

On Edmund Husserl

(For: "The Jews of Czechoslovakia")

Husserl's scope is wide, and his impact on philosophical, scientific, political and artistic thought is deep and manifold. There is an ever growing literature on the various aspects of his approach and method. It is therefore a hopeless task to try and resume his work. I shall not attempt it. Instead, I shall try to show why it may be held that with Husserl a radical revolution of our thought patterns sets in, and that we can no longer see the world and ourselves in the same way in which those before Husserl did. ~~Why~~ Husserl was right in believing that his Phenomenology is the "fundamental science of philosophy". *> explain Phenomenology*

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Let me begin with the problem of knowledge. How do we know? This is an "eternal" problem, and Husserl shows that it is "eternal", because it was formulated in a way which admits to no solution. Namely thus: in order to know, there must be a subject who wants to know and an object to be known. The problem then is: how does the subject adequat~~e~~<sup>e</sup> himself to the object? *Traditionally said:* "Adequatio intellectus ad rem". Ever since Aristotle, passing through Descartes and Hegel, and up to Husserl, various (theories of knowledge, epistemologies), have been elaborated, and they have structured science. However, none of these theories could claim success. On the contrary: Hume was able to show that on the basis of those theories knowledge in general, and scientific knowledge in particular, is strictly impossible. *He explained* And when Kant tried to "save science", he did so by sacrificing the link between theory and praxis, between "pure" and "applied" science. In the meantime, science went on knowing and changing the world and man, as if it had solved the "eternal" epistemological problem.

The problem cannot be solved as stated, because it poses the question of precedence between subject and object. Does the subject precede the object, ("idealism")? Does the object precede the subject, ("realism")? Are they simultaneous and somehow mysteriously coordinated? All those are metaphysical questions in the bad sense of that term. If radically pursued, they lead either to solipsism, (there is nothing but a lonely subject who "dreams up" the world), or to a primitive sort of materialism, (there is nothing but the mute world of objects, and no such thing as a mind which knows it). All the more reasonable positions in between can be shown to be compromises between those two radical extremisms.

Husserl reformulates the problem of knowledge, and suddenly there is no problem any longer. He does so by accepting knowledge as a concrete fact, and by showing that it is not knowledge, but the subject and the object of knowledge which are in need of an explanation. Let me give an example. "I know this table." Now this is a concrete fact: I know the table. Indeed, it is so concrete that I can take hold of it. Just as I can take hold of all the other concrete facts which make up my "Lebenswelt", the world I live in. However, what is very much less concrete is what I mean when saying "I" and "table". What do I mean when saying "I"? Well: something which, among other things, knows the table. What do I mean when saying "table"? Well: something which is known by me and by other knowers. Thus knowledge

in its sheer concreteness takes precedence to both the subject and the object of knowledge. There is no knower, where there is no knowledge. There is nothing known, if there is no knowledge. Thus it is not a fact that a knower and a known must meet in order to bring about knowledge. On the contrary: it is knowledge which brings about a knower on one of its sides, and a known on the other. Knowledge is a concrete relation, and it relates between the two abstractions "knower" and "known", between two abstract extrapolations from concrete knowledge.

Theory of knowledge is no longer an attempt to explain how knowledge comes about, but to explicit what is implicit in knowledge. It can be shown that it is a dynamic relation, a sort of arrow. It points from somewhere, (a supposed subject), to somewhere, (a supposed object). It is "intentional". I can call the point where it intends from a "subject", and the point where it intends to an "object". "I know this table" is a concrete intention, "I" is the abstract point where it starts, and "table" is an abstract point which it aims at. But of course there are more knowledges in my "Lebenswelt" than "I know this table". There is for instance the knowledge "I know this house", and the knowledge "you know this table". Which brings me to the following vision, ("Schau"), of the concrete world of knowledge: It is a net of concrete intentionalities, a "field". In this net there are points from which the intentionalities of knowledge flow: those are the abstract subjects. And there are points in which the intentionalities of knowledge meet: those are the abstract objects. This net is dynamic: knowledge increases and decreases. And the structure of the net is orderly: "mathesis universalis"<sup>(universal order)</sup>. The task of theory of knowledge is to study this fundamental mathematics of the field of knowledge.

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Now what goes for knowledge, goes for every concrete relation. For instance for experience and for evaluation. Experience is concrete, and it precedes the abstract experiencer and the abstract object experienced. Evaluation is concrete, and it precedes the abstract evaluator and the abstract object evaluated. The "Lebenswelt" is made up of such concrete, intentional, relations. For instance: when I feel a pain in my stomach, it is the pain which is concrete, and "I" and "stomach" are but abstract attempts to explain the pain. When I judge nazism to be bad, it is the value "evil" which is concrete, and "I" and "Hitler" are but abstract attempts to explain evil. Now all those types of concrete intentionalities imply each other. Nothing is known without being experienced and evaluated, nothing is experienced without being known and evaluated, nothing is evaluated without being known and experienced. This is what renders the "Lebenswelt" concrete: that it is a net of intentionalities which relate experiences, knowledge and values. That it gives meaning, ("Sinngabung"), to abstract subjects and objects. I sum: what is concrete about the "Lebenswelt" is that it is intentional. *way of seeing*

