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

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Part 2: Levels of life

When it comes to explaining what subjectivity is, it is hard to find an answer that both meets transcendental demands and does not entail two or more disconnected forms of subjectivity: when we point to the meaning-giving capacity of consciousness, we seem to be implicitly excluding the empirical dimension from the description of subjectivity, since at least for Husserl, transcendental and empirical appear to be incompatible; but at the same time, by disconnecting these two dimensions we risk dividing the subject in such a way that we can no longer understand it as a unity or whole. Radical genetic phenomenology puts some basic assumptions about transcendental subjectivity to the test, in particular regarding its giving priority and absoluteness to the world. Within it, limit-cases are a way to test the integrity of our beliefs regarding ontology, and death in particular is a sort of *shibboleth* that crystallises the dichotomies around which this dissertation revolves. Is there a way of reconciling the two aspects of the subject that death seems to tear apart?

I have ended the first part with an open question about the worldlessness and timelessness of the constituting subject in Husserl's account. His characterization of subjectivity is not, however, a straightforward matter; and according to the period and/or the question he was addressing, many different notions and figures of subjectivity appear in his writings. In this section, I will focus on four of these: the primal I, the Monad, the person and the body. While the Monad or the person can be considered proper names for subjectivity as a whole, the primal I or the body are, in principle, perceived as aspects or dimensions of the subject. Each part has a particular aim that is not merely descriptive, but rather has a role in the development of my thesis. If in our previous chapter I showed Husserl's own chosen path dealing with death and its limitations, this part will go deeper into what lies behind that choice, namely a concern with maintaining the purity of constituting subjectivity in the face of its constituted counterpart so as to avoid naturalism, which commits Husserl to the infelicitous outcome of leaning into a strong idealism. I will lay the foundation for the development of a different path, allowing for a better

understanding of death and mortality. What I hope to have proven at the end of this part is that, contrary to the overtly idealistic tendencies of the Husserlian view, subjectivity ought to be thought of in its concrete integrality, which includes both a subjective or first-personal aspect, and an objective or third-personal aspect; that is to say, we should think of the subject as a 'transcendental person'.

The first chapter of this part will deal with the primal I, which is the Ego-pole of the living-present. In Husserl's account, conscious experience is ultimately the unfolding of time, and so the final form of the subject is the final form of time, the most elemental level of time-constitution. This fundamental layer where subjectivity is rooted is anonymous and lies out of time. It is, ultimately, a non-being that is presupposed but not intuited, which seems to be problematic in the context of phenomenological methodology. The supratemporal character of the primal I is at the basis of Husserl's conception of the immortality of the subject. What I will contend, once I have laid down the basis for my own interpretation, is that it is misleading to try and isolate this primal sphere of temporalization without recognizing its co-dependency on the objective dimension of temporal existence. Arguably, this is an error that Husserl himself sometimes falls into.

Chapter 5 will deal with Husserl's monadology. Insofar as the Monad is portrayed as a concrete unity of subjective and objective poles of experience, it represents an attempt to overcome the dualistic perspective on consciousness that is at the root of the paradoxes of phenomenology. However, even in this context death becomes problematic and in dealing with it, we have a chance to inquire more deeply into Husserl's monadological theory, which proves to be highly speculative. My interpretative hypothesis is that this is not accidental but in fact one is pushed towards such metaphysical conclusions in order to preserve the absoluteness of the subjective or first-personal aspect of experience.

Chapter 6 enquires into the possibility of taking the person as another concrete type of subject-notion that encompasses both subjective and objective sides of experience. The notion of personhood seems to lend itself to this type of interpretation, although Husserl himself does not explicitly endorse this reading. Since the person is, for Husserl, the one who dies, it is worth exploring the

hypothesis that it may also be the true concrete transcendental subject. This, I will argue, is a correct and fruitful interpretation as long as we take into consideration the proper way of understanding the person's embodiment.

Chapter 7 will deal with this last condition. Drawing on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, I reflect on the body as a fundamentally two-fold phenomenon and the locus of the subject's own twofoldedness. I argue that subjectivity's embodiment in its objective dimension should be regarded as equally originary to the subjective dimension, which I associate with the anonymous primal I. Ultimately, this is the element that has been neglected in Husserl's account of limits, and what provides the unity of first and third-personal perspectives on the transcendental person. Considering subjectivity as an embodied transcendental person means that immortality can no longer be ascribed to it—at least, not without some important nuances. This part thus paves the way for a reconsideration of mortality in the following and last part.

