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## Husserl and Fink on the ‘Miracle of Phenomenology’

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### Introduction

How does transcendental phenomenology *begin*? In the closing pages of *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre directs our attention to this puzzling question with characteristic flair:

As you will know, Fink, in his *Kant-Studien* article, confesses not without melancholy that, so long as one remains in the ‘natural’ attitude, there is *no reason*, no ‘motive’, for performing the epoché. Indeed, this natural attitude is perfectly coherent and one can find in it none of those contradictions which, according to Plato, led the philosopher to carry out a philosophical conversion. Thus the epoché appears in Husserl’s phenomenology like a miracle.<sup>1</sup>

Dropping the Husserlian terminology for now, we can reformulate the question in a more straightforward way: what motivates the profound change in attitude necessary for engaging in philosophy? This is a familiar problem with a long history of answers. Yet, phenomenology cannot seem to avail itself of any of the usual philosophical explanations as to what motivates the adoption of the philosophical stance. The structure of the difficulty seemingly stems from the very nature of the transcendental endeavor. Transcendental insights are only attainable via painstakingly deliberate methods; however, these methods are a product of the natural attitude, and are only retroactively legitimated by what they were designed to find. This closed loop would lead Sartre to assert that the only way in was by way of a miracle.<sup>2</sup> But this cannot have been Husserl’s intended position. Somewhere along the way, something has gone awry.

Both Husserl and Fink had interesting thoughts on this issue. In what follows, I will first frame the methodological puzzle and briefly describe how it appears and gradually evolves in Husserl, before turning to Fink’s Hegel-inspired response to it. The latter, while an ingenious

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre: *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Translated into English by Andrew Brown. London/New York 2004, 49.

<sup>2</sup> Similar, albeit much more severe criticism is found in Taylor Carman’s rather unsympathetic reading of Husserl. He accuses his phenomenology of being incoherent because ‘its results presuppose its methods and its methods presuppose its results’. (Taylor Carman: *Heidegger’s Analytic. Interpretation, Discourse, and Authenticity in Being and Time*. Cambridge 2003, 54)

approach, is not without its own difficulties.<sup>3</sup> I shall conclude by pointing out some practical concerns raised by Fink's forceful interpretation, and hint at a more modest way of thinking about this problem, more in line with Husserl's moderate line of thought.

### I. An 'Unnatural Direction'

One of the guiding questions throughout the years of Husserl's collaboration with Fink was that of phenomenology's beginning and end.<sup>4</sup> Both of these can be understood in distinct, but closely related ways. The question of the beginning of phenomenology refers not just to the starting point for phenomenological research, the pure field of disclosure set free by performing the epoché and the reduction, but also to the original motivation for performing them in the first place. Likewise, the end of phenomenology points not just to the regulative idea or goal of absolute knowledge which, while perhaps not attainable, can be asymptotically strived for, but also to the ultimate telos of phenomenologizing activity as such. (In this latter case, the two aspects might in fact turn out to point to the same thing.) What must immediately strike us as important is that the fluid concepts of 'beginning' and 'end' apparently zigzag between the natural and the transcendental-phenomenological attitude, weaving in and out of the methodological brackets and around the dividing line of the reduction. The starting point, and thus the entire direction in which phenomenologizing then proceeds, seem to be shaped by the empirical, historical makeup of the psychological human subject who is initially motivated to do phenomenology. Similarly, there could be no grasping of phenomenology's ends at the transcendental level without considering the teleological charge of phenomenology, which is manifested in various personalistic, intersubjective, cultural, and, ultimately, historical spheres of life. A preliminary distinction between the different senses of 'beginning' and 'end' points us in the direction of their interwovenness, but also of their eccentricity relative to most other phenomena; it seems that both essentially straddle the natural and the transcendental attitudes, without being containable in either one.

Husserl was not oblivious to the peculiar difficulties coalescing around the complex philosophical concept of beginning. In fact, he was rather quick to recognize that the notion of

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<sup>3</sup> I will be focusing solely on Fink's arguments from the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*. However, his later thought developed beyond the arguments presented there and in the *Kantstudien* article. For example, his Freiburg lectures delivered in the winter semester of 1955/56 are a complex meditation on the nature of philosophical questioning, and are more nuanced than the ideas presented during the years of his collaboration with Husserl. (Eugen Fink: *Sein, Wahrheit, Welt. Vor-Fragen zum Problem des Phänomen-Begriffs*. Den Haag 1966) However, tracking this development would go far beyond the scope of this brief discussion.

