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

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Chapter 2: Limits and paradoxes

In the first chapter, I have laid down the guiding principles of phenomenology and explained why limit-cases can be considered a threat to them. To summarize the results, we can say that if phenomenology seeks to be a foundational theory of knowledge based on first-personal evidence, limit-cases undermine that enterprise insofar as they are not given to oneself, and thus seem to require a different type of explanation (namely, a third-personal one). For Husserl, this means limits are not proper phenomena but occurrences of the constituted world that affect the subject only as empirical human being and not as transcendental or constituting. This leads me to examine the relationship between these two dimensions or ways of thinking about subjectivity, and so in this chapter I turn to the paradox of human subjectivity. The paradoxical way of thinking about subjectivity is characteristic of Husserlian thought, and it is what shapes his own views on death, as his own presentation shows. I will here begin by focusing more specifically on death, as a problematic case where the limits and tensions of phenomenology in general are exhibited, and lay down some key issues that I will take up throughout the rest of this dissertation.

2.1 Introduction

The tension between the third-personal account of the human provided by naturalistic science and the first-personal approach of transcendental phenomenology is replicated throughout Husserl's work in different forms and in relation to different specific topics. Most notably, it is at the basis of one of the biggest issues developed in his last published work, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936), namely the problem of the paradox of human subjectivity. As Husserl famously declares in the third section of the *Crisis*, the performance of the *epoché* reveals that every objectivity in the world can be traced back to the constituting activity of transcendental intersubjectivity; only, because transcendental intersubjectivity is no different from humankind, it is considered at the same time an objectivity in the world, therefore presenting us with the paradoxical idea that a part of the world “*swallows up, so to speak, the*

whole world and thus itself too” (Hua 6, 183; Husserl 1970, 180). The paradox touches on the issue of the relationship between transcendental subjectivity and the empirical human being, and the possibility of it being solved depends on a more thorough clarification of this bond. In this chapter I will examine this paradox in light of the tension between these two forms of approaching subjectivity, along with two other paradoxes that, I will argue, are also the expression of the larger tension between first-personal and third-personal accounts of experience. One is the “crazy paradox” Merleau-Ponty points to in his analyses of Husserl’s reflection on the notion of Earth as ground in the text “Foundational investigations of the phenomenological origin of the spatiality of Nature: The originary ark, the Earth, does not move”. The other is the paradox of death, that consists of the contradictory understanding of my own death as being certain yet unconstitutable. Because these are expressions of the same over-arching tension, what is at stake in them is essential to phenomenology’s way of thinking about experience, and, as Husserl himself states, the power of phenomenology lies in its ability to resolve them:

From the beginning the phenomenologist lives in the paradox of having to look upon the obvious as questionable, as enigmatic, and of henceforth being unable to have any other scientific theme than that of transforming the universal obviousness of the being of the world –for him the greatest of all enigmas- into something intelligible. If the paradox just developed were insoluble, it would mean that an actually universal and radical epoché could not be carried out at all, that is, for the purposes of a science rigorously bound to it. (Hua 6, 184; Husserl 1970, 180)

The resolution of the paradox of human subjectivity is attained through the idea of self-apperception or self-objectification. I will examine this notion and turn to the paradox of death as an especially relevant case in which the tensions that underlie phenomenology are exhibited. Because death is a limit for constitution, the resolution cannot be applied in the same straightforward manner in which Husserl faces the paradox in the *Crisis*, and yet it functions as a kind of proof for Husserl’s solution. Because death is “*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), Husserl's way of approaching death –together with birth- show to what extent he is committed to a conception of the transcendental subject that is radically distinct from the empirical human being. I will present a preliminary idea of Husserl's developments on death and argue that its peculiarities present a challenge for the phenomenological method as a whole, and for the distinction between transcendental subjectivity and the empirical human being; then I will offer a preliminary analysis of the Merleau-Pontian diagnosis of Husserl's philosophy as well as Merleau-Ponty's own way out of the paradox, and point out some of its insufficiencies.

