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# The Earth and Pregiveness in Transcendental Phenomenology

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## Abstract

The doctrine of the pregiveness of the world features prominently in Husserl's numerous phenomenological analyses and descriptions of the role the world plays in our experience. Properly evaluating its function within the overall system of transcendental phenomenology is, however, by no means a straightforward task, as evidenced by many manuscripts from the 1930s. These detail various epistemological and metaphysical difficulties and potential paradoxes encumbering the notion of the pre-given world. This paper contends that some of these difficulties can be alleviated by revisiting Husserl's late concept of the earth and, more specifically, disclosing its transcendental function in the constitution of pregiveness. To test this claim, I turn to Husserl's 1931 manuscript describing the paradox of "the originary acquisition of the world." I argue that the paradox is dissolved by introducing the transcendental-phenomenological concept of the earth.

## Keywords

pregiveness – phenomenology – world – paradox – ontology – Edmund Husserl

## 1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to sketch out a transcendental-phenomenological concept of the earth, and situate it within the broader context of Husserl's late work on the concept of the world. I will argue that it can serve as the lynchpin of a phenomenologically interesting and plausible conception of the pre-given world. The doctrine of the pregiveness of the world plays an important role in

Husserl's phenomenology. However, it is also the source of some serious theoretical difficulties. It is unclear whether it should be understood as making solely epistemological, or metaphysical claims, or perhaps both. Most notably, it is not at all obvious how it is to be reconciled, nor whether it is at all consistent, with the central phenomenological concept of the transcendental ego. An illustrative example of some of these difficulties is to be found in Husserl's discussion of what he refers to as the "paradox of the originary acquisition of the world." While Husserl does offer a provisional solution to the puzzle it presents us with, he quickly comes to regard the answer he proposes as inadequate. I will argue that the paradox could be dissolved with the introduction of a transcendental concept of the earth.

This claim is in need of further qualification. Does talk of dissolving a paradox not imply that it was never a paradox to begin with, but rather a problem that could be either solved or explained away by the right shift in perspective or vocabulary, or by a change in methodology? The dissolution of the above-mentioned paradox, as hinted at here, hinges on a re-evaluation of phenomenology's relation to metaphysics and to its own metaphysical commitments. Such a wide-ranging re-evaluation is clearly far beyond the scope of this paper. However, showing why it might be beneficial is a necessary first step, and one that can be done in a much more localized manner. For that reason, the present paper contents itself with explicating how a certain *aporia* grows out of Husserl's discussion of the world. The tentative sketch of a solution offered toward the end, while clearly far from being fully developed, will hopefully convey some of the sense of this reimagined relation of transcendental phenomenology to the world and to the earth.

In what follows, I will first briefly discuss some implications of the methodological decision to focus on the world as a starting point for phenomenology. This general overview will serve as a springboard for further discussion of the basic phenomenological characteristics of the transcendental earth, before showing, finally, how it might defuse the theoretical issues plaguing the "originary acquisition of the world."

## 2 Approaches to the World as a Transcendental-Phenomenological Concept

The complex development of Husserl's thought, as well as its watershed moment, the so-called transcendental turn, have been well documented and abundantly discussed in the literature. One of the most pervasive ways of discerning various thematic and methodological stances of Husserl's post-turn

phenomenology has been via the tripartite division discussed by Iso Kern.<sup>1</sup> Taking Husserl's own writings and Rudolf Boehm's commentary<sup>2</sup> as a starting point, Kern distinguishes between three general paths that lead to the transcendental reduction, and therefore to transcendental phenomenology: the Cartesian, the intentional-psychological, and, finally, the ontological path. Importantly, Kern argues that the third, ontological path essentially entails a critique of the positive sciences as well. This allows him to trace the development of the ontological approach to transcendental phenomenology throughout Husserl's phenomenological writings, from the *Logical Investigations* onwards. Of course, Kern acknowledges that Husserl's investigations don't always lend themselves to easy and clear-cut characterizations,<sup>3</sup> and the distinction between the three paths is therefore more of a guideline than a rule of interpretation. This is no place to dwell on his critical reconstruction of the three paths. However, it is important to note that, while he recognizes the formal limitations of this general distinction, as well as the inter-wovenness of the three paths, Kern contends that the ontological path is clearly superior to the other two, containing none of their deficiencies, and allowing instead for a breaking through the restrictions and the limits of the natural attitude.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the overly abstract and limited nature of intentional psychology and Cartesian apodicticity, the ontological approach aims at developing the radical critical reflection of transcendental phenomenology on the basis of a concrete, natural, historical *Weltleben*.<sup>5</sup> For Kern, as for Landgrebe,<sup>6</sup> this increased focus on the modes of givenness of various types of objectivities means a decisive distancing from Descartes on Husserl's part.

The discussion of the paths to transcendental phenomenology may initially appear to be primarily a methodological one, and thus peripheral to the topic that interests us here. Additionally, the question of Husserl's relation to Descartes is a notoriously thorny one, and its relevance is not at all immediately

1 Iso Kern, "Die drei Wege zur transzendental-phänomenologischen Reduktion in der Philosophie Edmund Husserls," *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 24/2 (1962): 303–49.