<sup>4</sup> We are taking a cue from the title of Bruzina's book: Ronald Bruzina: *Edmund Husserl & Eugen Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology, 1928–1938*. New Haven/London 2004.

a philosophical beginning included two different but closely connected aspects: the historical moment of a particular mundane ego deciding to engage in the praxis of philosophy, and the idealized moment of the beginning of philosophy proper. These intersect and inform each other, and focusing exclusively on one at the expense of the other threatens to skew our understanding of this unique moment where mundane concerns flow into perennial, universally binding ones. For Husserl, this tremendous shift must start with radical belief-abstention, the likes of which is virtually unknown in our everyday lives. No wonder, then, that the one aspect of phenomenology he insisted on throughout his career – even well before the transcendental breakthrough – was its difficult and unnatural character. For example, in § 3 of the introduction to the second volume of his *Logical Investigations*, he discusses the ‘difficulties of pure phenomenological analysis’, where the main issue is ‘the unnatural direction of intuition and thought which phenomenological analysis requires’.<sup>5</sup> This observation is made in the introduction to *Ideas I* as well, signifying that the difficulties are not only present in the transcendental version of phenomenology as well, but are in fact amplified. The extraordinary difficulty lies in the fact that ‘a new *style of attitude* is needed which is *entirely altered* in contrast to the natural attitude in experiencing and the natural attitude in thinking’.<sup>6</sup> The transcendental turn therefore necessitates a differentiation of attitudes, and this differentiation operates on the claim that there is a radical difference between the natural and transcendental attitudes. Moreover, the change from one to another is not a simple switch that, once accomplished, secures the new field of research. There is constant danger of falling back into the natural attitude, and preventing this is not easy: ‘To move freely in it without relapsing into the old attitudes, to learn to see, distinguish, and describe what lies within view, require, moreover, peculiar and laborious studies’.<sup>7</sup>

Husserl’s understanding of the radicality of phenomenology seems to have become more radical with time. We catch a glimpse of this in § 57 of the *Crisis*, for example, where he argues that transcendental philosophy carries within it a certain unnaturalness and *opposition* to human common sense. This is because it constitutes ‘the complete inversion of the natural stance of life’, and so ‘places the greatest conceivable demands upon philosophical resolve and

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<sup>5</sup> Edmund Husserl: *Logische Untersuchungen. Zweiter Band: Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis*. Dordrecht 1984, 14 (Hua XIX/1–2). (English translation: *Logical Investigations*. Volume I. Translated into English by J. N. Findlay. London/New York 2001, 170)

<sup>6</sup> Edmund Husserl: *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch*. The Hague 1976, 5 (Hua III/1). (English translation: *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book. General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Translated into English by Fred Kersten. The Hague 1983, XIX)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

consistency'.<sup>8</sup> Thus the danger of lapsing back into the natural attitude cannot be understood as mere failure to adhere to the strict methods of phenomenology. Rather, it points to an innate tendency of the human mind that needs to be combated constantly. This insight would prove to be influential for Fink's own take on the unnatural character of the reduction.

The unnaturalness of phenomenology is primarily tied to the fact that the world is the single most dominant background presence in our typical everyday experience. Suspending all beliefs accompanying this presence must therefore have a profoundly transformative effect on the phenomenologist. Furthermore, tracing experience back to the sense-bestowing function of the transcendental subject – and thus disclosing the world as a nexus of constitutive achievements of the subject – would decisively alter our understanding of ourselves and of our place in the world. It is not surprising that Husserl likens phenomenology to a religious conversion, then, given this transformative potential of phenomenology and the gravity of its insights.<sup>9</sup> But we are still left with the question of how this conversion comes about.

There seems to be a vicious circle in the structure of the epoché and the reduction: in order to acknowledge the constitutive achievements of the transcendental ego, one has to have performed the reduction. But the performance of the reduction presupposes at least some of its results, not just as goal but also as motivating factor. Furthermore, because the desired radical change of attitude is a contrived and unnatural act, dependent on specific and complicated methods, the shift to the transcendental-phenomenological attitude cannot happen by chance; it very clearly must be *learned* and actively pursued. At this point, the issue of motivation becomes an explicit problem: it is unclear why anyone who was living in the natural attitude would choose to do this (or even how), given that they, by definition, cannot know in advance what these methods are going to disclose, if anything. Husserl's thoughts on this puzzling problem evolved with time, and we can only mention a few examples here. As early as 1910, in a course on the 'Basic problems of phenomenology', he recognizes the need to address the issue of the reasons for the reduction. Unfortunately, his answer to this epistemological puzzle is very dismissive at this early stage: 'One need not attribute to phenomenology any motives for neutralizing the positing of experience. As phenomenology, it has no such motives; the