2.2 The paradox of human subjectivity

As soon as the *epoché* makes an appearance in Husserl's work, the question about the relationship between the psychophysical human being and consciousness thought of as the residue left by its performance is raised. Already in *Ideas 1* we can find the following formulation of the paradox:

Thus, on the one hand consciousness is said to be the absolute in which everything transcendent and, therefore, ultimately the whole psychophysical world, becomes constituted; and, on the other hand, consciousness is said to be a subordinate real event within that world. How can these statements be reconciled? (Hua 3-1, 116; Husserl 1983, 124)

As in the *Crisis*, the context of the question is that of Husserl's articulated criticism of naturalism, physicalism, and the scientific view of the world. The paradox then does not present a *new* problem but is rather the phenomenological expression of the larger dispute with the naturalistic perspective applied to the subject. In the *Crisis*, where it receives its complete formulation, it is presented in the context of Husserl's description of the ontological way to the phenomenological reduction. Unlike the Cartesian way to the reduction that characterized Husserl's early presentation of the method, this doesn't start with the possibility of doubting or putting the external world in question, but with the recognition of some tensions arising between our common experience of the world and the scientific view of it.

Science tells us that the world we commonly experience is a world of appearances, contaminated by our subjective perspective and concealed by it. Unlike what our common life reveals, the scientific world is the real objective world reached through rigorous method of inquiry. Husserl points to Galileo (and Descartes after him) as responsible for the mathematization of the world that proves to be foundational for modern science. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century brings about a change in ontological thinking since it considers truth as something that must be completely stripped of subjective elements, thus undermining our immediate – necessarily subjective- experience of the world. But Husserl will point out, in a counter-movement, that science itself is performed in the context of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*), that is the world of common immediate experience, and thus presupposes it. Science does not uncover the true world, but rather throws “a garb of ideas” over the lived world and calls this method the truth (Hua 6, 52; Husserl 1970, 51). This is why, for Husserl, Galileo is a “*discovering and concealing genius*” (Hua 6, 53; Husserl 1970, 52), since the truths that he reveals through scientific method do not examine the ‘obvious’ which they deem illusory, while it is precisely in this obvious common experience that the origins of these truths can be found. The explanation for this is that the notions operating at the basis of the scientific idea of truth are constituted in common experience: what it means to be real, objective, physical, material, necessary, causal, etc., can only be cashed out by turning our attention to the most basic ways of givenness. This is precisely what phenomenology does, and since it has to protect itself from the *metabasis eis allo genos* (Hua 18, 22) that constantly wants to reintroduce the scientific understanding of these notions in order to explain their very meaning, it employs the *epoché* as a way of bracketing or putting these concepts out of play, in order to focus solely on the way in which what is given is given. Once we have bracketed the scientific understanding of the world and we focus on the *how* of its givenness, the correlation between its modes of appearance and the subjective modes of constitution becomes explicit, and thus the *epoché* leads to the reduction. Now, when we think of the re-conducting of constituted meanings to constituting subjectivity, a new issue regarding the *status* of subjectivity itself arises. Namely, since we ourselves are also entities in the world, it would seem as if correlation

happened between two objectivities, two parts of the world, thus leading to the question: How can we be at the same time objects *in* the world and subjects *for* the world? (Hua 6, 185; Husserl 1970, 181). To answer this question, we must look more closely into the meaning of this *we*. In the same manner in which we bracketed ‘objective’ truths about the world given to us, we must leave aside any assumptions about our own being as subjects. Through the performance of the *epoché*, we ourselves become “phenomena” with specific manners of givenness correlated to intentionality, and this intentionality cannot be accounted for in already constituted terms. Thus in the *epoché* “*nothing human is to be found, neither soul nor psychic life nor real psychophysical human being*” (Hua 6, 187; Husserl 1970, 183), because these are notions that already belong to the realm of natural and scientific knowledge. From a transcendental standpoint, constituting subjectivity is not identified with any mundane description. It must be, in a way, “outside” the world. It is nevertheless necessary that we consider ourselves as the entities we are in the world, but we can inquire back once again into the way this self-constitution unfolds, and this possibility proves that functioning subjectivity does not coincide with empirical humanity, and so we are at the same time inside and outside the constituted world. Understanding world-constituting subjectivity in a presuppositionless manner requires, then, that we go as far as possible in the genesis of constitution to reach the absolute functioning subject in its non-worldly origin. In effect, the regressive question of constitution ultimately leads to a subject Husserl refers to as “supernatural” (*übernatürliches*) (Hua 14, 86), indicating its disconnection to any sort of objective nature. Husserl points in this direction in the *Crisis* by mentioning a return to the primal Ego in its “*absolute singularity*” and the need to perform a second reduction that leads from transcendental intersubjectivity to the unique Ego that constitutes it (Hua 6, 190; Husserl 1970, 186), but he does not go into a lot of detail. In order to fully understand the resolution of the paradox we need to go beyond the *Crisis* to look into the way the constitution of others as transcendental Egos and the constitution of myself as a human being develops. The classical account of this process shows that constitution of the self and of

others is achieved through different stages¹³ that begin with transcendental subjectivity's self-objectification as a psychophysical being, that is, as a unity of body and soul. This is how the previously "supernatural" consciousness first comes to be a part of nature and is constituted as the ruler of a body located in space. Consciousness considered as a temporal flow becomes "annexed" to a body considered as material object:

