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Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Vecino, M.C.

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Chapter 10: Death and the first person

In this chapter I return to the problem of death and consider it in light of what has been developed in the previous chapters. I briefly consider Heidegger's position, as it is canonical in the phenomenological tradition, and argue that, as it happens with Husserl's account, it also entails the separation of the transcendental and the empirical subject. Against this perspective, I state that death affects both dimensions of the subject, and that it is therefore necessary to put into question Husserl's thesis of the immortality of transcendental consciousness. I propose to reconsider this immortal character as a feature of the phenomenological onlooker rather than of the constituting subject, thus circumscribing it to a methodological realm; as long as this functions as a warning for phenomenological work, and not as a means of creating a new separation within the subject.

10.1 Introduction

Because phenomenology is a transcendental inquiry grounded on first-personal evidence, and insofar as the factual end of life is a limit for intuition, limit-cases are not just personal but philosophical limits. But if it was the case that death remained completely exterior to our experience, the question of how to account for it or whether or not it is an absolute limit would never have arisen. From a first-personal perspective death is impossible, and yet "*once knowledge of death has been acquired, it enters into the horizon of all experience*" (Schutz & Luckmann 1983, 127). The question is, then, how to make sense of it. Death seems to differ from any other experience in that its meaning already contains the idea of an inexperienciability.

In the most renowned phenomenological account of death, namely Heidegger's, this particularity is explored through the idea of the "possibility of the impossible". This formulation, I will argue, is compatible with Husserl's own views on the immortality of the transcendental subject, for whom death always remain impossible to realize; but it lacks a proper understanding of how and why death can be incorporated into the horizon of our lives as it is. Where does the meaning of death come from? We don't live through it in the first person, nor do we transpose

the experience of others onto our own, because no one can in fact live through it. By separating the experience of my own death completely from the event of death, Heidegger seems to avoid the problem, but arguably at the cost of a complete disconnection of *Dasein* and the body. In his paradoxical formulation of death, Husserl seems to recognize that the particularity of death does not only stem from the impossibility of experiencing it, but rather from the encounter between this impossibility and the certainty of our future factual death. If death can structure our horizon in the way it does, it is in virtue of this ambiguity, which is to say that the meaning of death lies in the relation between these two terms and not in one or the other. Drawing from Fink's work in the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, and in accordance with our reflections on subjectivity so far, I will argue in favour of the fundamental ambiguity of the subject as a concrete whole of transcendental and empirical dimensions. Thanks to this dual character, no other experience exhibits the ambiguity of our very way of being as well as it does.

10.2 Heidegger's *Sein zum Tode*

The purpose of this section is to expose the reasons why Heidegger does not have a central role in this research, even though death is a central topic in his work and he is an exponent of the type of existential turn in phenomenology I have been exploring. There is no doubt that death holds a central role in Heidegger's work, and specifically in *Being and Time*. The relationship to death in the existential *Sein zum Tode* shows, ultimately, what it means to be *Dasein*: an unconcluded openness, a pure project, a possibility whose actualization is impossible. In this very context where death has its central role, Heidegger has been accused of ignoring or underplaying the importance of certain relevant issues like embodiment or animality (Aho 2009, Ciocan 2008, Krell 1992), topics that in the case of death seem especially important. Not unlike Husserl, Heidegger is strongly opposed to thinking of *Dasein* in third-personal terms, and he advocates subordinating any reflection on the body to the existential analysis of *Dasein* insofar as "*everything we call our bodiliness, down to the last muscle fiber and down to the most hidden molecule of hormones, belongs essentially to existing*" (Heidegger 2001, 232). This

means that the body as physical is not a condition of possibility of experience but rather it is derived from our being as experiencing subjects. He illustrates this point in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Heidegger 1995, 218) with a formula about organs and abilities: it is not that we can see because we have eyes, but rather we have eyes because we can see. Trying to understand human existence starting from the body as an entity would mean, for Heidegger, considering it as a thing, and thus mistaking the way of being of *Dasein* with that of the *Vorhanden*. According to Søren Overgaard, the fact that Heidegger explicitly rejects dealing with embodiment in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1996, 44; 100) does not mean he thinks of *Dasein* as disembodied but on the contrary, that he considers embodiment to be so fundamental to the being of *Dasein* that to reflect on it as a separate issue would give the impression of being able to separate *Dasein* into layers and it would defeat the purpose (Overgaard 2004, 128). It would imply thinking of *Dasein* as *having* a body instead of as *being* a body. However, because of *Dasein*'s very nature, the kind of embodiment that would be 'built-in' its description would probably resemble a kind of purely subjective body such as the one Crowell thematized, which, as we have seen, does not depict its ambiguous character.