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<sup>8</sup> Edmund Husserl: *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*. The Hague 1976, 204 (Hua VI). (English translation: *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Translated into English by David Carr. Evanston, IL 1970, 200)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 140/137.

respective phenomenologist might have these, and these are private matters.’<sup>10</sup> These curt remarks are perhaps understandable, given that Husserl himself had not quite worked out the intricacies of his own transcendental position at that point. More than a decade later, we find him more readily acknowledging the need for an explanation. However, the one we get is disappointing: as a beginner in phenomenology living in the natural attitude, I have to establish a relation to the idea of transcendental knowledge based ‘on some kind of motivation’<sup>11</sup> (*‘auf Grund einer wie immer zu beschreibenden Motivation’*) and let myself be guided by the overlaps between the two attitudes. It is in these discussions of method, written in the mid-1920s, that the idea of the natural attitude serving as a kind of a transcendental guiding thread (*‘transzendentaler Leitfaden’*) emerges as the basic binding element driving phenomenological research. This insight would later form the theoretical basis for Husserl’s insistence on an ‘intrinsic affinity’ (*Verschwisterung*) between transcendental phenomenology and sciences such as psychology and anthropology.<sup>12</sup>

But these remarks, underlining the points of contact and intersection between the mundane and the transcendental, carry little explanatory force, considering that Husserl, at the same time, seems to be at pains to minimize the role of psychological or existential motives for pursuing phenomenology. These attempts become particularly prominent in the very early 1930s and coincide with a growing need to distance himself from Heidegger and Scheler. This need led him to posit an idealized ‘theoretical curiosity’ – which he located in an absolutely disinterested ‘playful’ attitude toward the world – as the true source of all rigorous science, including phenomenology.<sup>13</sup> The clear anti-Heideggerian bite of this point notwithstanding, we cannot escape the feeling that such a purely theoretical approach throws out the baby with the bathwater. In an attempt to distance itself from mundane *sciences*, phenomenology seems to sever some essential links with the mundane itself. The problem of motivation reflects this: we still don’t have a good explanation as to why a person would decide to break away from their natural way of living, apart from an obscure notion of curiosity.<sup>14</sup> Let us now turn to how Fink tackles this problem in the early 1930s and see whether his arguments get us any further.

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<sup>10</sup> Edmund Husserl: *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität I*. The Hague 1973, 157 (Hua XIII). (My translation.)

<sup>11</sup> Edmund Husserl: *Zur Phänomenologischen Reduktion. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1926–1935)*. Dordrecht 2002, 11 (Hua XXXIV). (My translation.)

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Husserl: *Aufsätze und Vorträge*. Dordrecht 1989, 181 (Hua XXVII). (My translation.)

<sup>13</sup> Hua XXXIV, 260. (My translation.)

<sup>14</sup> This question has attracted considerable attention in the relevant scholarly literature. Let us mention here just a few of the many instructive discussions, without going into their arguments: Dorion Cairns: ‘The First Motivation of Transcendental Epoché’. In: Dan Zahavi, Frederik Stjernfelt (Eds.): *One Hundred Years of*

## 2. From the Transcendental to the Absolute

Fink's reflections on the nature of motivation for phenomenology from his 1933 *Kantstudien* article constitute what is probably the most famous set of phenomenological remarks on this problem. In this programmatic text, he points out the difficulties inherent to the issue: for starters, even questioning the motives for engaging in phenomenology is likely to lead us astray, insofar as we are led to believe that phenomenology is simply one philosophy among equals, or merely one way of knowing among others. Furthermore, there is a distinct sense in which it can be said that there is no conceivable way of correctly interpreting the beginning of phenomenology without performing its methods. But these, as Fink points out, cannot be truly understood from within the natural attitude, but only after they have been performed. This is a 'strange paradox' and a 'fundamental difficulty', and makes for the fact that every single interpretation of transcendental phenomenology will be unequivocally false, as long as one retains the worldly (or psychological) point of departure in this interpretation.<sup>15</sup> So far, so very Husserlian: all of this could have been written by Husserl at any time after the publication of *Ideas I*. But Fink adds a unique twist to his discussion: the basic difficulty with all attempts to understand the motivation for engaging in phenomenology is that these frame the performance of the reduction as a *human activity*. In truth, Fink writes, the phenomenological reduction lies wholly outside the horizon of human possibilities.<sup>16</sup> Understanding this claim is not easy, and its meaning remains somewhat obscure throughout the rest of the article. To better understand it, we must turn to Fink's more detailed discussion of phenomenologizing activity, as he develops it in the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*.

