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Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Phenomenology of death: subjectivity and nature in Husserl's genetic phenomenology**

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### **Citation**

Vecino, M. C. (2021, December 2). *Phenomenology of death: subjectivity and nature in Husserl's genetic phenomenology*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3246992>

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Introduction

*Das ist ja das Rätsel des Lebens. Das eigentliche Rätsel ist nicht die Entstehung des organischen Wesens als physischen Dinges, und selbst dass die (physischen Vorkommnisse) in objektiver Betrachtung etwa als organische zu spezifischen Vorgängen der Fortpflanzung, der Ernährung, des Stoffwechsels etc. sich ausbilden, ist nicht das Rätselhafte. Ob man nun mit gewöhnlicher Physik ausreicht oder nicht: Das allein prinzipiell über Physik Hinausgehende sind die Erlebnisse organischer Wesen, (ist) die Beseelung.*

Hua 42, 141

## i. Transcendental phenomenology vs. scientific naturalism

The dispute between the naturalist and the transcendental standpoints echoes a number of discussions starting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but having precedents throughout the history of philosophy. One can trace the kind of dualism that opposes consciousness to nature all the way back to ancient philosophy, and even if the focus has changed significantly there is something that remains of this primary opposition. Is consciousness another product of nature or is it something radically different? Can we study it like we would a natural entity?

Recently, the debates around the relationship between nature and intentionality or nature and normativity bring back the issue of how to account for conscious thought from a scientific perspective and of whether it is even possible. The starting point of these debates are the alleged insufficiencies of a physicalist perspective when it comes to explaining subjective experience. This is the point David Chalmers (1996) makes when discussing what he terms “the hard problem” of consciousness, i.e. the problem of explaining how physical data and sensations can give origin to subjective feelings and how to account for them. The so called “explanatory gap” (Levine 1983) between physical properties and subjective states

seems to be the inevitable outstanding balance left by scientific explanations of the mind or consciousness. However, scientists who support a strong naturalism consider that solving these challenges is only a matter of time. Defining the problematic areas for scientific practice, Huw Price (1997) refers to the four M's: meaning, morality, modality and the mental. What these dimensions of experience have in common is that they can't be sufficiently understood from the third-personal type of perspective that characterizes science. This perspective aims at obtaining a neutral, objective and external account of facts that can be applied to any and all possible cases. On the other side of the spectrum, phenomenology stresses the importance of adopting a first-personal perspective to account for conscious experience. The type of first-personal eidetic analyses of experience that phenomenology carries out provides the content left missing from third-personal scientific analyses. But phenomenology does not seek to simply fill in the gaps left by science; rather, it constitutes itself as a discourse that holds a priority over science and that grounds scientific practice. This is because, as a transcendental type of philosophy, phenomenology holds that everything, and not only the four M's, should be defined in relation to consciousness<sup>1</sup>. And assuming consciousness is only truly given in first-personal terms, the first person will become foundational for every possible knowledge.

Now, not unlike its counterpart, this priority comes at the cost of creating a gap or disconnection between two dimensions: on the one hand, between the study of subjectivity in first-personal terms (phenomenology) and the study of human beings in third-personal terms (science); and on the other, between consciousness itself considered as the subjective feeling of experience, and the body as the entity that can be affected by observable stimuli.

In contemporary philosophy and science, there are many who attempt to bring these dimensions together and soften the contrast between them. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Because the meaning of terms like 'subjectivity' and 'consciousness' is precisely at stake in the development of this dissertation, it is difficult to provide a definition of them up front. It should be noted, however, that what Husserl terms transcendental consciousness is broader than what in the analytic tradition can be referred to as consciousness, which is more focused on *qualia* and the subjective feel of experience. I will opt to use 'subjectivity' whenever it is possible rather than consciousness, and when consciousness is used, it should be understood in this broader manner, as the ability to interact with meaning.

because of their very definition, which rely on their mutual exclusion, this proves to be a difficult task. As Havi Carel and Darian Meacham put it in the introduction to their volume on *Phenomenology and Naturalism*: “*The problem is that in the philosophical tradition the two approaches do not seem able to accommodate one another in a manner that doesn’t reduce nature to consciousness (transcendental idealism) or consciousness to nature (reductive physicalism).*” (Carel & Meacham 2013).