Hand in hand with this thematic de-emphasis of the body there is a second one related to animality and biological life. Once again it is here a matter of explaining human existence not as a sum of elements (animality plus something) but as a whole. In paragraph 10 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger deals with the difference between fundamental ontology and other sciences that study the human being such as anthropology, psychology and biology. He claims that whereas the latter analyse the entity that is the human, fundamental ontology reflects on its being. If the question of the life of *Dasein* can be posed it is because *Dasein* gives meaning to that which it designates as "life" and does so in a privative manner, that is, starting from its own way of being and subtracting something from it. There is a fundamental separation between the being of *Dasein* and that of life inasmuch as the possibility of speaking of life is derived from *Dasein*'s understanding of being as something more than this life.

Both this characterization of the being of *Dasein* as different from the animal, and the exclusion of embodiment from the existential analytic, point in the same direction, namely that of preventing a naturalistic approach to existence. Heidegger's dealing with death stresses this point further, insofar as the authentic understanding of death for *Dasein* is starkly separated from the event of its factual death. The use of different terms to separate authentic dying (*sterben*) from factual dying (*ableben*), and the dying of animals (*verenden*) expresses this difference. Only authentic dying represents *Dasein's* relationship to death, which is described in terms of the existential encounter with the groundlessness of our existence. However, this way of distinguishing between the different ways of death and dying seems to go against the need to take *Dasein* as a bodily whole. Moreover, the separation between *ableben* and *verenden* appears to imply there is something like a third realm between existential dying and animal death, namely a properly human way of dying, while existential death would in fact have nothing to do with the event of death. Is it by pure homonymy that death is called death? To put it in Husserlian terms, we would say that death too is a constituted meaning, and to experience it is to relate to this meaning, which finds its origin in the subject and not in any physical state of affairs. Taken up by *Dasein*, death ceases to be merely factual death to become the possibility of the impossible, that is to say, the possibility of not being there anymore. Because this is not realizable, because it is a potency that can never become actuality, death as an end of experience cannot happen. Unlike Husserl, Heidegger advances towards a way of understanding death that allows us to say that *Dasein* dies, that is to say, that allows us to bring death into phenomenological reflection admitting of its central role regarding our experience. However, Heidegger and Husserl's account of death share a fundamental feature, namely the radical division between two realms: the transcendental and the empirical for Husserl, and the ontological and the ontic realms for Heidegger. So while, for Heidegger, *Dasein* does die, it is not clear how this dying relates to factual death; and more broadly, how *Dasein* relates to embodiment and the natural world. It could be the case, as Sartre points out in *Being and Nothingness*, that we were factually immortal, and this would have no effect on our being finite (Sartre 1978, 546) or, in Heidegger's words, in our dying.

As we saw in chapter 3, Husserl also tried to isolate a purely subjective experience of dying that was independent from the apprehension of factual death, but admitting the possibility of such an experience implied arguing in favour of a primordial solipsistic realm independent and prior to my involvement with others, a possibility that his later developments (and our own research direction) has put into question. What would it mean, then, to think about death as a transcendental-empirical phenomenon?

10.3 Who dies?

Ronald Bruzina explains very clearly the dilemma that we face regarding limits:

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)

In the context of Husserlian phenomenology, transcendental subjectivity simply *is* the empirical subject considered from the phenomenological perspective: “As transcendental ego, after all, I am the same ego that in the worldly sphere is a human ego. What was concealed from me in the human sphere I reveal through transcendental inquiry.” (Hua 6, 267; Husserl 1970, 264). And yet, as we have seen, this identification is cut loose in the moment of death, where personal life ends and transcendental life continues, albeit as a pure potentiality. Husserl understands death as the separation of transcendental life from its self-objectification as human being, and so our reflection on limit-cases has led us to examine this division within subjectivity. After having looked at different notions or figures of the subject in his work, we have come to an understanding of subjectivity as fundamentally ambiguous. It is in Husserl’s own investigations that we can find the evidence to support this ambiguity, even though he himself goes in a different

direction.