As we have pointed out, the concept of 'beginning' could plausibly refer to different things in the context which interests us here. For example, it could point us in the direction of the empirical philosophizing subject, the mundane ego initially deciding to do phenomenology. Here, it would refer to the psychological motivation for this initial decision, which is surely worthy of phenomenological attention. But it could also refer to the subject after leaving the

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*Phenomenology. Husserl's Logical Investigations Revisited*. Dordrecht 2002, 219–231; Robert Arp: 'Husserl and the Penetrability of the Transcendental and the Mundane Spheres'. In: *Human Studies* 27, 2004, 221–239; Hans Rainer Sepp: 'How is Phenomenology Motivated?'. In: Thomas Nenon, Philip Blosser (Eds.): *Advancing Phenomenology. Essays in Honor of Lester Embree*. Dordrecht/Heidelberg/London/New York 2010, 35–44; Rudolf Bernet: 'The phenomenological reduction: from natural life to philosophical thought'. In: *Metodo. International Studies in Phenomenology and Philosophy* 4(2), 2016, 311–333.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Eugen Fink: *Studien zur Phänomenologie*. Den Haag 1966, 110ff. (English translation: 'The phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl and contemporary criticism'. In: Rudolf Bernet, Donn Welton, Gina Zavota (Eds.): *Edmund Husserl – Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers. Volume I: Circumspections: Classic Essays on Husserl's Phenomenology*. Translated into English by R.O. Elveton. London/New York 2005, 204ff.)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 110/205.

natural attitude, i.e., after the initial bracketing and reduction, serving as the springboard for phenomenological analysis. Obviously, the idea of a ‘beginning’ is intimately tied to the notion of the reduction, understood by Husserl and Fink as the inaugural act of phenomenology. Yet, the reduction itself is by no means a self-evident act. How is it to be positioned with respect to the different meanings of ‘beginning’ we mentioned above? Are the world-situatedness of the subject and its motivation for phenomenology to be bracketed, or are they transcendently relevant, and analyzed as structural moments of the transcendental subject? It is questions like these that led Fink to refer to the ‘phenomenology of the phenomenological reduction’ as the ‘*first problem* of the transcendental theory of method – ‘first’ indeed not only as the problem that necessarily introduces things, but also as the *fundamental problem*’.<sup>17</sup>

This claim continues a line of argument Fink pursues earlier in the text, where he insists on the interplay between phenomenological activity and its respective method, insofar as the transcendental theory of method is not only necessary for, but indeed conditions, the practical performance of phenomenological analysis, while also simultaneously presupposing it as the only grounds on which it can be developed in the first place.<sup>18</sup> This general insight is then mirrored in the more specialized case of the phenomenological reduction.<sup>19</sup> But Fink now expands on this motif of self-presupposing, and supplements it with the crucial notion of *radicality* of knowledge. It is not simply the case that the reduction, understood as the gateway to philosophy, presupposes itself as already having been explicitly performed. It is rather a preliminary response – or the first step toward responding – to a deeply entrenched propensity for *questioning* which, according to Fink, is the first and basic way in which transcendental knowledge manifests itself, or appears, in the world for any subject.<sup>20</sup> There is something deeply mysterious and transcendent about the *whence* of this type of unnatural questioning: ‘The motivation for the action of reduction is the awakening of a questionableness that indeed enters the scene in the natural attitude, but which in principle ‘transcends’ the horizon of all

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<sup>17</sup> Eugen Fink: *VI. Cartesianische Meditation. Teil I. Die Idee einer transzendentalen Methodenlehre. Texte aus dem Nachlass Eugen Finks (1932) mit Anmerkungen und Beilagen aus dem Nachlass Edmund Husserls (1933/34)*. Hg. von Hans Ebeling, Jann Holl und Guy van Kerckhoven. Den Haag/Dordrecht 1988 32/29 (Hua Dok II/1). (Throughout this paper, we will be referring to both the original pagination of the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, and to the corresponding pages in the English translation: Eugen Fink: *Sixth Cartesian Meditation. The Idea of a Transcendental Theory of Method*. Translated into English by Ronald Bruzina. Bloomington/Indianapolis 1995. All direct quotes are taken from this translation.)