2 See *Hua* VIII: XXXIII ff.

3 Kern, 1962: 304.

4 *Ibid.*, 343.

5 *Ibid.*, 348.

6 In writing the paper discussed here, Kern was probably very much influenced by Landgrebe's "Husserl's Abschied vom Cartesianismus," published a year earlier. Cf. Ludwig Landgrebe, "Husserl's Abschied vom Cartesianismus," *Philosophische Rundschau* 9, Nr. 2/3 (1961), 133–77, translated by R.O. Elveton as "Husserl's Departure from Cartesianism," in *Edmund Husserl. Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers, Volume I: Circumscriptions: Classic Essays on Husserl's Phenomenology*, eds. R. Bernet, D. Welton, and G. Zavota, G. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 134–72.

obvious in the context of discussing the topic of pregivenness. However, as Kern and Landgrebe both argue, properly evaluating the role of Descartes in Husserl's late philosophy is not merely a historical exercise, but rather a way to transform our understanding of transcendental phenomenology itself.<sup>7</sup> In that respect, the discussion seems to be warranted. This seems to be especially true in the context of Husserl's later investigations into a phenomenologically satisfying concept of the world. Let's press this issue a bit further and turn briefly to John Drummond's criticism of the Landgrebe-Kern thesis regarding Husserl's abandonment of Cartesianism.

The thesis that Husserl's later philosophy marks a departure from Descartes faces two distinct problems. On the one hand, it is forced to contend with the fact that Husserl's work is peppered with repeated references to the Cartesian inspirations and inclinations behind phenomenology, and that Husserl never rescinded this view. (*Hua* I: 3f.; *Hua* II: 29f.; *Hua* III/1: 62f.; *Hua* VIII: 283). On the other hand, even if the majority of these references are to be found in Husserl's "middle-period" works, and hence may be said to predate the "later Husserl," the *Cartesian Meditations* certainly fall well within the later phase of his career, and therefore cannot be simply brushed aside. This is one of the reasons why Kern's thesis on the primacy of the ontological path, and the therein implied separation of the *Meditations* from the *Crisis*, cannot be seen as an accurate representation of Husserl's position.<sup>8</sup> Instead, Drummond argues that the two paths, rather than being somehow incompatible, are both in fact "individually necessary, but only *jointly* sufficient, to determine the sense of the phenomenological reduction."<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Drummond contends that only the Cartesian and the ontological way offer proper motivation for the transcendental reduction, with the intentional-psychological path being of a different order, serving as an exemplary *model* of the ontological path.<sup>10</sup> The two transcendental strands of Husserl's thought, according to Drummond, mirror the search for an absolute starting point for philosophy which, in order to function as such, must satisfy two conditions: it must be apodictically evident, and it must be absolutely ontologically prior, i.e., not relative to anything else. The

7 The importance of Kern and Landgrebe has been recognized in secondary literature. Cf. Donn Welton, *The Other Husserl* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 3, n. 4, 5, and 18, and especially chapter five. In his seminal study, Welton draws heavily on their work, and sees it as instrumental in challenging what he refers to as The Standard Interpretation of Husserl, and opening up a path for "the other Husserl."

8 John J. Drummond, "Husserl on the Ways to the Performance of the Reduction," *Man and World* 8, Issue 1 (1975): 47–69.

9 *Ibid.*, 48.

10 *Ibid.*, 64.

first condition is satisfied by the Cartesian, and the second by the ontological strand of thought. Only in combination do they yield an absolute, apodictic starting point for phenomenology, because “the way through ontology is incapable of establishing this apodicticity, just as the Cartesian way is incapable of establishing its precedence.”<sup>11</sup> On this interpretation, the absolute starting point is the transcendental subjectivity, to which all other constituted objectivities, including the pre-given world and intersubjectivity, are relative. Of course, this view forms the core of Husserl’s transcendental idealism.

The main difference between the Landgrebe-Kern approach and the Drummond interpretation, then, can be summed up as follows. The former sees the three different paths to the reduction as mirroring a thematic evolution of Husserl’s thought, while the latter understands the paths as compatible and necessary dimensions of a single transcendental project. Drummond’s interpretation is in many ways the mainstream interpretation, and we find a similar perspective in more recent scholarship as well. We thus read in de Warren that each of the three ways “opens converging angles on transcendental subjectivity as the field for Husserl’s searching phenomenological descriptions and their eidetic shaping into the science of transcendental phenomenology.”<sup>12</sup> The three dimensions of transcendental subjectivity thus disclosed are its foundational (Cartesian) and world- and self-constituting (Kantian) character, and the concreteness of experience (Brentanian) it encloses. Yet, de Warren is quick to point out that Husserl himself was acutely aware of the inherent danger of taking the first two aspects at their face value. The fact that transcendental subjectivity is foundational and world-constituting precisely does not mean that it is absolute in the sense of existing prior to the world and creating it *ex nihilo*, as it were. Rather, what is at play here is the particular Husserlian brand of concepts such as “absolute” and “constitution.” Here, “absolute” is more akin to “precondition” for constitution, whereas constitution itself is understood as the process through which, by way of subjective accomplishments, the world is revealed or disclosed as the essential correlate of subjectivity. Thus, the Husserlian concept of transcendental subjectivity unifies both classical senses of the notion of “transcendentality,” as precondition and as field of disclosing. “In this sense,” we read in de Warren, “absolute subjectivity, as the ‘movement,’ so to speak, of constitution, is ‘separate,’ or ‘distinct,’ from the world as constituted, yet it is not separate in the sense of