The common feature of these two approaches is a conception of nature that ultimately stems from the Cartesian division between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, thought to be at the root of the modern conception of science and the mind-body problem. In contemporary phenomenology and philosophy of cognition, one of the strategies used to bridge this gap (mainly aiming at establishing a dialogue between phenomenology and science) turns the focus to the notion of nature and points out that a more accurate and richer description of the natural realm softens or erases the radical divide between nature and consciousness. This is done by locating intentionality already at the lowest levels of animated life. These approaches, however, do not work within the methodological constraints of phenomenological inquiry since they go beyond the first-personal approach and use empirical third-personal descriptions as a starting point. In Husserl’s view, these descriptions are valid but only from a particular perspective, adopting a particular attitude that is not the truest, most appropriate way of speaking about our specific way of being (Hua 1, 131; Husserl 1960, 100). In Husserl’s account, this derived point of view is common to all sciences but philosophy. But by leaving it aside in accounting for ourselves and undermining scientific findings about human nature we might risk overlooking some important features that influence the way we experience the world such as our drives, our bodily makeup, and the influence of our social environment. In the late stages of his work, Husserl has struggled to integrate these aspects into the transcendental sphere, straying from the strict methodology that characterized his earlier work yet still attempting to anchor every result in first-personal givenness. The results, as we will see, are less than fully satisfactory, as he seems to engage in “*all aporetic efforts*” (Hua/Mat 8, 351) when facing issues such as the genesis of affection and temporalization.

In today's secular world, it does not seem controversial to say that the possibility for conscious thought is a feature of our species, a trait that developed over time as a way of adapting to the environment. And yet, this particular feature is what allows us to tell a story about nature, about ourselves and the history of our species. Consciousness is at the same time the product and the producer of nature. How should we consider this relationship?

This dissertation will not attempt to tackle such a broad and fundamental question, but only to contribute in a small way to the debate by reflecting on these issues within the framework of phenomenology. This means that my point of departure presupposes the transcendental principle and the privileged relevance of the first person, although throughout this research their role will be problematized and reconfigured. I will attempt to do this by focusing on a type of experience that has a problematic relation to the phenomenological method as Husserl conceived it: the experience of death.

## ii. Phenomenology of death

Along with other limit-cases (*Limesfälle*) as Husserl calls them (Hua 42, 1), such as birth and deep sleep, death has the peculiar character of being, by definition, non-experienceable. Since it is precisely the disappearance of the experiencing subject, as subjects we cannot be present when it occurs, and thus we cannot have a first-personal perspective on it. And yet, there is certainty<sup>2</sup> about the actual occurrence of these events: I know I have been born and I will die, just as I know, whenever I wake up, that I have been asleep and the world has continued to exist during my absence. However, because of the importance granted to the first-personal perspective in Husserl's work, it is difficult to give a phenomenologically coherent account of these cases. When it comes to death, Husserl considers that it has a paradoxical character, insofar as the absence of a first-personal perspective of it prevents us from fully accepting its certainty: we know that we will die, and yet we feel as if we were to live forever (Hua/Mat 8, 96).

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<sup>2</sup> What I call certainty here only refers to the fatal character of our demise, regardless of the different religious, spiritual or philosophical interpretations that can be made of it or of a possible "after life", which I will not deal with here.

The tension between these two aspects is resolved in favour of the subjective present experience, leading Husserl to conclude that consciousness does not die; that it is, in a sense, “immortal” (*unsterblich*) (Hua 29, 338).