Only by virtue of its experienced relation to the organism does consciousness become real human or brute consciousness, and only thereby does it acquire a place in the space belonging to Nature and the time belonging to Nature –the time which is physically measured. (...) A peculiar kind of apprehending or experiencing, a peculiar kind of "apperception", effects the production of this so-called "annexation", this reification {Realisierung} of consciousness. (Hua 3-1, 117; Husserl 1983, 125)

We have at this stage the Ego in its primordial sphere, that is, in its sphere of ownness where the presence of others is cut off. Without this first step, constitution of alter-egos is not possible because this one is given through a process of pairing (*Paarung*), a type of passive synthesis that starting from the recognition of the other's animate body in my sensory field attributes to this body a connection to a transcendental subject of its own in analogy with my own (Hua 1, 141 ff.). Thus "*it is unthinkable that the knowing Ego can experience another without experiencing itself and the other Ego as animal.*" [Es ist undenkbar, dass das erkennende Ich ein anderes Ich erfahren kann, ohne sich selbst und das fremde Ich als animalisches zu erfahren] (Hua 14, 98). After constituting myself as a psychophysical being I can do the same with the other, and ascribe to it a transcendental subject in a similar manner as that in which I can perform a reduction to my past self as transcendental. I reach in this way the transcendental community of subjects that constitutes the world, but since I needed to go through their constitution as objects in order to get to it, Husserl says it is "*wrong, methodically, to jump immediately to transcendental intersubjectivity and to leap*

¹³ I follow here Roberto Walton's systematic account of this topic in *Egología y Generatividad* (2004). There are, however, heterogeneous interpretations of the process of self-constitution. Most notably, Hanne Jacobs (2014) has argued that in order to constitute itself as psychophysical unity, the subject must constitute itself as a *person* first, and this type of constitution is given through the subject's action in the world. I will come back to this in the section on the person (chapter 6).

over the primal “I” (*Ur-Ich*), the ego of my epoché, which can never lose its uniqueness and personal indeclinability.” (Hua 6, 188; Husserl 1970, 185)¹⁴. Because the primal I is not a part of nature, and thus not a part of the world, the second reduction is what guarantees the strong separation between subjectivity as constituting and as constituted that provides for Husserl the resolution of the paradox. The characterization of the primal I is a complex issue that I will address in depth in chapter 4, but for now it will suffice to say that Husserl considers it the Ego-pole of the living-present (*lebendige Gegenwart*), the last level of temporalization that, being the source of time, is itself outside of time. It is the pure present that constantly renews itself at the heart of temporalization, thought of independently of retention and protention, that is, of past and future horizons. It remains an open question whether we can say something truthful about it since, due to its character, it can only be experienced retrospectively -therefore when it is no longer a pure present. Moreover, we can for these reasons question the idea of it being Ego-centred, since the impossibility of having an intuitive experience of it in its true form makes it *anonymous*, hence why the primal I “*is actually called “I” only by equivocation -though it is an essential equivocation*” (Hua 6, 188; Husserl 1970, 184). Out of time, of nature, and of the world: these are the characteristics that make up constituting subjectivity in its most fundamental level. Through the process of its self-apperception as a human being this subject becomes the entity that it is in the world, so that transcendental subject and empirical human are the same and not the same at once. In agreement with David Carr’s interpretation of this relationship as being one between two different types of self-consciousness (Carr, 1999), Dan Zahavi writes: “*It is the difference between being aware of oneself as a causally determined known object, as a part of the world, and being aware of oneself as a knowing subject, as –to paraphrase Wittgenstein- the limit of*

