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

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Summary

Does transcendental subjectivity die? Starting from Husserl's somewhat controversial claim about the immortality of the constituting subjectivity, this thesis uses the limit-case of death in order to present a phenomenological exploration of the notion of subjectivity and its relationship to nature. It also offers a second-order discussion about the method and nature of phenomenology in the face of naturalism. The main conclusion of the research is that, in order to make sense of death while abiding by Husserlian methodological rules, it is necessary to reconsider the notion of subjectivity

There are two main principles or meta-principles of Husserlian phenomenology that appear to be threatened when we consider limit-cases such as death and the nature of constituting subjectivity: one is the need to consider things as they are given to intuition, and the other is the need to consider experience from a first-personal perspective, in order to preserve the transcendental standpoint. The tension between these two demands come into view in the analysis of the case of death. This research attempts to achieve a balance between the demands made by these principles.

The thesis concludes that this point of balance can only be achieved via an understanding of the constituting subject as a transcendental *person*. It defends a reading of immortality as a mere methodological key, meant to convey the ineliminable character of the 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.

There are three parts to this thesis: 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. 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.

The third chapter of the first part presents Husserl’s treatment of limit-cases through the analysis of his texts and manuscripts, it concludes to the distinction between a genetic approach and a generative one and points out their respective insufficiencies.

I dedicate the second part of this dissertation to exploring four different notions associated with Husserl’s notion 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. 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. 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. In chapter 9, I present the notion of

subjectivity as a concrete embodied whole in comparison with three other possible interpretations inherited from the tradition.

Finally, chapter 10 returns to the question of death and reconsiders it in light of the foregoing analysis. This involves a reconsideration of the first-personal access to reflection and of the transcendental principle. Through an analysis of Fink's position in the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, I consider whether immortality can be attributed to the transcendental onlooker (the phenomenologizing subject) instead of the constituting subject, but conclude this perpetuates a problematic splitting of the Ego. In spite of this, it is useful to keep this idea 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.