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 8/8 for the classical expression of the impossibility of drawing up an architectonic of phenomenology in advance. Slightly later in the text, the even more explicit claim is made: ‘transcendental theory *presupposes* itself; we can only gain the concept of it if we already, in a certain sense, practice it’ (*ibid.*, 30/27).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 39f./35f.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 40/37.

questions that are possible within the natural attitude.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the notion of motivation is transformed into a transcendental-phenomenological one, and decoupled from any mundane, psychological sense.<sup>22</sup> What remains of this rarefied concept of motivation is thus a certain ‘phenomenological *fore-knowledge* that first makes it possible to pose the radical questions’, ‘radicality’ itself being understood ‘in a new sense’ here.<sup>23</sup> What is new about the radicality Fink describes here? It is the fact that the mysterious and transcendent character of this type of questioning is also a way of *self-transcending*. Importantly, the type of self-transcending he describes is markedly different from anything previously described in and by phenomenology. Let us pursue this a bit further.

‘Transcendental radicalism’, Fink writes, ‘is of a nature that is different in principle: motivated by transcendental insight, it puts into question what can never be put into question at all in the natural attitude’.<sup>24</sup> What is put into question is, of course, precisely the world itself. But the radicalism in question, according to Fink, rests on something deeply inhuman, which drives the worldly human consciousness to even try something as unnatural as phenomenology in the first place. The preliminary description of the non-worldly motivating core in question here is not very informative, and does not seem to go far beyond characterizing it as a kind of a transcendental ‘hunch’:

This means that we can never bracket ‘*all*’ prejudices, were such a purpose even to occur to us in the context of worldly reflection, if we do not in some way already have the transcendental insight that the *being of the world* as a whole (including therefore my own human being) is a ‘*prejudice*’, i.e., an unexamined unity of acceptedness [*eine unbefragte Geltungseinheit*].<sup>25</sup>

This ‘in some way’ does not inspire confidence, and reminds us of Husserl’s ‘some kind of motivation’ which supposedly allows for the initiation of radical epoché. But Fink’s rhetoric is more electric, and indicative of a rift between the domains of the transcendental and the mundane that is deeper than Husserl might have let on. The fact that any interpretation of phenomenology wed to the natural attitude is in principle false would seemingly imply that the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 41f./37.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Phenomenological cognition is *never motivated by mundane* but always by *phenomenological* knowledge. The concept of *motivation* too must at the same time be freed from mundane ideas and taken in a new transcendental sense.’ (Ibid., 39/35f.)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 39/36.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 37/33.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 39/36.



limits of our humanity are thus the limits of phenomenology in general. But wouldn't this mean that we are, in fact, restricted to mundane philosophy, and that anything beyond that was mere flight of fancy? Yet we are not, and phenomenology apparently does inhabit the transcendental register. How is this possible?

At this point, the Hegelian roots of Fink's recasting of phenomenology become very clear.<sup>26</sup> For Fink, as for Hegel, the problem of motivation is, ultimately, only a quasi-problem. A pertinent quote from Stähler, comparing Hegel and Husserl, might help us illustrate this point:

While Husserl poses the question of motivation for philosophy and tries answering it in various manuscripts, one could get the impression from Hegel's philosophy that the problem of motivation of philosophy does not exist for him. In point of fact, the natural consciousness is internally consistent and content, according to Husserl, until it is confronted with something alien to it, for example; Hegel, by contrast, discovers a contradictoriness within the natural consciousness, as well as a restlessness that can admittedly be concealed, but is nevertheless waiting to burst out.<sup>27</sup>

For Hegel, the restlessness of the spirit is ultimately the driving force, or the motor, behind the breakthrough of philosophy.<sup>28</sup> If phenomenology is to be understood according to the Hegelian model, the issue of the interplay between psychological motivation and transcendental insight seems to dissolve entirely. The miracle of phenomenology, if we adopt the Hegelian/Finkian perspective, only appears as a miracle, but in fact operates according to a hidden logic tethered to the movement of the Absolute. From this perspective, Fink can not only claim that the true, 'full-sided' subject of phenomenology is a dialectical unity of the transcendental and the mundane subject,<sup>29</sup> but can also maintain a much stronger claim which incidentally solves the problem of motivation for him. The question of what originally motivates the performance of the epoché and of the reduction is ultimately vacuous because it is not us, human beings, who are *doing* phenomenology at all. According to Fink:

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<sup>26</sup> It is not surprising that Hegel's shadow looms throughout the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, considering that Fink not only attended Heidegger's lectures on the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* in 1930, but also tutored Japanese students on that same topic himself (cf. Bruzina: *Edmund Husserl & Eugen Fink*, 129).