¹⁴ It should be noted here that authors like Zahavi (2001) and James Mensch (1988) have drawn attention to the presence of intersubjectivity in the *a priori* sphere of subjectivity independently of the contingent appearing of the concrete other (Zahavi), and at the lowest levels of constitution, namely already at the level of the living present (Mensch), contesting the view that places in empathy the first encounter with the other. However, suggesting that the primordial sphere is already intersubjective could lead to an erasing of the difference between I and other. For Husserl, as we will see further on, the primal Ego as an individual stream seems to be always presupposed, thus explaining his remark on the indeclinability of the singular Ego. For a general view on this topic see Cabrera, Celia (2013) “Intersubjetividad a priori y empatía” in *Ideas y Valores* vol. XLII, pp 71-93

the world.” (Zahavi 2001, 104). This is a problematic explanation for two reasons. One is that, as we will discover in the following sections, if we follow Husserl we will come to realize that the awareness of oneself as a subject is incompatible with the anonymity of pure subjectivity. A purely subjective experience of oneself would be an experience of the spontaneous ‘welling up’ of the stream of consciousness. This experience cannot be given thematically, but only ‘lived through’. Admittedly, when we speak of subjective self-awareness we do not speak of a thematic consciousness of oneself but precisely of this ‘living through’, which is nevertheless a type of awareness. However, there is a fundamental sense in which this self-awareness cannot take place independently of an objective type of self-awareness, and this is why Husserl insists that this equivocation is “essential”. Rather, the two types of awareness need each other and form a concrete whole that can only be separated by abstraction. We will come back to this later on. The other reason why this is problematic is that, starting from this separation of the subjective and the objective pole of awareness, one has to provide a plausible account of how they interrelate in a second step. This means coming up with an ad hoc answer to the question of what makes up the unity of the subject, and what brings together such distinct forms of awareness. According to Husserl, transcendental and empirical subject are one and the same, and yet it seems we need a criterion to explain how they relate. Because transcendental subjectivity is disembodied, we cannot point to the body as a unifying entity, and insofar as Husserl considers the constituting subject to be absolute and independent, it seems that at least in some way they are in fact not the same. If we consider the necessity character of self-objectification we face two subsequent issues: first, how is this necessity given? If we only have either a subjective experience or an objective experience of ourselves, we lack phenomenological evidence for their connection. In this connection, in the following sections I will explore the idea of a hybrid experience of oneself that is neither purely first personal—the perspective that characterizes subjective self-awareness—nor purely third personal—the perspective that characterizes objective self-awareness.

This issue leads us to the problem of death. Husserl explains death as the final separation between these two modes of being or awareness which seems to break

the necessary bond of self-apperception:

In the real phenomenology founded in the transcendental reduction, in the phenomenology that starts from the absolute sources of evidence (in which all objective evidences become objects of absolute subjective evidence), death is the separation of the transcendental ego from the self-objectification as a human being (Hua 29, 332)

This view of death is at the same time a consequence and a reason for the stark distinction between transcendental and empirical subject, and in order to be elucidated, it requires an elucidation of their relation.

2.3 The paradox of death

We are faced with a paradox: we need to both explain two distinct ways of being and the necessity to affirm the kind of worldly self-apperception that ties them together. I have mentioned that for Husserl a strong separation between empirical and transcendental subjectivity is what resolves the paradox. This strong division is essentially due to the fact that the body is bracketed in the *epoché* and considered a constituted objectivity of the world, not essential to subjectivity as constituting. The reification of consciousness mentioned above consists of it considering itself as annexed to a body that gives it a place in nature. This means that purely functioning subjectivity is not originally embodied¹⁵. As a result, every bodily occurrence belongs to the subject insofar as she constitutes it as something occurring to her, that is, insofar as she discloses their meaning; but because these meanings have to be taken up in some way or other, there is always a distance between consciousness and the body, even if it is necessarily myself that I experience in my body. A good illustration of this idea can be found in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1978), where he speaks of consciousness or the *for-itself*

¹⁵ As long as we consider the primal I (*Ur-Ich*) as the most fundamental level of transcendental subjectivity, we should say that it is not embodied insofar as it is previous to the constitution of objectivity. But this still portrays a classical reading of these issues, one that has become a point of discussion in the contemporary literature. In the sixth and seventh chapter of this dissertation I will explore the thesis endorsed mainly by Steven Crowell according to which the transcendental subject is embodied but only in a subjective manner. This presupposes and deepens the Husserlian distinction between lived body and material body, that will be addressed in chapter 7.