Firstly, we must address the immediate response one might provide to this statement, namely that it must be merely a type of metaphor that holds that we cannot actually live through our own demise. If the immortality of the subject means that consciousness lives on in any kind of worldly manner after the body ceases to be animated, then we must agree that this statement is of a speculative nature, and does not agree with the principles of phenomenological enquiry. What we are discussing here is not whether immortality in a traditional or religious sense is possible, but rather whether, for the special kind of being that is consciousness, mortality is. Husserl, and the phenomenological tradition in general, have made a point of examining the being of consciousness and how it relates —identifies to, differs from, requires or denies— the body. The opposition between the two terms that is characteristic of the more Cartesian strand of Husserlian phenomenology, shines through in Husserl’s dealings with limits and death and leads to the larger questions of the relationship between transcendental and empirical subjectivity, spirit and nature, constitution and naturalism. A phenomenological account of death requires that we address these founding issues, so while we can understand Husserl’s statement as metaphorical, we are forced to go further and inquire about what this metaphor might be trying to account for.

Through this reflection we will become confronted with the need to reconfigure, rethink and overcome the stark division between the two dimensions that a subjective reflection and an objective science of subjectivity represent. Limit-cases are a privileged gateway into this type of enquiry. Even though we don’t have a first-personal experience of these events, the certainty attached to them does not seem to stem from entirely third-personal sources either. I don’t learn that I will die in the same way I could learn about the frequency of planetary movements or even how my own immune system works. The experience of my own death is tightly related to the particular experience I have of my own body, which is one of fundamental ambiguity: I am my own body, while at the same time I can experience it as something alien. The demarcation of the inside/outside of my body and myself

is not simply a matter of shifting between one perspective and the other, or at least it seems most the time it is not so easy to circumscribe our experience of it to one or the other. By focusing on this type of experience it is possible to draw attention to the hybrid character of self-awareness, its way of being both objective and subjective, which is not reserved to limit-cases but encompasses all of our experience.

Now, given the importance that Husserl gives to the first person as foundation for knowledge, this type of conclusion might risk undermining the whole of the phenomenological method. As will become evident throughout this research, my aim is not to erase the first person entirely, but rather to hold on to the valuable insights that animate Husserl's phenomenology understood as a transcendental philosophy, without committing to some of its unworkable consequences. It will nevertheless be necessary to address these methodological issues, and in this sense, the question of death leads, as Eugen Fink has pointed out already, to a phenomenology of phenomenology (Fink 1995, 8). This meta-reflection will have its place in this investigation, insofar as immortality plays a crucial methodological role in Husserl's system.

### **iii. Thesis and development**

Does the subject die? This thesis argues that a Husserlian (i.e., a philosopher who holds on to Husserlian methodological principles) can only make sense of the phenomenon of death by considering the constituting subject as a (transcendental) person. As an outcome, I will propose the idea of immortality be retained only as a methodological key, that is meant to convey the ineliminable character of a lived perspective. This lived perspective does not function as an absolute foundation, as Husserl conceived it, and it does not entail the immortality of the subject, since its life is a *Faktum* whose origin is not the subject herself.

It is important to point out that my aim is neither to produce an account of death that would hold well within Husserl's thought, nor to use the case of death as a weapon against it. Rather, death is the Ariadne's thread that will allow me to address a problematic that arises throughout Husserl's genetic work, not due to

any shortcomings on his part but rather to the complex nature of consciousness. Nevertheless, since this alternative account of death challenges some of Husserl's interpretations of key topics —specifically Subjectivity and Nature—, one might expect this thesis to be providing an immanent critique of Husserlian phenomenology. This shall indeed constitute a secondary aim of this dissertation. However, it is here a matter of proposing a critique of the traditional, idealistic strand we find in his phenomenology rather than of Husserl's thought as a whole, and I attempt to do that from a particular angle, namely the problem of death for a transcendental consciousness.