11 Ibid., 62.

12 Nicolas de Warren, *Husserl and the Promise of Time: Subjectivity in Transcendental Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 28.

exteriority or beyond.”<sup>13</sup> We thus arrive at one of the most recognizable and oft-analyzed points of reference of Husserl’s later philosophy—the so-called “paradox of human subjectivity.” For Husserl, the paradox is simultaneously the greatest difficulty of transcendental phenomenology, and its most important, and in fact necessary theoretical question. It can be cast in the form of the following question: how is it possible that the one and the same subjectivity functions both as subjectivity in the world as object, and as conscious subject for the world? Put in yet another way, how does one make sense of the claim that the world, in which we live as spatio-temporally localized empirical consciousnesses, “takes its ontic meaning entirely from our intentional life through a priori types of accomplishments”? (*Hua* VI: 184/181) We now see how the seemingly purely methodological question of different and proper ways to the transcendental reduction ties in with the central *metaphysical* question of transcendental phenomenology.<sup>14</sup> Simply positing a necessary, transcendental subject-object correlation doesn’t quite satisfy here, because the transcenden-

13 Ibid., 29.

14 For the purpose of this paper, I shall mean by “metaphysical” those cognitions or principles which in some way resist or escape legitimization through intuition. This is clearly a very loose definition, but often implied in phenomenological literature, particularly with respect to the question of realism vs. idealism. The question of the role and place of metaphysics in phenomenology has been amply discussed in the literature. While this is no place to revisit this debate, a few brief remarks are in order. The problem of evaluating Husserl’s stance towards metaphysics owes its difficulty to a number of factors. First, the concept of “metaphysics” itself is highly unclear—as Zahavi points out, there are several different meanings of it operating within the phenomenological tradition (Dan Zahavi, *Husserl’s Legacy. Phenomenology, Metaphysics, and Transcendental Philosophy* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017], 30ff.) Additionally, Husserl is somewhat ambiguous on the topic, famously insisting that his method doesn’t exclude metaphysical conclusions as such, but rather all sorts of “adventurous” and “speculative” metaphysics of old. (*Hua* I: 166) This ambiguity is then coupled with the fact that Husserl’s own thought changed and evolved over the years. Depending on how firmly one wishes to cling to his relatively early methodological device of bracketing and to the principle of all principles, one could argue, as David Carr has, that metaphysics has no place in phenomenology *qua* critical reflective analysis whatsoever. (David Carr, *The Paradox of Subjectivity—The Self in the Transcendental Tradition* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], chapters three and four.)

According to this reading, phenomenology is metaphysically neutral not only by necessity, but also by design, because it only reflects on our knowledge of the world, rather than producing it. Husserl’s later publications and research manuscripts are not easily squared with this view, however. For a highly illuminating overview of this topic, cf. László Tengelyi, *Welt und Unendlichkeit. Zum Problem phänomenologischer Metaphysik* (München: Verlag Karl Alber, 2015), esp. 171–228. Tengelyi frames the discussion of metaphysics in Husserl in terms of *Urtatsachen* and *Urfakta*, where the latter is understood as the all-constituting and all-conditioning consciousness. (209) Both the *Urtatsachen* and

tal relation between the two correlates is still left in need of clarification. How is phenomenology to escape this deadlock? A possible solution might be an account of how the constituting subject is itself constituted.<sup>15</sup> De Warren hints at this possibility with a poignant formulation: “Transcendental subjectivity is thus neither outside nor inside the world; it carries, or better, is the world in its constitutional unfolding.”<sup>16</sup>

It is not clear what an account of subjectivity as both constituted and constituting ought to entail, nor how one should proceed phenomenologically in order to attain such an account of double constitution. It would, however, necessarily have to contain a sketch of the grounds on which this primordial constitution takes place. The phenomenological notion of the world we are working our way up to here, I believe, might serve this purpose.

Let us briefly return to what we referred to as the Landgrebe-Kern thesis earlier. It could be argued that their claim regarding Husserl’s distancing from Descartes is subtly working towards the above-mentioned idea of double constitution. This becomes especially plausible when we clear up what is actually meant by the proposed act of distancing. Above everything else, it is understood as a transformation of the notion of “apodicticity.” Rather than being an absolute starting point, apodicticity is now understood as something to be strived for, the guiding idea behind the philosophical quest of radical consideration and self-critique. Put differently, absolute evidence is not seen as something given anymore, but as something given-as-goal.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Husserl’s self-avowed Cartesianism has been harmful to, and not representative of, the overall project of transcendental phenomenology. This is especially obvious in the case of the crucial concepts of “subject” and “world,” and their correlation. Descartes’s methodological doubt is founded on a global skepticism

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the *Urfakta* seem to be metaphysically potent concepts. The crucial question to answer then is if we ought to pin the status of the *Urfaktum* to a constituting consciousness.