Such a "Schau" has of course enormous consequences. Some of which have already come about, and most of which have probably not yet been realised. The ne-

gative consequence is that the "eternal" metaphysical struggle between realism and idealism is over. Among the positive consequences I shall mention only a few, which appear to me to be fundamental. (a) The attitude of science has changed. It no longer tries to "decipher" the objective world, but it is now aware of the fact that it is scientific intention which structures the objective world. "If the objects did not behave according to scientific rules, they would not be objects". (b) Science has become aware that there is no such thing as "pure knowledge", "pure science". That science implies experience and values, that there is an "artistic" and a "political" side to every scientific proposition. And that this co-implication of knowledge, experience and values is precisely what is concrete about science, its "pure intentionality", its "Sinngabung". (c) The arts come out from there splendid isolation in glorified ghettos, and they now accept their responsibilities in the field of knowledge and values. They accept their epistemological and political responsibilities, because they assume their "pure intentionality", which is to give meaning, (not only experience, but also knowledge and values). The fatal modern divorce between the arts and technology is almost over. (d) Political thought is changing. It is becoming aware of the close link between political structures, scientific thought and deed, and artistic expression. But I shall have to say more on this in a later consideration.

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There is one difficulty in all this, however: the "Schau" I was referring to is not easily attainable. When we look about us, it is not pure intentionalities which we see, but things like tables. And when we look "inside", it is not pure intentionalities which we meet, but something like a mind, an identity, an "I". Of course: we know that we are mistaken. We know that the table is nothing but an electromagnetic and gravitational field which behaves according to "our" equations. We know that the mind is nothing but a sort of data processing which we can simulate in computers. Still: we cling to the belief in the reality of minds and tables. This is so, because our "Lebenswelt" is covered by thick layers of prejudices, (previous judgements), which make us believe in objects and subjects. It is necessary to remove these layers, to "reduce" them. The objects must be freed from those layers, to show what they really are: abstract points I intend to, ("phenomenological reduction"). And "I" must be freed from those layers to show what I really am: an abstract point from which intentions irradiate, ("eidetic reduction"). Once I have freed the Lebenswelt from those layers, I can see the world as a pure and concrete field of relations.

To do this, I must somehow step away from all those prejudices, I must somehow transcend them. I do not believe, as for me, that Husserl has shown how I can do so, ("Transcendental reduction"). What he seems to advocate is a sort of *cleansing process* (catharsis). *Heidegger's 'two moments' (Epoche)* Something like suspending all judgements by keeping one's mouth shut. ("Epoche"). In this silence of mine, in this pause, the Lebenswelt will begin to speak for itself: "Zu Worte kommen lassen". This attitude of silence is the phenomenological attitude toward the world. Which does not mean that all the previous judgements, (all the previous history of science, of politics and the arts), is the-

reby abolished. It only means that they are suspended, ("put between brackets"), and that, once the world has "spoken", (once it has shown what it is), the suspended judgements may be applied to it, to see how they stand the test. Thus "e-poche" is not a denial of previous judgements, but a testing. In being so, it is a radical renewal of previous knowledge, experience and values.

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However, what is most radical in all this is, in my opinion, the new vision, "Schau", of human existence. Let me put it this way: the ancient struggle between idealism and realism in the field of knowledge has an equally ancient counterpart in the field of politics, (in the Greek sense of "art to govern a polis"): What takes precedence, man or society? Or: is man a function of society, or is society a function of man? Is a man "good", if he is good for society, or is society "good" if it is good for man? Phenomenological "Schau" will do away with this "eternal" problem, which leads, on the one extreme, to absolute individualism, and on the other extreme to totalitarian collectivism.

Under a phenomenological vision society will be seen as a net composed of intersubjective intentional relations. The knots in the net are what used to be called "individuals" before Husserl. It can be seen that they are nothing concrete: if the net is unknotted, they disappear. There can be no such thing as an "I" which is unrelated. In fact: I am the sum of my relations. It can equally be seen that there is no such thing as "a society". If the knots are unknotted, the net will collapse and disappear: it comes out from the knots. "I" and "society" are abstract extrapolations from concrete intersubjective relations. And those relations are intentional, they "mean".

Now once this vision of the intersubjective character of individual and society is digested, it must lead to a new kind of political thinking. Once it is accepted that the individual is a function of society, society a function of the individual, and that both are abstractions of pure intentionalities, it will become obvious that politics is not about the individual or society, but about intersubjective relations. I suggest that this is in fact being accepted, though not by politicians, but by scientists, engineers and artists. The vision of a future intersubjectivity which runs through the channels of telematics, this "universally dialogical" vision, which is sometimes called "information society", seems to me a consequence of Husserl's vision, although of course mostly unknown to those who prepare it.

*of the 20th century*

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*and way of thinking is within the same tradition*

Husserl was of Jewish origin, but there seems to be nothing especially Jewish about him. Unless, of course, we consider his "epoche", this attempt to step back from the Lebenswelt, and to keep silent, so that it may speak for itself. There is something deeply unsatisfactory, <sup>even</sup> mystical about this. It is, in fact, a religious attitude, and it may be considered a Jewish one, (although Husserl would probably disagree that it is so). It is very like the attitude which characterizes the Sabbath. And I suspect that Jewish mystics would, with some reservations, accept Husserl as one of their own, which is a paradox worth consideration.

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The thoughts I have submitted here are of course no objective rendering of Husserl's writings. How could they be, if "objectivity" in the traditional sense is precisely what Husserl aims at destroying? What I have done here is a report on the impact which Husserl has had on my thoughts, my experiences, and on my values. My report is intersubjective. But I hope it is not subjective. I hope that many are able to recognize themselves in it. And that they will recognize the impact which Husserl had upon them, even if they have never read him. And this is, I believe, the mark of greatness: Husserl is changing even those who do not know that he ever existed.

All this in pursuit of Husserl's goal

June 1958