as being always beyond or elsewhere (*ailleurs*) from its own facticity—that is, the facts related to their spatio-temporal existence, which includes the body as an object *in-itself*. This separation is meant to explain that while consciousness or the for-itself is intimately related to the subject's own body and facticity, she can never fully coincide with it since her way of being is to transcend the in-itself, and so it remains separated from it, although not by something positively characterized but actually by *nothingness*. This leads to the idea of complete or radical freedom, which can only mean that, thanks to this unbridgeable distance, consciousness is not bound by any external causes but it is responsible for every meaning it discloses insofar as it is the source of their constitution. So for example, if I feel thirsty and reach for a glass of water, I might consider this to be an urge that is imposed on me, borne out of a physical need of my body; and while this is true insofar as my experience of thirst reveals it as having those characteristics, it requires that consciousness discloses it as such to appear in this way, and so there is no immediate causal reaction to it; what exists in fact is a *motivation* to act in a certain way. This is true of all bodily occurrences: instincts, emotions, urges; all require that consciousness constitute them as what they are. As Husserl states about hunger: “*it is still the same instinctive happening, striving performance, but ‘understood’ as eating*” [Es ist noch dasselbe instinktive Geschehen, strebende Tun, aber „verstanden“ als Essen.] (Hua 42, 106). As it happened with the perception of a mountain in the example of our previous chapter, the experience of my thirst is meaningful and thus, subjective from the outset. However, in these cases we are always considering something given to intuition that can be taken up in one way or another by constituting consciousness. “*Hyletic sensation*” (Husserl expression to refer to the materiality given to intuition in a case of perception) is entangled in an intimate way with meaning, but it is there. If we now focus on the case of death, this picture becomes more complex. As Depraz and Mouillie state: “*In the case of death, the telos of donation is itself put into question, because what appears, even teleologically, is more like the Faktum of non-donation that is at work*

in death” (Depraz & Mouillie 1991, 109)¹⁶. As it happens with other limit-cases as birth and deep sleep, there is no actual experience of them because they are precisely transitions from and to unconsciousness understood as a point of zero affection where nothing stands out to the Ego and it remains purely passive. In the case of sleep, which is present to us in our daily life, we have the experience of the previous moments leading up to sleep and we wake up with the feeling of *having been* asleep, but there is no intuitive content of the actual transition or the moments of deep sleep. And yet these are phenomena that have a meaning to us, and that strikingly *give* meaning to our lives, as is arguably the case with death. But their constitution is, at best, indirect. As Husserl points out, we first constitute the death of others, and by analogy apply this knowledge to our future self¹⁷. This constitution does not provide us, of course, with an experience of the ending of consciousness, but rather with a breakdown of the other’s body that ceases to be animated, and that we interpret as a separation from his or her consciousness. From first or second-hand experience of the death of others, and from common knowledge imparted in our life-world, we learn about the inevitability of death in our own case, and the certainty that we will at some point stop ruling in our bodies as well: “*Death is not a life-worldly experience of a boundary. One knows only that one will die.*” (Schutz and Luckmann 1983, 126). However, having its origin in third-personal knowledge, this notion will be permanently second-guessed by our first-personal experience. Since we don’t have any personal experience of the transition to complete unconsciousness, we live in a state of constantly renewed affection, and we can only come close to the idea of its complete absence by considering our own experience of approaching the limits of affection, such as when we are about to fall asleep, when we faint or become ill (Hua/Mat 8, 147). On the basis of these experiences we can *imagine* what our death would be like, but never live through it. Thus, as Epicurus has famously stated, we can never coincide with our death:

¹⁶ Or, dans le cas de la mort, ce *telos* de la donation est lui-même remis en question, puisque ce qui apparaît, même téléologiquement, c’est bien plus le *Faktum* de la non-donation à l’œuvre dans la mort.

¹⁷ Der Tod der Anderen ist der früher konstituierte Tod. Ebenso wie die Geburt der Anderen (Hua 42, 3).

as long as we are, death is not; and when it comes we are no longer there¹⁸. However, the conclusion drawn by Epicurus is that, in virtue of this necessary displacement, death is completely foreign to us and we should not consider it in any way. For Husserl however, the conclusion that should be drawn is that the ego is immortal:

*the transcendental I cannot die; he can't insofar as there is nothing exterior to him and death must precisely come from outside. Death as what comes to me from the outside, she is the unconstitutible par excellence because "the transcendental I has no exterior", because "the intentional inside (...) is at the same time outside (Montavont 1999, 167)"*¹⁹.