15 Derrida’s reading of Husserl is particularly pertinent here. Although his *Voice and Phenomenon* is ostensibly a book about Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, it in fact contains the kernel of his understanding of, and relation to, transcendental phenomenology in general. This becomes especially clear as the book progresses. One of its most important passages comes in the form of a long footnote in Chapter 6, where he writes, as the conclusion of a long line of reasoning, the following: “The concept of *subjectivity* belongs *a priori* and *in general* to the order of the *constituted*. [...] There is no constituting subjectivity. And it is necessary to deconstruct all the way down to the concept of constitution.” (Jacques Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967], 94; translated by Leonard Lawlor as *Voice and Phenomenon* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011], 72.)

16 de Warren, 2009: 29.

17 Kern, 1962: 346.



which entails a skepticism regarding the existence of the world. The subject for Descartes accordingly serves as the only absolutely evident island in a sea of beings whose existence is rightly doubtful. In marked contrast to this, Husserl's phenomenology emphatically affirms the existence of the world, and the progressive turning to the ontological path towards transcendental phenomenology simply mirrors Husserl's continuous interest in securing as phenomenologically rich and viable a concept of the world as possible. This is why Kern can claim that drawing parallels between Descartes's methodological doubt and Husserl's reduction has been particularly harmful to phenomenology.<sup>18</sup> We see here how the world becomes a central concept for a proper understanding of transcendental phenomenology. A similar sentiment is found in Landgrebe as well, who characterizes Husserl's transcendental subjectivity as "[t]he indissoluble correlation of world-constituting achievement and what is achieved within it, which can no longer be designated as 'subjectivity' in the traditional sense." We read further that "[t]he presentation of this correlation is actually that great task of phenomenological analysis which can be achieved by the reductive method," and that "herein lies the 'field' of phenomenological analysis."<sup>19</sup>

Transcendental phenomenology, then, entails a radically new conception of subjectivity, one which can only be properly grasped via an analysis of its correlation with the world, it being understood here as "the result, constantly changing throughout the history of man, of constitution as an interpretation, an expounding of something which, before and apart from this expounding, is nameless and unspeakable."<sup>20</sup> The idea that transcendental constitution is actually *interpretation* of something nameless, a letting-speak of something unspeakable, is immensely powerful, because it introduces a metaphysical claim into the crucial concept of constitution. The claim could be summed up as follows: whatever the transcendental subject of phenomenology may be, it presupposes an *ur-transcendental element* of pre-interpretation world that serves as the grounds for the subject's transcendental accomplishments. Phenomenology thus becomes, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, a putting of questions to that which does not speak, or a "reconquest of brute or wild being" [*reconquête de l'être brut ou sauvage*].<sup>21</sup> The ability to follow phenom-

18 Ibid., 344.

19 Landgrebe, 1961: 174/169–70. In this and all following instances throughout this paper, the first number refers to the original pagination, and the second to the English translation.

20 Ibid.

21 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1964), 136–7; translated by Alphonso Lingis as *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 102.



enology in this direction is the major strength of the Landgrebe-Kern reading. In contrast, while Drummond's interpretative intervention might be historically more faithful to the letter of Husserl, it seems to be blind to this new spirit of his later phenomenology. Let us now take a closer look at how the concept of the world might be modified accordingly.

### 3 The Transcendental Function of the Earth

The transformation of the notion of apodicticity necessitates a transformation of the transcendental method. If the new, open-ended, historically grounded ideal of apodicticity is to be pursued, the pure reflection of the Cartesian type must give way to an equally open-ended phenomenological procedure. This methodological difference in approach is captured by the distinction between historical reflection, *Besinnung*, and pure ego-reflection, *Ichreflexion*, a distinction conceptualized and featuring prominently in the *Crisis* and the surrounding texts. Here's how Husserl distinguishes between the two and introduces historical reflection in "Appendix XXVIII" to the *Crisis*, written in the summer of 1935:

Here we can also say more simply and, at the same time, in preliminary generalizing way: The reflection in question is a particular case of that self-reflection in which man as a person seeks to reflect upon the ultimate sense of his existence [*Dasein*]. We must distinguish between a broader and a narrower concept of self-reflection [*Selbstbesinnung*]: pure ego-reflection [*Ichreflexion*] and reflection upon the whole life of the ego as ego, and reflection [*Besinnung*] in the pregnant sense of inquiring back into the sense or teleological essence of the ego.

*HUA* VI: 510–11 n.1/392 n.