The genetic question about the origin of experience had led Husserl to the unfolding of time through the retention of a primal impression (*Urhyle*). At the very “bottom” of temporalization, what he found was an anonymous layer, whose anonymous character had to do with our way of reaching it, namely retrospectively, through a reflective act. According to Husserl, this showed the need to take this anonymous primal source of time as the most fundamental figure of subjectivity, the final source of experience. However, as I understand it, the impossibility of reaching the spontaneous source of temporal experience other than after the fact, is already evidence of the interdependency between subjective and objective aspects of personal experience that I have been advocating for so far. To put it simply, while reflection presupposes the anonymous functioning Ego, this functioning Ego requires reflection—and so, objectification—to be given at all. In Husserl’s reading, the objective awareness of myself that reflection provides is dependent on subjective awareness, but he never seems to give the same importance to the other direction. This becomes evident whenever he implies that a pure spirit or a pure consciousness can still *be* without there being a world, which ultimately means a pure consciousness could *be* without having an objective place in the world. Naturally, it is also what motivates the idea of the immortality of the transcendental subject. When we look closely at the dynamic of time, we see that the privilege of the primal Ego over the empirical is somewhat arbitrary once we take into account the interplay between subjective and objective dimensions that takes place as long as there is conscious experience. In death, this dynamic would cease because the objectification of the subject is lost, but rather than thinking of it as making everything stop, Husserl views it as a moment of separation between the two, where the transcendental continues. The reason behind this has proven to be of a methodological nature. In the chapter on Monadology (5), I have argued that in fact what continues or what needs to be admitted as always having been there and always remaining there should be considered as the phenomenological onlooker rather than the transcendental subject. Indeed, whatever we can meaningfully say or imagine about our life as subjects and the world as the horizon of this life, needs to be correlated to a subject, because the opposite would mean

describing something like a world in-itself. This is the sense of the methodological need that leads Husserl to positing the immortality of the subject. *In the context of his work, we can potentially retain some idea of immortality of a strictly methodological nature, meant to express the insurmountable character of the reflecting consciousness; while reconsidering the idea of the immortality of constituting consciousness.* In order to do this, the first-personal approach must be reconsidered.

10.4 Constituting subjectivity

While Husserl seems to think of the first person in terms of an Ego, scholarship after him—especially in the French tradition—tends to stress the idea that, because what we effectively reach through intuition is an anonymous consciousness that does not seem to be yet personal, the first-person is either lost as ground of experience, or must be understood in broader terms. In her reflection on the first-personal approach in phenomenology, Natalie Depraz (2014) comes to a conclusion along these lines: the true first person, she states, because it is anonymous and bodily, is not an “I”. It is not either a non-I, but a field of felt intimacy that is nevertheless already in relation to others. Rather than characterizing this field, phenomenology would put forward an idea of the first-person that is already objectified, and therefore it would be a third-personal first-person, which is contradictory. Now, if it is not an “I”, how can this field be first-personal at all? In his *Phenomenology and Embodiment*, Joona Taipale explains it as follows:

It should be noted here that the term “first-person” does not quite merit its name: even if experiences have an ipseity or mineness from the start, this ipseity remains anonymous and pre-personal. Accordingly, when discussing ‘first-personal givenness,’ I am not referring to thematic self-presence of subjectivity, but to the pre-reflective mineness of experiencing. (Taipale 2014, 74).

Without this mineness of experience, that is, without the possibility of going back to lived experiences within the unity of the flow of internal time, there wouldn’t be experience at all. To experience something is for something to last in time, and

time is given first-personally, in the sense that it is lived through and not perceived as an object itself. In this sense, a first-personal approach is irreducible. As Dan Zahavi clearly explains:

To speak phenomenologically of the temporality of consciousness is to speak of the temporal givenness of consciousness. but to speak of the temporal givenness of consciousness is to speak of its temporal self-manifestation. To suggest otherwise is to reify consciousness. Of course, it might be necessary to distinguish different types of self-manifestation, and different types of subjective temporality, but from the outset it should be realized that Husserl's investigation of inner time-consciousness is nothing apart from an investigation into the temporality of prereflective self-awareness. (Zahavi 1999, 71).

Self-manifestation of consciousness is a necessary starting point of phenomenological analysis, but the analysis of time undeniably presents us with a foreign element that cannot be reduced to this self-manifestation and that in fact allows for this self-manifestation to occur. This is, naturally, what the a priori of correlation expresses. So even if the unity of experiences is given in “subjective” time, this is in fact already a mixture of a subjective and an objective element. That this is a *felt* element, that is to say, that it is not in-itself, is also just a necessary consequence of this correlation. Taken as a living point of view that we cannot step out of, the first person, indeed, could never die. And yet, as Husserl already acknowledged, we know that it will, because what the first-personal reflection showed is that affection –and thus, *Hyle*—is needed for there to be a living perspective. Husserl stated that death was the separation of the transcendental and the empirical subject, but as we have seen, this is a speculative remark. What we face when trying to understand limits is the impossibility of going beyond an already temporalized, worldly life. Going back to our reflection on nature in chapter 8, we had seen that the regressive question for the genesis of constitution could only take us as far as the recognition of a primal fact, and this was the existence of the Ego as the point of encounter of ideality and facticity. While normally the necessity of ideality was defined in opposition to the contingency of facts, in the case of the transcendental Ego this opposition did not hold and the *eidos* of

