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

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General conclusions

This thesis argued that a Husserlian (i.e., a philosopher who holds on to the two Husserlian principles) can only make sense of the phenomenon of death by considering the constituting subject as a transcendental person, that is to say, as being both constituting and constituted, without any primacy of one over the other. I started by pointing out the tension between transcendental phenomenology and naturalism, and the seemingly unresolvable chicken-and-egg scenario between consciousness and nature. The result is closer to a recognition of the virtuosity of the circle that goes from one to the other and back, than to a strong defence of either term as privileged. This amounts to nothing more than a confirmation of the fundamental correlation that is at the centre of Husserlian phenomenology. This correlation cannot be dissected into smaller components, because the poles that are involved in it are abstract moments that do not stand alone. When Husserl stresses the independent and absolute character of consciousness, spirit, or constituting subjectivity facing the world and its own self-objectification, he seems to be attempting to separate them himself. In his dealings with death this becomes more apparent, and the story of how he deals with the being and nature of the transcendental facing the world can be told following the thread of death. This is what I have tried to do throughout this research.

Regarding the secondary aim of this dissertation, namely providing an immanent critique of the traditional, idealistic strand of Husserlian phenomenology, I have tried to show the limitations of such an approach by showing the limitations of the first-person perspective upon which it rests.

I began the first chapter by looking at the difficulties that death brought to the transcendental method in the eyes of Husserl. The primacy of spirit over nature was to him a necessary result of the adoption of a transcendental standpoint. As the resolution of the paradox of human subjectivity showed, constituting consciousness was considered by Husserl to have a non-worldly type of being, which meant it was also not subjected to birth or death. In fact, death provided the separation between consciousness and the human being. In the context of phenomenology, stating that the being of consciousness is different than the being

of an entity is a platitude. And yet, as the treatment of death shows, the consequences of such a view are far-reaching and not at all obvious.

In chapter three, I described Husserl's first approach to death as a temporal impossibility, and then his own attempt at overcoming this difficulty by appealing to an intersubjective, Generative solution. This kind of approach put the weight of the constitution on the shoulders of the community, and in this sense, it seemed to allow for a consideration of limits as true phenomena. However, it fell through when it came to explaining the constitution of the community itself, which still depended on the Ego, proving that in order for generativity to work, one must reassess the foundations of Husserl's theory of constitution. After going through Husserl's treatment of death and the complications that it gives rise to, I turned to a more detailed analysis of subjectivity in part 2.

The genetic analysis of constitution showed that in its most basic form, consciousness can be identified with time. But since temporalization can only occur when there exists both an Ego pole and a non-Ego pole, it is impossible to isolate any form of subjectivity that is completely independent of the givenness of a material core (*Hyle*). Husserl's solution was to presuppose the presence of the primal Ego, which is strictly speaking supra-temporal. In chapter four, I considered the primal Ego as the most fundamental form of the subject. This proved to be problematic since it is not intuitively reached but constructed. And yet, the mere fact that there is a constituted pole points in the direction of a constituting subject, and so it is not easy to get rid of the primal I altogether. In searching for a type of concept that can encompass both poles of the constituting process, I turned in chapter five to the notion of Monad. The discussion around Monadology is of great importance for the topic of death since, when Husserl speaks of the immortality of Monads, he goes beyond the simple negative statement of the supra-temporality of the primal I, and into a metaphysical theory of some sort. How close or far this metaphysics is to intuition and the principles of the phenomenological method remains to be examined. After discussing the possibility of considering immortality as a mere methodological necessity, in the line of Kantian regulative ideas, I concluded that this is not entirely compatible with Husserlian phenomenology given the need to ultimately anchor knowledge to intuitive evidence. Rather, following

Tengelyi, I claim that the impossibility of intuitively deciding in favour of either mortality or immortality should lead to the recognition of the primal fact of the existence of the Ego and its intertwinement with the world. While the first type of solution would privilege the integrity of the transcendental principle to the detriment of intuition, the second one would do the opposite. To make such a decision between the two entails committing to a general appreciation of what makes phenomenology what it is.

The notion of Monad, with its metaphysical background, was not entirely suited to consider the whole of subjectivity. This led me to the transcendental person and the ambiguity of her embodied experience as the notion that was most useful to account for the subject. Chapter six starts by considering the person as is commonly understood in Husserl's account, that is, as the subject of the natural attitude. As a moral and social agent, the person distances herself from the empirical human being, while remaining at the same time different from the transcendental subject. This special status of the person regarding both dimensions of subjectivity is what makes it valuable for my argument. By recuperating the idea of a "transcendental person", I can point to what would be a correct understanding of the subject, namely one that brings forth her fundamental ambiguity. It is first necessary, however, to examine the intuitive foundation of this ambiguity. Chapter seven deals with the importance of embodiment as the corner stone of the interpretation of subjectivity as a concrete whole of constituting and constituted subject. To put it simply, we can say that if the subject is a transcendental person, then it is necessarily embodied; and if it is embodied, it is both 'subjective' in the sense of being for-itself, and 'objective' in the sense of being in-itself, an object in the physical world. Except that this kind of description is bound to miss the mark when in fact subjectivity is not a combination of two things but a concrete unity. The type of understanding of the subject as a combination of these two dimensions is intimately related with a certain conception of the world as being made up of nature and spirit, and so these considerations must be accompanied by a reflection on the idea of nature in general (chapter eight). Nature is not to be seen as the disenchanted realm of physical entities that Descartes opposed to *res cogitans*. Phenomenology shows that nothing like a nature in-itself can be

encountered, and so nature is always 'spiritualized'. But in this movement, it has also rejected every type of limit imposed to that constituting subject considered ultimately as a primal Ego. There is, however, a certain limit that consists not of the particularities of facticity, but of facticity itself: the limit of life. Drawing on the previous idea of primal facticity presented by Tengelyi and other somewhat heterodox readings of Husserl, we can recuperate an idea of Nature as the primal fact of existence.

Chapter nine presents the final reworking of the notion of Subjectivity through a negative strategy, by pointing out the shortcomings in three possible understanding of the subject with respect to my own conclusions. In this chapter and the final one, I present the results of the investigation and my own conclusions regarding subjectivity and death. I propose that subjectivity be considered as a concrete unity of subjective and objective poles, that is to say, as the process of constitution as a whole without any privilege or primacy granted to either one of the poles. On the other hand, this should not lead to consider the whole as a third or fourth kind of being, above or beyond the movement and the poles that constitute it. A sense of incompleteness may remain, insofar as there is no superior synthesis that can provide an end point to the movement. However, this should not be regarded as a flaw of the philosophical system, but rather as the way of remaining true to the way things, and limits, are given.