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Review of *The Existential Husserl. A Collection of Critical Essays*

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Exactly three decades have passed since Lester Embree reprimanded phenomenology scholars for reading Husserl – “incredibly”, he added – as the “father of existential phenomenology”. (1993: xi) His short, impassioned discussion named no names, but one can imagine the kind of reader Embree could’ve had in mind; in their zeal for defending Husserl from the barrage of charges of intellectualism, quietism, solipsism, etc., they overcorrected and subsequently lost sight of the genuinely new and salient contributions of his eminently *transcendental* philosophy. Embree highlights what he takes to be a substantive difference between existential and transcendental inquiry, anchored in their diverging phenomenological interests. The former is characterized by a “reflective-descriptive philosophical preoccupation with concrete individual human subjectivity” (1993: xii), whereas the latter is focused primarily on philosophy of science and deals with nonworldly subjectivity. Although its philosophical project has “great continuing merit”, existential phenomenology, he concludes, is not transcendental. (1993: xi)

A lot has happened in the Husserl-world since, and we now have access to much more of the relevant *Nachlass*-material than would have been readily available thirty years ago. In addition to an up-to-date knowledge of that primary material, the sensibilities of the modern Husserl reader are also shaped, perhaps in equal measure, by the voluminous secondary literature on the modalities and limitations of transcendental phenomenology that has appeared since. In light of these additional sources, how should we evaluate the putative sharp contrast between existential and transcendental concerns? Plausibly, phenomenological description of the existential makeup of concrete subjectivity ought to be a part of the broader transcendental project, at the very least. But how do the two fit together? This question yields a further issue. Life and death, freedom and necessity, anxiety and happiness, values, moral principles, life-shaping choices – i.e., the building blocks of concrete human existence – are all clusters of

phenomena which test the limits of pure or mere description. They appear to reach deep into the normative domain, thereby licensing phenomenology to talk not only of how things are, but of how they ought to be. Whatever the exact nature of the fit between existential and transcendental phenomenology might be, it cuts across the entirety of Husserl's philosophical project.

Readers interested in exploring these and other relevant thorny issues are in luck. The recent collection of essays *The Existential Husserl*, put together by Marco Cavallaro and George Heffernan, is an excellent contribution to the scholarship and will be an invaluable resource for specialists and students alike. The task they set for this collection was to "initiate, or, more accurately, to revitalize, a long-delayed and long-dormant exploration of the existential and even existentialist aspects of Husserl's thought", an "inchoate awareness" of which has been growing in the community, as the editors point out, at the latest since the publication of such volumes as XXXIX and XLII of the *Husserliana*. (vi) The volume succeeds in this task admirably. It comprises an introductory discussion written by Heffernan and fourteen largely original contributions written by an all-star lineup of phenomenology and Husserl scholars. Apart from the two papers written by the editors, the reader will find contributions from Jagna Brudzińska, Nicolas de Warren, Carlos Lobo, Sophie Loidolt, James Mensch, Dermot Moran, Thomas Nenon, Bernhard Obsieger, Sonja Rinofner-Kreidl, Rosemary Rizo-Patrón Lerner, Rochus Sowa, and Andrea Staiti. Their papers cover an impressive range of topics, and are all well worth reading. In this review, I will confine myself to a small selection, mostly with an eye out for the general framing of the idea of an 'existential Husserl', and will point out a couple of relevant connections between the other papers in passing. I will conclude with some general remarks on the scope and merits of this volume.

When considering the relation between existential and transcendental phenomenology, at least two concerns naturally arise. One is that the latter's cognitive-theoretical focus on evidence and knowledge, scientific or otherwise, precludes it from engaging with practical or existential matters in any meaningful way. Strictly speaking, this concern is not even essentially tied up with its transcendental character, but is rather a matter of philosophical interest; preoccupation with questions of knowledge, universal validity, truth, and evidence permeates Husserl's work well before his 'transcendental turn'. The other concern is more directly related to the question of the very nature of phenomenological reflection. Let us grant phenomenology the philosophical license to explore, and philosophically pronounce on, existential or practical

issues. But what, then, is the status of such phenomenological reflection? Does the essentially worldly and historical character of its subject matter not clash with, or resist, transcendental expression, thereby rendering ‘existential phenomenology’ a misnomer for what is essentially a kind of philosophical anthropology?