<sup>27</sup> Tanja Stähler: *Die Unruhe des Anfangs. Hegel und Husserl über den Weg in die Phänomenologie*. Dordrecht/Boston/London 2003, 146. (My translation.)

<sup>28</sup> On the motif of restlessness in Hegel, cf. Jean-Luc Nancy: *Hegel. L'inquiétude du négatif*. Paris 1997.

<sup>29</sup> Fink: *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 127/116.

Man cannot *as man* phenomenologize, that is, his human mode of being cannot perdure through the actualization of phenomenological cognition. Performing the reduction means for man *to rise beyond* (to transcend) *himself*, it means to *rise beyond himself in all his human possibilities*. To express it paradoxically, when man performs the phenomenological reduction (un-humanizes himself), he carries out an action that “he” just cannot carry out, that just does not lie in the range of his possibilities.<sup>30</sup>

It is not really ‘man’ who is doing phenomenology at all, but rather ‘the transcendental subject that, awakening within him, presses toward self-consciousness’.<sup>31</sup> This ‘pressing toward’ is based on the latent transcendental insight that the world is an unexamined unity of validities. Now, this fore-knowledge cannot appear anywhere else other than in the natural historical world, and in no other way than as knowledge of a natural, historical subject. Yet, Fink tells us, phenomenology is decisively *not* a philosophy existing ‘within the world historically, having arisen in human cultural history’.<sup>32</sup>

From the Hegelian/Finkian perspective, of course, there is no paradox here, as the contradiction is itself sublated in the gradual unfolding of the Absolute. Fink’s fusing together of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology with the Hegelian idea of a phenomenology of spirit allows him to circumvent the difficult problem of motivation floating between the natural and the transcendental attitude, because it replaces it with a logic of epistemic inevitability that is beyond these attitudes. Let us briefly reconstruct and retrace its steps here.

Phenomenology, according to Fink, is ultimately concerned with describing a specific kind of circular movement of knowledge divided into three stages. The first stage concerns the anonymous constitutive achievements of transcendental subjectivity which necessarily aim toward, and in a sense terminate in, the natural world. The second stage is the reflective reversal of this basic enworlding, triggered by the performance of bracketing and reduction, and leading to the freeing of the pure transcendental onlooker.<sup>33</sup> The transcendental knowledge gained by this onlooker is finally reintegrated into the world as the absolute truth, albeit in a limited way, considering its ontic embeddedness. The switch from the first to the second stage is explained

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 132/120.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 133/121.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 143f./131.

<sup>33</sup> Fink’s charged vocabulary, including phrases such as ‘nullification’ or ‘un-humanization’ of man, the freeing of the ‘shrouding cover’ of humanity through the epoché, etc. (ibid., 43f./39f.), have prompted some scholars to speak of Fink’s ‘gnosticism’ (cf. Steven G. Crowell: ‘Gnostic Phenomenology: Eugen Fink and the Critique of Transcendental Reason’. In: *New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* 1, 2001, 257–277).

by the notion of phenomenological fore-knowledge which serves as a latent trigger for the sort of reflection pursued here and only briefly flashes in the natural attitude while itself not being part of it. But this elegant solution does not come without its own puzzles: once the subject has achieved the level of self-knowledge which reveals its own constituting role, why does it ever seek the mundane world again? In other words, why does transcendental knowledge *have* to be reintegrated into the world as seeming truth (*Scheinwahrheit*), as Fink calls it, especially if the removing of the ontic shroud of mundane existence is understood as epistemologically desirable?<sup>34</sup> This reintegration is, for him, a mandatory moment of the Absolute which does not in any way rest on the activity or ‘wish’ of the phenomenologist.<sup>35</sup> The transcendental onlooker is ‘*passively taken along*’<sup>36</sup> or ‘*enclosed and swept along by constituting life*’ [*umgriffen und mitgerissen*] and ‘enworlded within the constituted context of time’.<sup>37</sup> These references to the deep-seated passivity driving transcendental cognition lead us to the conclusion that it, itself, rests on a more fundamental concept. This, for Fink, is the Absolute. In fact, phenomenology, the privileged path to knowledge, is a form of ‘being taken along’ [*das passive Mitgenommenwerden*], a *moment* of the Absolute. Indeed, Fink maintains a difference between the transcendental and the Absolute, and claims that the latter is an ‘all-embracing *inclusional concept*’, whereas the former serves exclusively as an ‘*oppositional concept*’, denoting that which is ‘*removed from the world*’ and ‘*set up over against it*’.<sup>38</sup> But none of this is very satisfying; the Finkian solution to the issue of motivation strikes us as a stipulation, insofar as it presupposes a set of metaphysical commitments from which it derives its whole rationale. Unless phenomenology can offer a more compelling explanation of how it begins – and why – it risks veering off into hermeticism.