Regarding Husserlian and phenomenological scholarship, I try to show that conscious experience, although always centred around “myself”, can never be purely first-personal, since our own way of being embodied subjects in the context of a life-world already exceeds this perspective. However, I will attempt to present a potential reworking of the issues at stake that still ‘plays by Husserlian rules’, meaning that respects his methodological principles as much as possible. Specifically, I will try to maintain a balance between two main principles or meta-principles of Husserlian phenomenology that appear to be threatened when we consider limit-cases and the nature of constituting subjectivity: one is the need to consider things as they are given to intuition, and the other is to consider experience from a first-personal perspective, in order to preserve the transcendental standpoint. I try to stick to these principles as much as possible, which sometimes will require even going against Husserl himself. For the sake of the first principle, I will contend with Husserl's more idealistic strain, which, as will become evident, can lead to a kind of speculative metaphysics. For the sake of the second principle, I will try to offset a tendency, common in post-Husserlian French phenomenology, that attempts to overcome the ego-centred character of Husserl's system by positing a being that would be prior to the subject, whether it is desire, life, flesh or simply being. Although I will not directly analyse the philosophies of particular authors taking part in this movement, I will refer throughout this dissertation to the work of Merleau-Ponty, not only as a leading and initiating figure, but as a valuable antecedent for the problems that this research touches on. To a large extent, the issues raised here echo a number of Merleau-Ponty's own

concerns about Husserl and the phenomenological method. Throughout this dissertation I will attempt to point out some of the limitations of his own philosophy, and for the following tradition that pursues his movement from epistemology towards ontology. The cost of this movement is that it abandons the transcendental standpoint when it claims it can describe a type of being that is not ontologically dependent on any subjective perspective. I attempt to walk the narrow path between the French abandonment of the transcendental standpoint and Husserl's tenacious defence of it. The purpose of maintaining this balance is simply to be true to phenomenology's mission of *going back to the things themselves*. Intuitive givenness and the first-personal standpoint are tools to guarantee a faithful description of experience but, as I mentioned above, there are times when they seem to be at odds with each other, since they sharply exhibit the limitations of both extremes. The study of limit-cases brings forth this tension, and thus requires that we find a middle way. When it comes to explaining limits, Husserl struggles to give an account of them that doesn't rely on naturalistic assumptions—namely, that the body's breakdown entails the dissolution of consciousness and vice versa—at the cost of flirting with speculative theories when he states that transcendental life somehow extends beyond worldly life. Both ways of approaching the topic seem problematic, which ultimately relates to the dualism at play in the understanding of nature and subjectivity as two excluding and opposed terms.

In order to accomplish these goals, the thesis will be divided into three parts: a general presentation of Husserl's phenomenology and the problem of limits, an in-depth analysis of subjectivity in its different dimensions, and a reflection on nature and death that proposes a reconsideration of these key topics in light of previous results.

The first part builds up the framework to understand the problem of limits and presents Husserl's treatment of them.

In the first chapter, I provide an introductory view of phenomenology as transcendental philosophy and its relationship to scientific naturalism, sketching out the tension between the first-personal type of analysis that phenomenology proposes and a third-personal study of conscious experience that represents

psychologism and naturalism. I explain the importance that a first-personal perspective has for Husserlian phenomenology and introduce the problem of limits in this context by explaining briefly Husserl's first mention of the immortality of the subject. In the second chapter I present the so called "paradox of human subjectivity", which deals with the problematic relationship between the transcendental subject (consciousness) and the empirical subject (the human being). The paradoxical understanding of ourselves as being at the same time subjects and objects for the world translates into a paradoxical understanding of our death as both unavoidable and impossible: unavoidable for humans, impossible for consciousness. Therefore, the paradoxical encounter with death can be interpreted as an instantiation of the paradox of human subjectivity, therefore dealing with the relation between transcendental subject and human being. Moreover, in this section I will analyse the resolution Husserl finds in the form of a separation between transcendental and empirical subject. Since death is interpreted by Husserl as "*the separation of the transcendental ego from its self-objectification as human.*" [das Ausscheiden des transzendentalen Ego aus der Selbstobjektivation als Mensch] (Hua 29, 332), it is not only a case of this paradox but in fact it serves as a proof of the separability of the two dimensions of the subject. I will argue that this response is problematic insofar as it entails that the constituting subject is not embodied, and that the transcendental subject is not fundamentally involved with the world.