These two general concerns are addressed in Heffernan’s opening paper ‘Husserl’s Phenomenology of Existence: A Very Brief Introduction’. This paper – which is best read as a substantial extension of the editors’ rather sparse ‘Preface’ – very successfully dispels the first worry and meaningfully alleviates the second, more serious one. Heffernan’s discussion is sensitive to both historical and philosophical issues, and buttressed with an impressive range of references to relevant correspondence, historical material, and philosophical works of both Husserl and others. It would be all too easy to reduce Husserl’s gradually developing interest in existential matters to a reaction to personal crises, but Heffernan urges caution and warns against any such facile interpretation. Yes, a series of personal catastrophes and profound disappointments did befall Husserl; yes, those events were also philosophically formative and marked a shift and a broadening of focus in his thinking. (4-10) But no, whatever the reasons behind his gradual turn to existential questions were, a wish to develop a coping mechanism was not one of them. Instead, Heffernan argues, even the early work of the ‘breakthrough’ years was resonant with those questions, and not existentially barren. Expectedly, this argument (11-21) gains in force the further we are along in this intellectual reconstruction, and some of Heffernan’s arguments for the existential relevance of Husserl’s early work are a touch more tentative and Procrustean than the later ones. (11f.) However, he also quite rightly points out that the least distorting reading of Husserl will have to be the moderate one, as “there are works of Husserl in which it makes little or no sense to search for existential themes” (21), and there are others where the existential charge is readily apparent. Most will probably be located somewhere in-between. Thus, it in no way detracts from Heffernan’s argument that Husserl’s early work is less overtly existential.

What about the other concern, that these kinds of reflections represent a lapse into the naively anthropological kind of philosophy Husserl himself was at pains to avoid? This worry is not defused as comprehensively and conclusively as the one above, but Heffernan does address it in a suggestive way. “On the basis of the accounts of the transcendental-phenomenological method in his other works”, he tells us, “one might argue that the *epoché* and reduction are presupposed in many texts of *Husserliana* XLII, for example.” (22) These are part

of the habituality of the transcendental philosopher and of their “philosophical person and procedure”, and so can be safely assumed to be operative even in the absence of their explicit performance. This is particularly salient if we believe, as Husserl did and Heffernan does, that the adoption of the philosophical attitude represents a profound personal transformation akin to a religious conversion. (23; Heffernan quotes from Hua VI, §35) As someone who is inclined to think of the transcendental attitude as a fairly permeable theoretical habitus of mundane subjectivity, I believe this is on the right track. But this argument, taken in isolation, is unlikely to convince those who maintain that the ‘existential-transcendental’ pair is in fact an either-or choice. After all, the transcendental philosopher might operate under the assumption that they are working under the constraints of their methods without realizing that they have lapsed back into the natural attitude. But also – and more importantly –, regardless of their positioning with respect to the mundane and transcendental registers of experience, it remains unclear whether the appeal to the universal validity of transcendental insight can be squared with an analysis of the concrete existential makeup of worldly subjects at all. Heffernan rightly closes his informative “Very Brief Introduction” with the remark that these questions will require further examination. This sets up nicely the subsequent papers – which take this examination in many directions –, and prepares the reader for the discussions to come.

What emerges from Cavallaro’s and Heffernan’s framing of the task and scope of this volume, and especially from Heffernan’s “Introduction”, is an image of a philosopher who was well beyond any simple opposition between existential and transcendental phenomenology. Not only are there existential aspects of Husserl’s thought; Husserl was “not merely occasionally and perfunctorily but rather frequently and foundationally over a long period of time” engaged in developing a *phenomenology of existence*, and was thus a true existential phenomenologist. But, importantly, his “transcendental philosophy encompasses a phenomenology of existence”, making Husserl’s approach importantly different from those of other philosophers of existence, existentialists, or philosophers of the absurd. (18) Aspects of this weighty claim are explored in particular by Dermot Moran (“Husserl, Jaspers, and Heidegger on Life and Existence”), Thomas Nenon (“Authentic Existence in Husserl and Heidegger”), and Bernhard Obsieger (“Kierkegaard and Husserl”), who explicitly contrast Husserl’s approach to those of Jaspers, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard. There is a natural and smooth progression between these papers. Moran provides an informative overview of Husserl’s attempts – growing out of his resistance to the perceived lack of scientific rigor of Jaspers and Heidegger – to “reinterpret ‘existential’