transcendental Ego coincided with its fact (Hua 15, 385). The question about the genesis and the end of our experience unveils the fact of our existence, which is both contingent and necessary. As Tengelyi states: *"It is, indeed, a contingent fact that, at the very moment, I exist and think; but as long as I actually think, my existence is necessary. That is why Husserl speaks of the 'necessity of a fact'"*. (Tengelyi 2014, 51). This type of paradoxical formulations once again show up when characterizing the basis of subjectivity, and despite Husserl's efforts to 'solve' these paradoxes, there does not seem to be a possible reconciliation. But what exactly does this paradox mean? Is it, as Husserl seems to suggest in the case of death, a conflict between the way I experience myself in the first person, namely as immortal and necessary, and how I experience myself in the third person, as contingent and finite? Both perspectives seem to be irreconcilable, as James Hart points out:

The transcendental I cannot be said to be contingent or factual in any sense that we may find in our manifestation of the world. We cannot properly say that the transcendental I exists 'as long as' primal presencing 'lasts.' Nor can we properly say that 'at some time' the transcendental I might no longer be. Nor can we say that the transcendental I at one time was not. The senses of necessity, temporality, possibility, and contingency here tend to reflect the senses that are embedded in the manifestation of the world. To this extent they are inappropriate. Yet the transcendental person is present to us also as someone in the world who has begun and who will die, who is as ephemeral as anything else. (...) Each perspective urges scare quotes (or quotation marks) on the disclosure of what appears from the different standpoints. Not that the appearances are denied or simply transcended, but rather their sense is disturbed by the other perspective. And there is no clear standpoint that can harmoniously unify them. (Hart 2009, 449)

And yet, what we have seen so far is that limit-cases simply cannot be restricted to only one standpoint. As Depraz & Mouill   assert in an article dedicated to the topic, the locus of death is the space in-between the two:

'We die': this statement considers then only the interval, which is not made of time or space, from facticity to the ontologically constituting structure, an interval that takes

time [prend du temps]. To live (that is to say, phenomenologically, to constitute) takes time. It is that, taking time, that we call 'dying'”⁹⁶ (Depraz & Mouill   1991).

Since limits can never be something *to* the subject, and therefore cannot be said to be constituted *by* the subject but rather coincide with it, it is not possible to understand them through the subject-object scheme. The first-personal perspective thought of as the ‘mineness’ of experience is itself bound to temporalization, and so it falls short when it comes to explaining temporalization itself. As Klaus Held points out, the living present is living insofar as it lies between birth and death (Held 1981, 217).

Husserl’s idea of the immortality of transcendental subjectivity is intimately tied to his views on what subjectivity and the first person is, and the reflection on limits puts both these characterizations into question. Subjectivity could only be said to be immortal because it was outside of time, as the primal I of the living present. But if we accept the idea of the primal facticity shown by the reflection on limits, we must reject any identification of the subject with the pre-being of primal temporalization. *If transcendental subjectivity is itself bound to temporalization, then it would in fact be legitimate to say that it lasts as long as primal presencing does.*

However, the previous quote points to an important issue: How can transcendental consciousness last or end, if the meaning of what lasting or ending is, can only exist for her? The transcendental principle persists as long as the meaningful expression of its limits redirects us to the meaning-giving activity of a subject. Is it not the case that the unveiling of the limits of the first-personal perspective is achieved by a first person? We must now turn to the methodological aspects of immortality in order to consider one final point, namely whether it is possible to ascribe immortality, if not to the transcendental subject, to the phenomenologizing subject or transcendental onlooker.

⁹⁶ «Nous mourrons»: cet   nonc   consid  re alors seulement l’intervalle, qui n’est ni de temps, ni d’espace, de la facticit      la structure ontologiquement constituante, intervalle qui, lui, prend du temps. Vivre (c’est-  dire, ph  nom  nologiquement, constituer) prend du temps. C’est cela, prendre du temps, que nous appellerons «mourir».