If death as a limit demarcates an *inside* and an *outside* of consciousness, a realm within the reach of constituting subjectivity and a realm beyond it, then transcendental consciousness would not be the all-encompassing absolute mode of being, but instead it would be relative and secondary to the life it is given. In other words, constituting consciousness would only be functioning as long as it is alive and has a functioning body. Naturally, such conclusion couldn't stand in the context of Husserlian phenomenology, and thus Husserl finds himself in the position of differentiating, once again, between transcendental and empirical subjectivity, and restricting death only to the latter. Death, then, is a worldly event that concerns the human being (not consciousness); it is her demise that is at stake but not that of consciousness as constituting. The transcendental subjectivity that the *epoché* unveils does not die; it is, in a sense, "immortal", because dying for it has no sense etc." [*„unsterblich“, weil das Sterben dafür keinen Sinn hat etc.*] (Hua 29, 338).

The phenomenological proof for the endlessness of consciousness is to be found in the analyses of temporality. Let's recall that the reduction to the living-present previously mentioned gives as a result a continuously renewed present

¹⁸ *Letter to Menoeceus*, trans. By Cyril Bailey in *Epicurus: the extant remains* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1926).

¹⁹ "Le moi transcendantal ne peut pas mourir; il ne le peut pas dans la mesure où il n'y a rien d'extérieur à lui et où précisément la mort doit venir de l'extérieur. La mort étant ce qui arrive au moi de l'extérieur, elle est l'inconstituable par excellence puisque "le moi transcendantal n'a pas d'extérieur", puisque "le dedans intentionnel (...) est en même temps dehors". The last two phrases between quotation marks correspond to manuscript MsBIV6 and Hua 15, 556.

moment that is not susceptible of beginning or ending because it is not strictly speaking *in* time. Once it gains a duration through retention, we encounter the stream of inner-time consciousness where every present impression necessarily has a horizon of retention and protention. This means that there cannot be a moment preceded or followed by nothingness because the structure of our temporality does not allow for it, explaining therefore in more technical terms our inability to experience any transition to unconsciousness.

So while we know that as human beings we will die, from a first-personal perspective we will not be able to constitute the end of our own time, and this creates a paradox in our understanding of death: *“But isn’t this paradoxical: being in the streaming present, I must inevitably believe that I will live, when I know that my death is approaching.”* [Aber ist das nicht paradox: lebend in strömender Gegenwart seiend, muss ich unweigerlich glauben, dass ich leben werde, wenn ich doch weiß, dass mein Tod bevorsteht.] (Hua/Mat 8, 96). We can think of this paradox as an applied case of the greater paradox of subjectivity. If before we inquired about the possibility of being objects in the world and subjects for the world, we would now pose the question of the possibility of constituting death as well as suffering it; and it appears as though this more precise inquiry requires a more dramatic solution, for the straightforward constitution of death is not possible. So the appeal to the division between the two aspects of subjectivity has to be carefully thought out in order to guarantee that transcendental subjectivity does not get conflated with empirical subjectivity, or turned into a kind of supernatural entity that would survive its self-objectification in time. Transcendental subjectivity is not immortal in the way a religious narrative would portray our soul to be, and Husserl is explicit about this:

The soul of the body is not immortal, strictly speaking, it is not necessary to think of it as immortal. In fact, common experience shows us that the soul really dies. But each human-I has in them, in some way, their transcendental I, and this does not die and

does not come into being, it is an eternal being in becoming" (Hua 35, 420)²⁰.

But to say that it is immortal because it cannot constitute its own limits (so merely in a negative sense) is simply sweeping under the rug the problem that death confronts us with, namely the insufficiency of this familiar scheme of constitution to address certain types of experiences related to self-constitution. As I will try to show in the rest of this dissertation, even when limits can't be given as objects to the subject in the first person, there is an experience of them that cannot simply be reduced to a third-personal perspective. If we exclude death from the transcendental sphere, overlooking the fact that we make sense of this limit — albeit in an obscure way — as the end of our conscious life, we fail to address the particular character of subjectivity, which is to be an indivisible whole of transcendental and empirical dimensions. How we consider death from a phenomenological point of view represents an important theoretical decision (a decision that only we are able to make because there appears to be no evidence to settle the matter). As Ronald Bruzina clearly states, death confronts us with an alternative:

Either transcendental constituting "subjectivity" is structured by the beginning and end of life humans undergo or else humans as individuals cannot be identified with that "subjectivity". Yet is not that identification at the very heart of phenomenology's whole investigative track and procedure insofar as the openness to being that is intrinsic to intentionality, and correlative in the phenomenality of beings, is structurally constitutive of human experience and hence is the fact that allows proposing a reflective investigation of constitution in the first place? (Bruzina 2001, 374/5).