problems within the scope of a transcendental phenomenology of social and cultural human existence.” (189) What enabled Husserl to integrate such problems into his phenomenology was the fact that subjectivity, and in particular the “ego-subject” (192) was not only the starting and anchoring point for his phenomenology (a characteristic the latter shares with existentialist philosophies more broadly), but also, importantly, significantly more *concrete* than, say, the Kantian formal principle of the unity of apperception. The Husserlian transcendental ego accrues experiences and expands, ultimately opening up toward convictions and values, worldviews and communalization, etc. (193) Moran rightly points out, however, that these are nevertheless grounded in the cognitive ideal of universal rationalism. The entirety of Husserl’s work, then, adopts the character of reason’s *intervention* against the corrosive dangers of irrationalism of all stripes.

Nenon reaches a similar conclusion in his contribution which problematizes the notion of authentic existence in Husserl and Heidegger. After a quick and useful primer on the more famous Heideggerian concept of authenticity, Nenon treats the reader to a sprawling and highly instructive overview of the genesis of Husserl’s demand for a genuine, ethical existence. The argument of the general form ‘ x was previously thought to be original to Heidegger’s work, but I show that Husserl had already thought about x in the 19xxs’ is already fairly well known to phenomenology scholars. And while Nenon’s paper does rehearse a version of that argument, his approach is more nuanced, for it acknowledges the parallels between the two without losing sight of the major differences between them. Heidegger and Husserl part ways, Nenon writes, “not because one is interested in concrete experience and practical life and the other strictly in science and the theoretical domain, but over differences about the appropriate description of practical life and how to ground an authentic existence.” (215) The possibility of appropriate description and grounding hinge on Husserl’s rich and conceptually inventive notion of reason, which underlies and nourishes his later focus on questions of authentic existence. (218) The watershed moment in this development were the *Kaizo articles*, with their reflections blending intra- and intersubjective, ethical, and cultural aspects of experience together. Building on the ‘Fichte lectures’ and their concern for the blissful life of unified theory and practice, the *Kaizo articles* “document a fundamental shift towards the primacy of the practical” (220), as well as highlight the importance of personal freedom and responsibility, especially in light of constant background processes of communalization. “Becoming an authentic subject for Husserl, then, involves critical reflection on the sedimented beliefs, values, and patterns of action that one has

not only developed as an individual, but also inherited as a member of a community.” (222)

The substantial and decisive difference between Heidegger and Husserl is that the latter understands this critical reflection as being essentially tethered to a “dedication to the ideals of reason” (224). This echoes the point made by Moran and many other authors represented in this volume, and is also a useful way of spelling out the contrast between the Husserl-specific brand of reason-driven ‘existentialism’ and the existentialisms of other philosophers. Take Heidegger as an example. His existential analysis of *Dasein* seems perfectly designed to disclose the radical lack of grounding of one’s existence which would later transform into the kind of radical freedom discussed by Sartre. That is an existentialism that theoretically undergirds and amplifies the anxiety- and nausea-inducing state of finding oneself condemned to make continuous self-shaping choices without having the luxury of a universal yardstick or guiding principle. Husserl’s existentialism is more reassuring, and ultimately beholden to the ideals of the Enlightenment, which is a point made palpable in Sophie Loidolt’s (“Is Husserl’s Later Ethics Existentialist? On the Primal Facticity of the Person and Husserl’s ‘Existentialist Rationalism’”) and Sonja Rinofner-Kreidl’s (“Husserl’s Concept of the Absolute Ought: Implications for Ethics and Value Theory”) contributions as well. For Heidegger, meaning is chosen. For Husserl, meaning is created, but not *ex nihilo*; its scaffolding is *found* in, and draws its validity from, universal reason. In the end, Nenon concludes, this means Husserl is intellectually closer to Kierkegaard than to Heidegger and the French philosophers in his wake who are typically associated with the moniker ‘existentialist’; this proximity is expressed in their pursuit of personal responsibility and commitment to their respective notions of the absolute. (224)