### 3. Toward a Phenomenological Praxeology

Our cursory presentation of Husserl’s and Fink’s positions indicates that their responses to the issue of motivation are plagued by the same difficulty: an apparent irreducible circularity which is resolved by an appeal to either pure theoretical curiosity or a vague transcendental inkling shrouded by the mundane and waiting to be freed by a shift in attitude. Fink even elevates this

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<sup>34</sup> He does try to address this by invoking ‘a tendency that seems to grow out of *transcendental pedagogical impulses*’ (Fink: *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 110/100), but this remark doesn’t really go anywhere. In fact, Husserl seems to be much more interested in the idea of phenomenological pedagogy than Fink at the time, even within the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation* itself.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 119/109.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 127/116.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 142/129.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 158/143.

circularity to the level of important methodological insight when he insists on the impossibility of drawing up the architectonics of the system of phenomenology without simultaneously *engaging in* phenomenology. But his solution to the problem of motivation comes at a great theoretical cost, for it embeds the logic of this solution into a metaphysical system which exceeds the limits of phenomenology itself.

However, let us leave the difficult and controversial issue of phenomenology's relation to metaphysics aside, and point instead to practical aspects of the problem of motivation where the Finkian approach fails to address the issue in its full breadth. Here, Husserl's analyses seem to be richer and phenomenologically truer to the issue at hand, especially if we ignore his *ex machina* notion of pure theoretical curiosity.

The issue stems from Fink's insistence on the absolute difference between the realms of the mundane and the transcendental. While he does argue for their mutual dependence and, ultimately, synthetic unity, the fact that the transcendental onlooker is placed squarely outside the realm of ontology means that Fink simply cannot accurately describe the gradual transition from the natural to the transcendental attitude. For him, no matter what existential or psychological motives might factor in the initial move toward the epoché and the reduction, the switch, once this move has been made, must be instantaneous and as absolute as the difference between the mundane ego and the transcendental onlooker. This view is often repeated in the literature, and often with reference to Husserl's reference to the performance of the absolute epoché 'with one blow' [*in einem Schlage*].<sup>39</sup> The logical consequence of this claim would then supposedly be that the transcendental epoché not only 'has to be installed suddenly', but that the 'reaching of the transcendental level [...] is only a question of yes or no'.<sup>40</sup> But a claim like this must immediately provoke radical skepticism. Even if transcendental phenomenology is entirely independent of whatever set of highly complex historical, sociological, linguistic, and other circumstances initially led the person to pursue it, *surely* it depends on prior knowledge and understanding of its precise, laborious, and repeatable methods? And although Husserl and Fink both like to point out that the craft of phenomenology cannot be compared to that of any other vocation, there is no doubt that these methods can be learned, must be practiced, and that one can get better at applying them. For this reason, it would be more plausible to understand Husserl's repeated references to performing the epoché 'in one go' as indicative of its general intention – disclosing the authentic subject matter of

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<sup>39</sup> Hua VI, 153/150.

