenthesizing is closely examined it is seen to be, from the very beginning, more suitable to the object-sphere; just as the locution of "putting out of action" is better suited to the act- or consciousness-sphere," (UNQUOTE) (Husserl, *Ideas I* – Kersten, 60). It is thus a mistake to understand the method of bracketing or parenthesizing in contradiction to the neutrality modification in consciousness, or to confuse the one for the other. "Bracketing" or "parenthesizing" and "abstaining-from-producing something" or "not living in the act" are but two sides of the same coin. In short, the universal epoché as Husserl employs it neither affirms nor denies; and the enactment of the epoché has a twofold focus, on both thesis and theme.

The world-epoché marks a primary methodological concept in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Immediately, though, it becomes apparent that this universal epoché has the effect of destabilizing the very sense of myself as an



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embodied human subject in the real world. That is to say, the belief in my own being qua human (qua mundane, even) falls sway in the universalization of the epoché. Indeed, in a move not entirely dissimilar to Descartes's, the radicality of this meditation reveals a unique transcendental solitude. Husserl goes further, though, to suggest that the phenomenological method induces, so to speak, a splitting of the ego. In my worldly doings I, of course, experience myself as natural human ego. But the radicality of reflection imposed within phenomenological method discloses a transcendental ego "in" whom (or "for" whom) this natural subject obtains that sense qua human. This is "a new and important step" (*Ibid.*, 491) that opens a vast new field of research for investigation, "a field of immediate, apodictic experience, the constant source and solid ground of all transcendental judgments whether immediate or mediate" (*Ibid.*, 492). This immediate domain of research is, methodologically, at first restricted to my own individual ego, i.e., its transcendental *cogitations in all their typical forms*. *Ideas I* provides us with an example of this restriction. As is clear, though, phenomenology is an eidetic science and is as such guided by the method of ideation. "What is seen when that occurs is the corresponding pure essence, or Eidos, whether it be the highest category or a particularization thereof- down to full concretion" (Husserl, *Ideas I*-Kersten, 8). The scientific investigation of

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transcendental consciousness discloses the essential structures of cognition qua cogito-cogitatum. An eidetic science, phenomenology is at the same time a philosophy of leading clues. Proceeding methodologically from the cogitatum qua cogitatum, in other words, the phenomenologist regressively investigates the field of apodictic experiences in which that cogitatum is constituted. "The thing that is naïvely given to us as one thing, and possible as something permanent and completely unaltered – becomes the *transcendental clue* that leads us to the systematic reflective study of manifolds of consciousness that essentially pertain to any one thing" (Hua-CW VI, 497). Transcendental reflection thus extends to vast subterranean domains. These include the transcendental peculiarities of the "I can," transcendental habits built up in the life of consciousness, productions of empathy, and, correlatively of course, the universal validity-phenomenon that holds sway in consciousness, i.e., "world" – reduced, of course. "I have lost nothing that was there for me in the state of naivete, and in particular nothing that showed itself to me as existing reality. Rather: in the absolute attitude [Einstellung] I now recognize the world itself, I recognize it for the very first time as what it continuously was for me and had to be for me according to its essential nature: as a transcendental phenomenon" (*Ibid.*, 495). In this radically unnatural view of transcendental life, the phenomenologist's regard ranges over the entire

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domain of the life of consciousness, from the world qua validity-phenomena to the transcendental experiences in which the sense that validity-phenomenon holds good.

### Ecological Terms

The question driving this presentation is whether it is possible to think of transcendental subjectivity in ecological terms. What has fallen under the epoché is every judgment about spatiotemporal existence, which of course, includes judgments about my own organic existence. Yet if this is the case, it seems, then, the central tenet of ecological thought also falls prey to the epoché. Ecology proceeds from the thesis that every organism necessarily exists embedded in a system of interdependencies. Individuals and species exist together in what can be described as a pyramid of trophic relations. "Each successive layer depends on those below it for food and often for other services, and each in turn furnishes food and services to those above" (Leopold, Land Ethic, 215). Here the problem of this paper announces itself clearly. The transcendental ego appears in the initial moment of the method as a solitude of immanence, the organism, on the contrary, is a transcendent nodal point in a system of trophic relations.

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We are now at a stage where we can see the form of answer will take in response to this fundamental discrepancy. To understand transcendental subjectivity as worldless, as a subject unrelated to world, represents a fundamental misunderstanding of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology – even within his most Cartesian-styled texts. In Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, "*what we lose is not the world, but our captivation by the world*" (Fink, *SCM*-Bruzina trans., 42). By means of the methodological suspension of belief and bracketing of the natural world, we come to recognize that our natural life is but an abstract stratum; transcendental subjectivity is that which is truly concrete. As we noted already, "the world continues to appear the way it had been appearing; world-life [*Weltleben*] is not interrupted" (Hua-CW VI, quoted above).

The acquisition of the *solus ipse* in phenomenological reflection marks the beginning of philosophical wisdom, not its end. Indeed, phenomenological reflection discloses a subjectivity that is in essence relational. The validity-phenomenon of world being is for the phenomenologist a leading clue by which to inaugurate regressive investigations into the constitutional performance of an anonymous ego. Thus for a phenomenologist to lose the world would be like an

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archaeologist losing the very ground from which she unearths the civilizations underneath her. It is inconceivable.

Admittedly, I have been toying in this presentation with an equivocation in my use of the word "relation." On the one hand, the concept of relation as I have been using it is transcendental in character. The method of correlation research and the distinct strata upon which constitutional investigations progress requires, according to Husserl, "a secure ordering of problems if one is to ascend from one level of problems to the next higher level" (Husserl, Hua-CW VI, 498 modified). Husserl's phenomenological investigations proceed by leading clues to detail the essential morphology of relations between cogito and cogitatum. This relational-study leads of necessity into depth investigations into the essential connections between cogitata and corresponding faculties of the transcendental ego, i.e., into the "I can" and a transcendental habitus inherent to transcendental life. Even here, these depth investigations remain incomplete, as they abstract from the entire problem field of empathy and the investigation of "the open and endless whole of transcendental intersubjectivity, precisely as that which, within its communalized transcendental life, first constitutes the world as an objective world, as a world that is identical for everyone" (Husserl, Hua-CW VI, 498). On the other hand, the concept of relation as is used in ecology is natural in character.

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Ecology begins with the insight the human being is a member of the natural order. Not only is any particular species but a nodal point in a system of trophic relations, each individual stands in essential kinship relations with the diversity of earthly life. Every kinship relation implies a natural history, and thus life, itself, is a relation that reaches back into the natural history of this planet. The human being, in other words, is unique only insofar as it is the specific evolutionary product of a contingent history of beings. How is one to understand this equivocation adequately? I'll conclude with Husserl's own words, which occur near the conclusion of the 1931 "Phenomenology and Anthropology" lecture.

What we must constantly keep in mind is that what this transcendental phenomenology does is nothing other than to interrogate the one world, exactly that which is always for us the real world (the world that holds true for us, shows itself to us, the only world that has meaning for us). Transcendental phenomenology uses intentionality to interrogate the sources of that world's meaning and validity for us, the sources that comprise the true meaning of its being. That is precisely the way and the only way, to gain access to all conceivable problems about the world, and beyond them, to the

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transcendentally disclosed problems of being, not just the old  
problems raised to the level of their transcendental sense (Husserl, Hua-CW  
VI, 498).