The thought-provoking suggestion of intellectual kinship between Kierkegaard and Husserl is explicitly taken up by Obsieger and, in a different and perhaps less central way, by Carlos Lobo (“A Phenomenological and Logical Clarification of Individual Existence”). In his nuanced and highly interesting discussion, Obsieger very successfully illustrates the inherent limitations and possible shortcomings of Husserl’s reason-driven understanding of authentic existence; at the same time, he demonstrates how Kierkegaard’s careful distinctions between the three fundamental modes of existence helpfully supplement some of Husserl’s less plausible claims regarding the authentic ethical life. Husserl’s reflections on what he calls the ‘non-ethical life’ are characterized by a very black-and-white, all-or-nothing approach. The problem with Husserl’s approach, as Obsieger presents it, is not so much that his ethics places unrealistically

high demands on individuals; rather, it is that those demands appear to be accompanied or supported by an untenable moral psychology. Husserl's notion of the ethical life – impressively multifaceted and rich, and seemingly encompassing virtue-driven, deontological, and consequentialist concerns – is sensitive to the complexities of human life, its contingencies and contradictions. It even accommodates something like moral luck, and acknowledges that ethical action might not always be possible, or might be possible only conditionally or partially. (The descriptive and theoretical relevance of this becomes obvious when considering something like the doctrine of double effect.) For Husserl, then, “the earnest striving for the good is more important than the amount of good actually achieved.” (242) This certainly sounds right, and further underlines that Husserl's ethics, though highlighting the importance of producing the good, cannot be reduced to a straightforward consequentialism, but rather entails both a strong sense of obligation and a substantive concept of virtuous character sustaining commitment to duties.

So far, so good. But here is a difficulty: by tying this understanding of the ethical life to a strong notion of universal reason, as Husserl apparently does, one seems to be committed to the claim that the reasons for this ethical life ideally ought to be as self-evident and transparent as universal reason supposedly is. This then trickles down to the level of moral psychology, i.e., to the motivation for living an ethical life: “For Husserl, human life as such possesses an ethical meaning and is commanded by ethical norms and values. A life that does *not* satisfy the ethical demands must thus be meaningless and worthless, and therefore no one can ultimately want to live it.” (229) A non-ethical life will be an unhappy life, then, and the only reason why anyone would live it would be because they fell prey to hedonistic weakness. No one can willingly and deliberately choose to live a life of vice, pleasure, or selfish interests. (230) What actually happens is that one loses sight of their life as a cohesive whole, and turns to the pursuit of momentary pleasures, thus fragmenting their existence and losing their sense of a unified self in the process. As a presumably universally valid description, this seems both wildly inaccurate and entirely unlikely to convince anyone who does not already share Husserl's very specific presuppositions. It is at this point that Obsieger suggests we look to Kierkegaard for more realistic – and more nuanced – descriptions of hedonistic existence. His discussion of Kierkegaard's notion of ‘the aesthetic life’ (232-38) is very helpful and well worth the read in this context. Ultimately, Husserl and Kierkegaard turn out to have a lot in common: both imbue their theories with a strong sense of duty, and both highlight the central importance of

faith – in reason and in God, respectively – for the choice to live an ethical life. Though one might wonder about the nature of that choice in Husserl, if it is true that he believed “that reason is sufficient to guide human life” (250); for, again, choosing against that life would be to choose unreasonably, but to what extent does one ever knowingly and deliberately *choose* irrationality? At the very least, the notion of ‘choice’ here seems to be weaker than usual.