While the paradox reveals a tension between the *experience* of endlessness and the *knowledge* of finiteness, if we reflect on our actual experience of death, we may find that we have neither, or rather both at a time. Death seems to conjugate

²⁰ Die Seele des Leibes ist nicht unsterblich, prinzipiell gesprochen, d. h. sie ist nicht notwendig als unsterblich zu denken, und sie stirbt ja wirklich nach alltäglicher Erfahrung. Aber jedes Menschen-Ich birgt in sich in gewisser Weise sein transzendentes Ich, und das stirbt nicht und entsteht nicht, es ist ein ewiges Sein im Werden.

an experience of endlessness and finitude, and a knowledge marked by a necessary “mystery”; whether we are aware of ourselves as constituted or as constituting. I interpret this as the exhibition of subjectivity’s resistance to the division, making death an especially suitable candidate to explore this overarching issue. This is an idea already explored by Eugen Fink in his *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*. The special “coincidence” (Fink 1995, 61) that he spoke about between transcendental and empirical subjectivity shows itself in a striking way when it comes to limit-cases such as death, and calls for a rethinking of the phenomenological method. As I will show in chapter 10, death will be the gateway to a phenomenological reflection on the methods and limits of phenomenology, i.e., to a *phenomenology of phenomenology*.

2.4 Merleau-Ponty’s assessment

A specific proposal for a reconsideration of the relationship between transcendental and empirical subject can be found in Merleau-Ponty’s reinterpretation of Husserl’s work. In his course on Husserl and the origin of geometry of 1959-60, he reflects on the origin of what he calls Husserl’s “*crazy paradox*” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, 76). There, he analyses Husserl’s text from 1934 “Foundational investigations of the Spatiality of Nature: The originary Ark, the Earth, does not move”²¹, which coincidentally includes a brief comment about death. Husserl refers there to the paradoxes that arise from the phenomenological consideration of the subjective constitution of the world in relation to the objective order of the sciences. In the case of the Earth, the text is meant to underline the precedence of the lived Earth which is a ground (*Boden*) that does not move, in relation to the Copernican or scientific Earth as a body amongst others that is in constant movement. As was the case of death, our scientific *knowledge* of the Earth as a moving body contradicts our immediate *experience* of it as being always at rest: “...*the Earth itself is really the ground and not a body. The Earth does not move; perhaps I may even say that it is at rest.*” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 122) In the same way that our body is primarily *Leib* and not *Körper*; that is, that it is

²¹ Included in the edition of Merleau-Ponty’s course on Husserl: *Husserl at the limits of phenomenology*, 2002, Northwestern University Press

experienced as *lived body* and not as an object in nature, the Earth is the ground that is always in the same place. Husserl's strategy is once again to claim "*a priority of life over the physical world*" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 75) stating that the moving Earth is contained in the original still Earth which is its condition of possibility. In virtue of the transcendental principle that holds that "*(t)he ego lives and precedes all actual and possible beings*" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 131) the subjective order is held to be prior to the objective one. The text ends on a declamatory note as Merleau-Ponty writes:

But one may find it a little extravagant, frankly crazy, to contradict all natural scientific knowledge of actuality and real possibility (...) But even if one found in our attempts the most unbelievable philosophical hubris, we would not back down from the consequences for the clarification of necessities pertaining to all sense donation for what exists and for the world. We do not back down even when confronting the problems of death in the new way phenomenology conceives them. (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 131)

Merleau-Ponty finds here the "crazy paradox" that stems from the consideration of the Earth as not moving. He locates the source of this paradox in the specific way of setting the problem, which can be traced back to the Cartesian division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. According to Merleau-Ponty, as long as we start with a dichotomy between the order of causes (the physical world) and the order of conscious experience (reasons) we will not be able to solve the tension (Chouraqui 2016, 60). This separation will inevitably lead us to one of two options: either conflating the two by reducing one to the other, or keeping them apart but not being able to account for any communication between them; so either pure identity or pure separation.