<sup>40</sup> Sepp: 'How is Phenomenology Motivated?', 40. Sepp does highlight Husserl's sensitivity to existential factors motivating philosophy, however (*ibid.*, 39).

phenomenology by bracketing the seeming universality of the general thesis of the existence of the world.<sup>41</sup> This ideal outcome is nevertheless constrained by the circumstances of the phenomenologizing ego, be they a beginner or an experienced phenomenologist. Transcendental analysis can fail in many ways: the beginner might find it difficult to consistently apply the method of bracketing, or they might find themselves inadvertently falling back to the general thesis on occasion; they might be unable to adopt a firm criterion for distinguishing between essential and inessential elements of an experience, or fail to consider correlate phenomena; they might be distracted or tired; finally, they might simply be unsure whether they have actually successfully adopted the transcendental perspective. All these possible pitfalls can be mitigated by attaining a firmer grasp of the phenomenological method, but none of them preclude the philosopher from ‘reaching the transcendental level’ only halfway, for a brief moment, or hazily. In other words, reducing transcendental analysis to a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ obscures a great deal of its actual way of proceeding. Husserl is therefore right to characterize the transcendental attitude as a ‘habitus’,<sup>42</sup> as this rich notion implies a much more intimate and developing relation between it and the natural attitude, as well as the possibility of in-between forms of research: beyond mundane science, but not quite at the level of transcendental science yet.<sup>43</sup> Of course, the notion of a scientific habitus specific to transcendental phenomenology must force us to critically rethink Fink’s claim of phenomenology’s ahistoric exceptionalism.<sup>44</sup> On the contrary, it is *because* phenomenology first appears as a philosophy among others, in a particular place and at a particular moment in history, that it allows for the formation of a unique scientific habitus which transcends its own place and time. But this self-transcending is neither a random occurrence nor an abnegation of its historicity as somehow limiting. Phenomenology draws both its ambition and its potential from its historic milieu and the legacy of European sciences and philosophy preceding it, and the same goes for its practitioners. Put differently, the historical circumstances from which transcendental phenomenology develops are intertwined with the circumstances of those pursuing its universal insights.

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<sup>41</sup> Husserl distinguishes between the ‘non-authentic’, doxastic universality of the world as subject matter of a universal science, and the authentic universality of the transcendental ego (Hua XXXIV, 50).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. For a pertinent discussion written about a decade earlier, cf. Hua XIII, 200–211. An excellent discussion of the intertwining of the mundane and the transcendental in phenomenological research is found in Edmund Husserl: *Die Lebenswelt. Auslegungen der vorgegebenen Welt und ihrer Konstitution. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1916–1937)*. Dordrecht 2008, 312–324 (Hua XXXIX).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Friederike Kuster: *Wege der Verantwortung. Husserls Phänomenologie als Gang durch die Faktizität*. Dordrecht/Boston/London 1996, 93–107.

<sup>44</sup> Fink: *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 142–144/129–131.

This does mean that a slightly mellowed transcendental theory of method might be preferable to Fink's radical one, which is more of a hindrance than a boon in attempting to grasp actual phenomenological practice. One thing to focus on, for example, would be a more nuanced account of the origin and limits of the ideal of presuppositionless science, and a better understanding of the gradual shift from the natural to the transcendental attitude.<sup>45</sup> Another aspect worthy of attention would be the possibility, nature, and goal of the *communication* of transcendental insights to non-phenomenologists. Indeed, Husserl does not shy away from occasionally talking about the 'educational function of the phenomenological reduction',<sup>46</sup> while also pondering the possibility of making its results understandable to those who haven't performed it themselves.<sup>47</sup>

These last remarks suggest that a good theory of motivation for phenomenology would profit from a slight expansion of perspective: the question of *how* ought to be supplemented by the question of *why*. For Husserl, the answer to the latter is clear. Transcendental articulation of experience does not only remove dogmatic blinders; it enriches both the world and mankind, and opens up the avenue toward a 'higher humanity'.<sup>48</sup> Phenomenology 'bears within itself the significance of the greatest existential transformation which is assigned as a task to mankind as such'.<sup>49</sup> But this transformation in no way leads *beyond* the horizon of humanity. Rather, it realizes humanity's innermost potential, because it is not an epistemological transformation, but an ethical one. Therefore, the way into phenomenology need not be any more miraculous than the desire to improve one's own life, and the lives of others.

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<sup>45</sup> For a recent pertinent treatment of these topics, cf. Kenneth Knies: *Crisis and Husserlian Phenomenology. A Reflection on Awakened Subjectivity*. London/New York 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Edmund Husserl: *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*. Dordrecht 1991, 179 (Hua IV).

<sup>47</sup> He reflects on this topic in the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation* (Fink: *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 127/115 n.396; 143/130 n.469), but also in other manuscripts from roughly the same period (cf. Hua XV, § 31).

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Fink: *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 127/115 n. 396; 143/130 n. 469.

<sup>49</sup> Hua VI, 140/137.