Marco Cavallaro’s excellent paper (“I Want, Therefore I Can’: Husserl’s Phenomenology of Heroic Willing”) on heroic willing and practical irrationality throws considerable light on these issues and usefully expands on the modalities of willing under threat of impossibility or unrealizability. Both it and Jagna Brudzińska’s rich discussion (“Transcendental Anthropology and Existential Phenomenology of Happiness”) of the aims and scope of a phenomenology of happiness make it clear that existential phenomenology must proceed with particular sensitivity to the fragility, contingency, and communal embeddedness of the ethical projects we create for ourselves and others. But there is also a reverse side of existential vulnerability, expressed in the kind of profound self-assertion and self-constitution which is the result of existential choices Husserl has in mind. This is illuminatingly explored in Andrea Staiti’s paper (“Existential Choice: Husserl Meets Heller”). Among the many points Staiti makes, let me mention just one. The self-constitution that follows from existential choices is not to be understood as self-creation in the sense of adding of properties to the substance of personal identity. The choices in question are rather acts of self-disclosure: choosing oneself through choices is a process or an act of knowing oneself, and perhaps even of choosing – or rather *affirming* – one’s own destiny. (328) This Hellerian point echoes Husserl’s reflections on the nature of ethical commitment, which, if it is to rise above the level of moral naivety, ultimately must theoretically and reflectively engage with the very notion of ethical rapport with ourselves and others. (331-34) A truly ethical life is one lived with an eye out to universality, because “the immediate motivator of ethical agency ... is not the particular value that a single action is going to realize, but rather the general rule that I ought to act in such a way as to realize values.” (333) Because these choices cut so deep, they are, in a sense, plastic (“irreversible and irrevocable”, in Agnes Heller’s words); abandoning them amounts to a personal catastrophe, or, at the very least, prompts a radical personal transformation. It is these kinds of plastic choices, and the beliefs resulting from them, that sustain us and our relationships with others, for “being a good person is only possible to the extent that we take seriously the dimensions of value that speak to us and respond to them with our commitments.”

(342) There is perhaps – both in Husserl and Heller – an element of grandeur in these claims, and the worry might be that that grandeur is unwarranted or veering into pathos. But if there is one thing that must have become apparent to the reader of this volume, it is that existential phenomenology aims for more than mere description; whether *all* people truly act and live this way *all* the time is important, but not decisive. The point rather seems to be that they – under the ideal conditions of realized and reflectively acknowledged universal reason – ought to live their lives in this way. Existential phenomenology is suffused with normative potential, which brings it one step closer to its task of providing a civil service to humanity.

I have focused mostly on the general framing of the idea of an ‘existential Husserl’, and have paid special attention to some of the ways the authors in this volume let this idea play out in the ethical domain. This will arguably be the most interesting part to non-phenomenologists or phenomenologists not focusing on Husserl. But these brief remarks do not come close to exhausting all the riches of this valuable collection. Apart from other papers with an explicit focus on issues of values and ethics (including Nicolas de Warren’s “Mag die Welt eine Hölle sein’: Husserl’s Existentialist Ethics” and Heffernan’s “The Development of Husserl’s Categorical Imperative: From Universal Ethical Legislation to Individual Existential Exhortation”), the volume contains numerous discussions of theoretical issues big and small, such as the nature of evidence in phenomenology, problems of individuation and abstraction, constitution, the phenomenological concept of the world, etc. (for example, in James Mensch’s “Birth, Death, and Sleep: Limit Problems and the Paradox of Phenomenology”, Rosemary R.P. Lerner’s “Revisiting Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology of the Ego: Existence and Praxis”, and Rochus Sowa’s “The Existential Situatedness of the Transcendental Subject”), and Husserl specialists will find vast quantities of interesting and inspiring material here. Having said that, it is worth pointing out that this collection is geared primarily toward philosophers who are already used to plumbing the depths of Husserl’s phenomenology. This, of course, cannot be a slight on this volume, as it delivers exactly what its title and subtitle promise. But one wonders whether a bit more engagement with contemporary developments in fields such as virtue ethics, moral psychology, or philosophy of reasons and rationality, wouldn’t have opened up more paths for productive communication with fields sorely in need of phenomenological analysis.

But no single edited volume can do everything, and what this volume does do, it does very well. It avoids some pitfalls entirely (this is a book with a clear focus on Husserl’s existential

phenomenology, and not a collection of surface-level comparisons between Husserl and other thinkers more typically associated with existential(ist) philosophies), and it cuts some typical problems down to a bare minimum (such as repetitive passages or entire chapters, which are often found in similar thematic collections). This is a welcome addition to the scholarship, and an excellent demonstration of the ongoing relevance of the Husserlian philosophical project.

List of references

Embree, L. (1993). Foreword. In R. Bernet, I. Kern, and E. Marbach: *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, ix-xv.