Merleau-Ponty follows Husserl in saying that the moving Earth is only possible because we have the experience of the still Earth as ground, and therefore the objective scientific Earth cannot be the original object. However, he goes one step further to state that, in a counter-movement, the earth as ground does not make sense without considering the earth as moving object either. Without this latter notion, we wouldn't be able to think of earth as being at rest, since both rest and

motion are relational terms that need each other. Under Husserl's framework, it would not be possible to account for our lived experience of the Earth as being either at rest *or* in movement. Merleau-Ponty's solution will be to focus on the dynamic between the two terms and point to it as the original sense of being; a dynamic consisting of the mutual precedence of the two orders, "*a movement of antecedence of the concerned terms*" (Carbone, 2015, 58) where one necessarily leads to the other as preceding it. Contrary to what Husserl believed, both the objective order and the subjective order would be relative under this scheme, and it would be necessary to go back further to the original movement of being that supports them both:

The Earth which is first is not the physical earth (by definition, it is homogenized); it is the source Being, the Stamm und Klotz being, in pre-restfulness; the mind which is first is not the absolute Ego of Sinngebung. It is the Denkmöglichkeit and they are Ineinander, entangled. (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 76)

In the idea of entanglement between objectivity and subjectivity, flesh and idea, lies the cornerstone of Merleau-Ponty's take on Husserl's philosophy and of phenomenology in general. Following on Husserl's texts but reappropriating them in an unorthodox way, he takes the somewhat lateral notion of *Verflechtung* (interweaving or entanglement), from the text on *the Origin of Geometry* and places it at the centre of his own reflections. The *Verflechtung* between language, world and humans that Husserl mentions in that text²² becomes the *chiasm* in Merleau-Ponty's thought, the necessary interdependence of nature and consciousness. It is the *chiasm* that is originary and not transcendental subjectivity thought of as the Ego of *Sinngebung*, of sense-giving. This Ego is an "idealization". This would also explain why it cannot die.

Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, in order to overcome the irresolvable tension, we need to move beyond the cogito as the starting point of inquiry and transition to ontology, that is, to a description of being beyond the subject. But this entails a

²² "Thus humans as humans, fellow humans, world -the world of which humans, of which we always talk and can talk- and on the other hand, language, are inseparably intertwined [verflochten]." (Hua 6, 370; Husserl 1970, 359)

reconfiguring of the method entirely. First of all, let's recall that Husserl stated that if the paradox could not be solved in the way he presented it, this would mean "*that an actually universal and radical epoché could not be carried out at all, that is, for the purposes of a science rigorously bound to it*" (Hua 6, 184; Husserl 1970, 180). This is precisely the conclusion one arrives at when following Merleau-Ponty. Already in the preface to *Phenomenology of perception*, he speaks of the impossibility of performing a complete reduction (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, lxxvii) due to the fact that we are essentially intertwined with the world, therefore not susceptible of being thought of as a pure subject disconnected from it. The *epoché* could not give us as a result the "supernatural" consciousness that Husserl seems to find because consciousness finds itself always already in nature. This is an intuitively appealing conclusion, but one that might be considered challenging for the transcendental principle. Due to the close relationship between transcendental principle, first-personal perspective and evidence, in the context of Husserlian phenomenology it would be a priori problematic to maintain transcendental evidence while at the same time stepping beyond the first person. The effort to overcome the ego-centred character of Husserl's phenomenology characterizes not only Merleau-Ponty's work but post-Husserlian French phenomenology in general. Broadly speaking, there originates a turn from epistemology towards metaphysics, in the sense that the appearing of phenomena begins to be considered independently from the constituting subject, as self-constituting being (Tengelyi 2014, 50). In the Husserlian context, on the contrary, even if my first-personal reflection reveals a necessary intertwinement with the world and language, this necessity is of the same kind as that of self-objectification, meaning that inasmuch as an absolute non-worldly consciousness is conceivable, we wouldn't be able to think of the world or language as co-originary with it. Consciousness is necessarily objectified in order to be given to itself, but conceptually speaking it can still be told apart from its objectification. The difficulty amounts to a methodological problem: if we are able to posit a being that is previous to the subject—i.e. nature or the world in itself—, we would be able to enquire once again about the subject positing it, and would fall back on transcendental subjectivity. In order to legitimately transition from the subject that

inquires to the being he reaches as originary without jumping over the methodological issue—that is, while still playing by Husserlian rules—we need a guiding clue that leads from one to the other, and that stands ultimately on the grounds of first personal experience. As Fink already noted, death is a possible candidate to achieve this task. In the following sections I will examine this possibility further.