To be sure, this is Husserl painting with a very wide brush, and the distinction he is making here may not be entirely clear and unambiguous. However, there are two significant things to take notice of in this quotation. First, the reference to questions of the "ultimate sense of a person's existence" implies that Husserl "understands *Besinnung* ... as a kind of existential meditation."<sup>22</sup> This implies an inherent temporality and historicity both of the objects of reflective investigations, and of the investigation itself. This historical dimension of

22 Dermot Moran, *Husserl's Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 49.

constitution is, as is well known, one of the themes of genetic phenomenology, and seems to drastically modify the ideal of phenomenology as “first philosophy.” The second important aspect of the passage above is the reference to the method of “questioning back” [*Rückfragen*], which carries with it the image of an unfolding, or of an uncovering of historically sedimented layers of sense-formations. Importantly, this investigative process of working-back opens phenomenology to a possibility that wasn’t present in the Cartesian approach. It is the possibility of uncovering sense-formations which are constituted by subjectivity only in a limited and modified sense, namely, constituted as *pre-given*, rather than given directly. Here is how Steinbock presents this important modification:

The process of questioning back displaces the emphasis in phenomenology from an inquiry into *modes of givenness*, which assumes there can be a simple starting point, to an inquiry into *modes of pre-givenness*. The use of the expression ‘pre-givenness,’ especially in relation to the notion of lifeworld, is significant because it reflects an awareness, implicit or explicit, that the world is always already there, meaningfully, when we reflectively or intuitively turn toward it.<sup>23</sup>

These are sense-formations which feature as pre-given at the transcendental level, and as liminal phenomena at the level of concrete experience. The world is exemplary of this type of liminal and pre-given phenomena. In other words, the regressive method of questioning back enables us to reach, among other things, the bottom level of constitution, i.e. the world that we take for granted as the grounds for all types of constitutive achievements and concrete, lived experiences. Furthermore, the line of arguments we’ve been following so far has led us to the conclusion that the pre-given world is not simply one phenomenon among many, but an ineluctable element of any phenomenological investigation of transcendental constitution. The world thus takes on a fundamental role in and for constitution, serving as a “Noah’s Ark,”<sup>24</sup> bearing

23 Anthony J. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond. Generative Phenomenology after Husserl* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 83.

24 This is a reference to the full descriptive title of Husserl’s 1934 text „*Umsturz der kopernikanischen Lehre in der gewöhnlichen weltanschaulichen Interpretation. Die Ur-Arche Erde bewegt sich nicht. Grundlegende Untersuchungen zum phänomenologischen Ursprung der Körperlichkeit der Räumlichkeit der Natur im ersten naturwissenschaftlichen Sinne. Alles notwendige Anfangsuntersuchungen.*“ Husserl uses the term “originary ark” to characterize unique experiential role of the earth, and Merleau-Ponty “rebrands” it as “Noah’s Ark.” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology. Including*

transcendental subjectivity along with its history. The world, understood here as the “primordial synthesis as a unity of mutually connected experiences,” a “ready-made ‘representation of the world,’ just as it is formed in apperceptive transference <of sense>, conceptual anticipations and projects” (UKL: 308/118), is explicitly different from the idealized world as presented by science. The difference is illuminated through a painstaking phenomenological questioning back, and leads to the realization that the role of the pre-given world is taken on by the earth, here understood as the “experiential ground for all bodies in the experiential genesis of our representation of the world.” (Ibid.) In this respect, the *Umsturz* is not only consistent with the themes pursued in the *Crisis* and its corresponding manuscripts, but also explicitly builds upon several groups of analyses written before 1934. These are manuscripts covering a wide range of concomitant topics such as the primordial historicity of the pre-given world, the horizontal nature of experience, habituality and familiar styles of givenness, etc. A particularly interesting discussion of these topics is found in a text from early 1933, i.e., written about a year before the *Umsturz*. There, in a whirlwind of rich analyses of the intricate relations between givenness and inner and outer horizons of experience, Husserl gives a Merleau-Ponty-sounding characterization of the general horizontality of experience. He refers to it as an “unconscious milieu” which encloses the specifically conscious stream of experience, i.e. serves as a horizon of latent, unconscious, yet still co-valid sense which belongs to, but also co-determines intuitively fulfilled sense (*Hua* XXXIX: 102). What this characterization contains, writes Husserl, are the grounds for a doctrine of the givenness of the world (Ibid., 104). The pre-given world of experience, as I wish to argue, takes the form of the earth, understood here as the experiential background without foreground.<sup>25</sup> This mode of givenness is part of, or belongs to the larger notion of world-as-life-world, yet is in a sense more basic than it, since it is, like the life-world, necessarily presupposed and directly lived in, but, unlike it, never directly intuited.

The *Umsturz* manuscript tries to capture and describe this intangible function of the earth. Keeping in mind our previous discussion of the paths to transcendental phenomenology, we may conclude that it is best read as belonging

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*Texts by Edmund Husserl*, eds. L. Lawlor & B. Bergo [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002], 68) Henceforward UKL: e.g. (UKL: 307/117), where the first page number refers to the German edition in Marvin Farber, ed., *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), 307–25, and the second page number to the revised English translation by Lawlor & Bergo in Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits*, 117–31.