10.5 Phenomenological onlooker

I have stated that, even if we can put into question the immortality of constituting consciousness, we can retain some idea of a methodological immortality. This goes back to the epistemological reading of Monadology I put forward on chapter 5. When Husserl claims that the Monad was already there before consciousness arose in the world, and that it will be there forever; he seems to be presenting a hypothetical situation where the being of the world continues, and as a consequence he must posit the being of consciousness, even if as a potentiality. It does not mean, or it should not mean, that a pure consciousness can be independent of the world, as his more idealistic formulations suggest. Rather, it means that as long as we can imagine such a world without consciousness, there is in fact a consciousness correlated to it, namely our own as those who imagine it now. It would be impossible for a world to exist without there being a point of view, and this is the ultimate meaning of the first-person. In its most basic configuration, the first person coincides with the primal I, which is a “living point of view” (*lebendigen Gesichtspunktes*) (Taguchi 2006, 175) from which we understand the world and others. But to be aware of the necessity of this point of view entails having gone beyond the natural attitude and into a phenomenological reflection: the transcendental principle that is behind Husserl’s defence of immortality becomes available through the performance of the epoché, which in turn modifies this scheme by objectifying the functioning subject. This ontifying of the absolute anonymous first person is the “*secondary (or non proper) enworldment of phenomenologizing*” (Fink 1995, 116) that was mentioned in our discussion of the primal I (chapter 4). According to Fink, because in order to bring to light what transcendental consciousness is, we need to turn it into an object which we can speak about and betray its proper character (of being pre-ontic); the phenomenologizing subject, which he calls transcendental onlooker, is revealed as a kind of condition for the being of the transcendental subject. It is a matter of contention whether Husserl agreed (or to what extent) with Fink’s developments in

the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*. But, as Ronald Bruzina points out in his introduction to the English translation, “*the differences from Husserl that emerged in Fink’s thinking were genuine problems for and within transcendental phenomenology, genuine problems that developed intrinsically within it rather than antagonistically confronting or undercutting it from the outside.*” (Fink 1995, xxxii). The main point to consider here is the transcendental onlooker’s involvement in the world. Up until now, I have tried to reconsider Husserl’s perspective on transcendental subjectivity as being outside of time and the world, to show that this outworldly dimension of subjectivity is only abstract and any talk of it having a priority over constituted subjectivity is deceiving. This was mainly achieved by examining constitution as a process that requires a noematic pole from the start. However, even if we can deny that constituting subjectivity could be considered independently of the world—in a strict sense, independently of the hyletic core that is the basis for the constitution of a world—, we have to now ask if the same goes for the transcendental onlooker. Indeed, Husserl does not explicitly separate these two forms of transcendental life, but according to the reading I’ve proposed so far, it is in fact possible to make out what I’ve referred to as a methodological dimension of the first-personal perspective. Could this mean that the transcendental onlooker could absorb the characteristics that Husserl attributed to constituting subjectivity; and in this sense, that it is her, the onlooker, that can be considered outside of time and “eternal”? This would entail admitting that phenomenologizing is not any kind of constitution but something radically different. As Fink himself wonders: “*But does the transcendental onlooker, who does not participate in the constitution of the world, still at all ‘constitute’? And if so —what sense does ‘constitution’ still have?*” (Fink 1995, 12). It is evident that phenomenology is an accomplishment of humans in the world like every other, but insofar as it tries to overcome the natural attitude, it is also, in a sense, a “*flight from finitude*” (Fink 1995, 112). Nevertheless, we must beware not to divide subjectivity once again, now between constituting and phenomenologizing subject; when we are precisely looking for her unity. When considering this issue, Fink suggests that the unity of the three I’s (phenomenologizing, constituting and empirical), what he calls the Absolute, is a “*synthetic unity of antithetic moments*” (Fink 1995, 142), where being (world) and

pre-being (constituting subjectivity) are the two opposing elements. This in-itself Absolute then becomes for-itself when the (once again opposing) tendency of self-elucidation arises through the reduction. In line with what we presented in our previous chapter, we can turn to Fink's use of dialectics to account for the movement that ceaselessly goes from constituting to constituted subjectivity and back, where the two poles are given in opposition but require each other.⁹⁷ But in Fink's developments, noncommittal as they are to any straightforward form of metaphysics, there is a sense of closure that might be lacking justification. Just as we rejected the move towards an ontological description of a being prior to the subject-object division in Merleau-Ponty, I would not go as far as to endorse an idea of a science of the Absolute that goes beyond the subject-object correlation. Fink seems to suggest that these categories cannot fully apply to the Absolute because they belong to the realm of mundane science (Fink 1995, 151). This might be true, but it is only one side of the coin. The self-cognizing of the reciprocal relation of being and pre-being that completes the Absolute, should not be thought of as something else or beyond these terms, but as the relation itself between them. In the same way, a science of the Absolute should not be understood as rising above mundane science, but rather as the awareness of the reciprocal relation between mundane science and phenomenology.

⁹⁷ A similar formulation can be found in Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, where he describes perception as a "*diacritical, relative, oppositional system*." (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 206)