The third chapter of the first part presents Husserl's treatment of limit-cases through the analysis of his texts and manuscripts. I start by presenting the different stages of Husserl's work and the different methodological tools associated with them. Limits become a topic of investigation in the context of genetic phenomenology, which, unlike the static phenomenology that characterizes Husserl's first works, deals more directly with temporal phenomena and time-constitution in general. In this sense, many of the manuscripts that deal with death are primarily dedicated to thinking about time. I distinguish between two approaches to death: a genetic and a generative one. While the genetic approach deals more directly with these reflections on time-constitution and limits as they are conceived from an individual standpoint, the generative approach considers these

issues from the perspective of a community. Because it focuses on intersubjectivity, it is able to consider birth and death as a part of the transcendental sphere —which wasn't possible in the genetic approach— insofar as they are revealed as necessary traits of the world, parts of the *a priori* of the world. However, even when generativity supposes an advancement regarding the genetic approach, it does not go against the idea of immortality but only reconfigures it in such a way that it becomes possible to conceive of the death of the individual subject but not of transcendental life in general.

It becomes necessary to understand, then, how Husserl characterizes subjectivity and life, in order to understand who dies and what remains, and what the relationship between those parts is. I dedicate the second part of this dissertation to exploring four different notions associated with Husserl's description of subjectivity: the primal I, the Monad, the person and the body. In chapter 4, I take a look at the problem of the retrospective character of reflection and the anonymous character of the functioning subject. I argue that the attempt to identify this purely functioning subject with constituting subjectivity falls into some inconsistencies insofar as, deprived of all objectification, the primal I is a non-being that cannot be manifested and cannot constitute on its own. Chapter 5 focuses on Husserl's monadology. The notion of Monad has the advantage of being inclusive and admitting within itself the noematic correlates of experience. However, as it becomes apparent upon closer analysis, Husserl's monadological theory ultimately rests on a speculative ground that is also at the basis of the idea of immortality. After revisiting this idea, I consider a possible reading of it that does not entail any metaphysical commitments, but ultimately rule it out as it is inconsistent with Husserl's position. I then turn to the notion of person in chapter 6, and focus on the "transcendental person" as a possible candidate to think of the concrete subject that is embedded in a life-world. I complement this by reflecting on the ambiguous nature of embodiment in chapter 7. Through the idea of the ambiguity of the body, it is possible to understand subjectivity as the concrete unity of the subjective and the objective dimensions of experience while overcoming the speculative element of the monadological view. This will be revisited in chapter 9, where I present this notion of subjectivity in comparison with three other possible interpretations in the

tradition. Before that, chapter 8 deals with the question of nature and a possible redefinition of it as the realm of primal facticity that genetic questions ultimately lead to. This allows us to consider nature a part of the subject while retaining its irreducible character.

Finally, chapter 10 comes back to the question of death and reconsiders it in light of the previous analysis. The first-personal access to reflection and the transcendental principle are reconsidered. Through an analysis of Fink's position in the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, I consider whether immortality can be applied to the transcendental onlooker (the subject of phenomenologizing) instead of the constituting subject, but I conclude that the notion of immortality should in no way serve as a criterion to split the subject, even though it is useful to retain it as a methodological warning against naïve naturalism.

The overall conclusion of the thesis amounts to the recognition of life as an unsurpassable *Faktum* that underpins the inter-dependency of the subjective and objective poles of constitution, that is to say, of the *a priori* of correlation. I conclude that a Husserlian can only make sense of the phenomenon of death by considering the subject as transcendental person.