25 Saulius Geniusas, *The Origins of the Horizon in Husserl's Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 187.

to the ontological strand of thinking within phenomenology. A pithy statement underscoring the general theme of Husserl's various investigations mentioned above is found in a text from December 1935, where he writes that "the truly fundamental ontology that precedes all ontologies is the ontology of the (not yet idealized) life-world." (*Hua* XXIX: 151) The *Umsturz* is, ostensibly, exemplary of such a fundamental-ontological *Besinnung*, in that it aims to describe "the things surrounding us precisely as our surroundings and not as 'Objective' nature, the way it is for natural science." (*Hua* IV: 183/192) We are now faced with a new methodological question, however. In light of Husserl's general downplaying of ontological investigations in favor of transcendental ones (*Hua* VI: §37, §51),<sup>26</sup> how are we to interpret the reflective analyses of this text? Are they a simply an ontological how-to manual for dismantling scientific idealizations, or do they have transcendental weight? The answer, as is so often the case with Husserl, is complex. As Steinbock points out, there are several layers that need to be distinguished here. There are, on the one hand, purely ontological considerations which, while necessary in their own right, take place outside the transcendental attitude, because they, by definition, have to be conducted before the *ἐποχή* has been performed. These do not interest us here anymore. The *transcendental* reflections on the world can take on two forms, on the other hand. They can take on the form of a classical Cartesian transcendental approach, wherein the life-world appears as a phenomenon, and the world as totality. Here, the lifeworld is "exposed as a mere component in concrete transcendental subjectivity."<sup>27</sup> In contradistinction to the Cartesian approach, a historically-regressive one would "describe the world in two coeval modalities, as world-horizon and as earth-ground."<sup>28</sup> This means abandoning the conception of world-as-object which is analyzed as a mere constituted correlate of my subjectivity, in much the same way we would analyze a chair, for example. Phenomenologically grasping the earth as ground means, first, recognizing that it resists the totalizing Cartesian perspective, that it "is not something we can ever fully 'stand above.'" Because "the earth-ground is not something that belongs to us" and "does not function constitutively as a 'resource' or 'possession,'" Steinbock concludes, "Husserl's analyses show that, on the contrary, it is to the earth-ground that we belong."<sup>29</sup> The arguments and the remarks we've been following so far point towards a transcendental conception of the earth which is, undoubtedly, very difficult to grasp from the

26 See Steinbock, 1995: 86–122 for a detailed exposition of this issue.

27 *Ibid.*, 98.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*, 121.

perspective of transcendental phenomenology. This is no longer the world or the lifeworld which has a transcendental function within the structure of absolute subjectivity. Rather, here we have the earth as *bearer* of transcendental-ity itself. Elsewhere, while discussing the complexities of the constitution of material nature and of the spiritual world, Husserl will talk of the “underlying basis of subjectivity,” an “underground of subjectivity” [*der Untergrund der Subjektivität*] or, even more tellingly, of a root soil in the obscure depths [*ein Wurzelboden da in dunklen Tiefen*]. This is the lowest level of subjectivity, “the place of the constitution of a world of appearances, or of appearing Objects, the world of the mechanical, the world of lifeless conformity to laws: all these being mere pre-data.” (*Hua* IV: 279/292) The references to the underground, the soil of subjectivity<sup>30</sup> are to be taken literally here: it is the transcendental element, the earth itself, which provides the basis on which it can then be constituted as pre-given. It maintains a specific double relation to the transcendental subjectivity. It provides it with the most general background milieu, thus being the source of greatest familiarity, while, simultaneously, being that which is, to borrow yet another Husserl’s phrase, “foreign to the ‘I.’” (*Hua Mat* VIII: 109) This conception of the earth-as-transcendental element, of course, breaks loose with the stringent apodicticity of the Cartesian approach, since it can only be attained through the regressive method of the ontological path. However, it does more than that—it lays the foundation for a distinctively realist interpretation of nature and subjectivity. This means an abandonment of transcendental idealism, but does not necessarily entail an abandonment of transcendental phenomenology. How might the transcendental perspective be preserved in such a position?

#### 4 Originary Acquisition of the World and the Transcendental Earth

The two competing transcendental interpretations are opposed not just in their methods and starting points, but in their results as well. Despite the tension between them, they are intermingled and occasionally run parallel in Husserl. This tension is particularly conspicuous in a text, written in October 1931, titled “Erfahrung als Handlung führt auf einen unendlichen Regress—Wie ist ursprüngliche Erwerbung der Welt möglich?”<sup>31</sup> This text describes yet another

30 Given the complex editing history of the research manuscripts comprising *Ideas II*, it is as yet impossible to know whether this passage, in this formulation, truly comes from Husserl’s pen. I would argue, however, that the point stands either way.

31 *Hua* XXXIX: no. 41, 438–49.

paradox of the world, namely, the paradox of “the originary acquisition of the world.” Let us analyze its structure and the motivation behind it, and see how and if our newly acquired transcendental conception of the earth might help dissolve the paradox.

The manuscript describing the paradox is part of a larger thematic block dealing with the notions of “world as acquisition” and “world-apperception.” These reflections are the focus of the longest section of a volume on the constitution of the pre-given world, containing “by far the most extensive and richest reflections by Husserl on topics related to the life-world published up until now.”<sup>32</sup> Part of what makes the volume so interesting is that the consequences of Husserl’s gradual shift towards the ontological path to transcendental phenomenology, taking place in the 1920s and especially in the 1930s, can be tracked across the writings collected there. We have seen that the shift from one ideal of apodicticity (as absolute starting point) to the other (as the regulative goal), i.e., the shift from the Cartesian to the ontological path, meant a progressive transformation and expansion of the sphere of experience that was to be phenomenologically described. Above everything else, it meant recognizing that the immanence of the cogito was a porous kind of immanence, owing a great deal of its structure to the transcendent historical world. Thus, the ego as starting point for phenomenology is made significantly more complex, and the boundaries between transcendental ego and empirical consciousness become somewhat blurred. While this may initially appear as a trademark insight of the “later” Husserl, it is in fact as early as *Ideas II* that the detailed analyses of the personalistic attitude, described here as foundational for all other attitudes, explicitly push phenomenology in this direction (*Hua* IV, Section Three, esp. §§49–53). Of course, this now leads to a complication. An expansion of the sphere of description means an expansion of the list of phenomena that need to be sorted out as either transcendently and structurally relevant or as bracketable. Husserl does not always seem to have a clear criterion for distinguishing between the two. The increasing focus on the ego-as-person means that the various ways of our practical dealing with the world and others, our handling of objects, the layers of habitualities governing our everyday experience, or, most generally put, the praxis permeating our personal lives, now have to be addressed in and by transcendental phenomenology. How is the practical dimension to be integrated into transcendental phenomenology? One appealing way to go would be to thin out the conception of the transcendental

32 Thomas Nenon, “Intersubjectivity, Interculturality, and Realities in Husserl’s Research Manuscripts on the Life-World (*Hua* XXXIX),” in *The Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity*, eds. R.T. Jensen, & D. Moran (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 143.

ego to the point where it would be understood as the empirical, practical ego. The transcendental ego would then be stripped of any apodictic or ontological priority, and thus of any pretense to self-grounding. Transcendental constitution would, as a consequence, have to be understood as a type of action, i.e. as practical. However, this is not a viable option for Husserl, as it would reduce phenomenology to an empirical science akin to psychology or anthropology.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, he needs to find a different way to integrate praxis with a thicker concept of transcendentality. He does this via a two-step strategy. Firstly, he construes the notion of action [*Handlung*] broadly enough so as to make it relevant for the transcendental perspective. Secondly, he then finds a way to construe the scope of action in such a way so as to prevent it from impinging on the concept of a self-grounding transcendental ego. The first point is a general, ontological one, whereas the second is the more specialized, Cartesian one. While Husserl is relatively successful on the first, he fails on the second. Thus, his description of the difficulties does not offer more than a diagnosis of a paradox, and this is something Husserl himself recognized, characterizing the problem itself as significant and adequate, but its presentation as unusable<sup>34</sup> (*Hua* XXXIX: 862). What is the paradox, then?

In accordance with the first point, Husserl operates with an unusually broad and inclusive conception of action—it encompasses not only things like making plans (*Hua* XXXIX: 439, n.1), but also ordinary perception. (*Hua* XXXIX: 440) This enables him to set forth a broad conception of experience, where each act is understood as a busying oneself with something [*Sich-Beschäftigen-mit*] “of the world” [*mit Weltlichem*], i.e. as an action in the broadest sense of the word. (*Hua* XXXIX: 438) Experience, in turn, is then understood as experience-as-action. This is an extraordinarily ambitious framework, for it fuses together

33 See Steven G. Crowell, “Transcendental Phenomenology and the Seductions of Naturalism: Subjectivity, Consciousness, and Meaning,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. D. Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) for an excellent exposition of these issues, and for an illuminating insight into the error he sees Husserl as committing, namely the unwarranted introduction of a “naturalistic” presupposition into his account of the transcendental ego. Crowell’s article is also one of the rare instances where the paradox of the originary acquisition of the world is treated in detail, and his treatment of it is highly interesting and instructive.

34 Geniusas seizes on the same point (2012: 217) and points out, correctly in my opinion, that this does not signify the limits of phenomenology, or of “genetic investigations at large”, as much as the limits of this particular manuscript. In his, admittedly very brief, discussion of the manuscript, he hints at the complex interplay of time-consciousness, association, objectivities and prominences (Ibid., 217f.) as one possible direction for the overcoming of the paradox. This, however, merely seems to shift the difficulty to a different place rather than solve it.



epistemological, ontological, and normative claims, undergirded by a philosophy of action. Let us try to unpack some of these claims.

Whether as an empirical or pure I, I always already “have” a pre-given world, populated with various beings. But this “having” is never a sterile having of beings in a vacuum. It is always a having in a world already “equipped” with sense. I never busy myself with beings as such, but with things like rocks, cows, or hammers. My experience is always tethered to a normative network or typology of familiarities and habitualities which provides me with the most general horizon within which my experiences happen. (*Hua* XXXIX: 443) (Recall here the “unconscious milieu,” a phrase coined by Husserl some two year later.) Indeed, we find a similar structure at play at both the subjective and the objective side of experience. An experience, or an object of experience, in order to be recognized as familiar and classed within this typology, must not only be “had,” but must also rest on a certain “fore-having” [*Vorhabe*]. This “word of many meanings” (*Hua* XXXIX: 439) binds action, normativity, and ontology together. If I busy myself with a piece of wood, I must have something in mind, I must *plan* or *intend* to do something with it. But I also have to have already recognized it *as a piece of wood with which I can busy myself* by whittling it, for example. Furthermore, this normative dimension rests on an even more primitive, ontological one: I must have already had this piece of wood *as a piece of wood*, a particular being with its characteristics and sense, rather than the characteristics and sense of, say, a stone. Thus, for Husserl, experience is captured by this *Habe-Vorhabe* schema, and is understood as constant movement from one “having” to another, mediated by clusters of “fore-havings.” Once an action, in the broadest sense of the word, results with a certain “having,” the latter then becomes an enduring acquisition, or a being [*bleibender Erwerb*]. This radical conception of action, unsurprisingly, leads Husserl to a radical conclusion: “Every action acquires being on the basis of that which already is. Is being, in general, not an acquisition?” (*Hua* XXXIX: 441)

There is no doubt that this conception of experience-as-action seem to be an appealing way to wed praxis with the transcendental ego, for it highlights the correlation between action and constitution. Crucially, this ontological approach also leads to an important insight regarding the ontology of the world, by expanding the notion of being to being-as-acquisition. Yet, transcendental phenomenology cannot content itself with this insight. As soon as the experiential structure of having/fore-having is paired up with the genetic-ontological explanation of constitution-as-action, we are faced with the problem of an infinite regress: everything new that I experience must already find itself within the horizon of the already known, must presuppose a general framework of

types and goals of knowledge. (*Hua* XXXIX: 443) This normative-epistemological regress has implications for ontology as well:

Every knowing must be preceded by another knowing; whatever existing thing I'm conscious of presupposes that I have already acquired a similar being. Can there be an originary acquisition? Can any thing [*Sache*], any thing [*Ding*] of the world, be given as first and (a) getting-to-know-as-first?

*HUA* XXXIX: 443

On Husserl's understanding of action and acquisition, the answer must be negative. It seems that every intentional act that has a certain worldly thing as object necessarily depends on either a) a prior knowledge of that very thing, or b) on prior knowledge of relevant and sufficiently similar other things. Therefore, this broad view of action which leads to a practical understanding of transcendental constitution, Husserl concludes, is inadmissible, on pain of unavoidable infinite regress. "That the ever new is to be formed *in infinitum* is not the difficulty here, but the fact that the new always presupposes that which is already long-known, that is, that which has been acquired earlier." (*Hua* XXXIX: 444) This seems to be enough to conclude that a *purely* ontological (methodologically speaking) approach to analyzing the being of the world cannot suffice, as the notion of transcendental constitution, if reduced to action in the usual sense, no matter how unusually broad, cannot account for the givenness of the world.

Husserl attempts to resolve the issue by supplementing the general ontological platform with a more specialized Cartesian element, thus providing the "thicker" sense of transcendental that was previously lacking.<sup>35</sup> What is needed is a richer notion of originary acquisition, one where concepts such as "thing" and "fore-having" no longer have their mundane sense, but rather come into being from the well of subjectivity—a veritable "originary institution of worldliness" [*Urstiftung der Weltlichkeit*] (*Hua* XXXIX: 445). It is not immediately clear how this is to be accomplished. To be sure, the sense of the notions of "acquisition," "thing," and "fore-having" will have to undergo a fundamental change. This change might be effected by a change in the very concept of action: acquiring, Husserl tells us, will still point to a certain type of action, a doing, but, crucially, this is no longer going to be a doing driven by willing or deliberation. Additionally, the object of this doing cannot be any existing thing, any being (*Hua* XXXIX: 445). Presumably, it is only the transcendental

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35 Again, "Cartesian" and "ontological" are to be understood here in the methodological sense discussed above.

ego that is capable of such pure action, devoid of any personalistic or mundane elements. It would seem that Husserl thus manages to regain and retain the ontological priority of the Cartesian transcendental ego, and hold on to a conception of constitution that is not modeled after mundane action.

But this is a hollow and unsatisfying solution to an engaging and important problem. It amounts to no more than pinning normative, epistemological, and ontological difficulties onto an unwarranted metaphysical assumption. For, how else to understand the notion of originary acquisition as doing without acting other than as a convenient metaphysical stipulation? From a strictly phenomenological point of view, it doesn't seem to have a leg to stand on, so to speak, for it ultimately takes recourse in metaphysical speculation. Now, there are at least three general approaches one could take to dismantling this difficulty. The first one, founded on accepting Husserl's analyses here as basically correct, would be to try to expand the notion of metaphysical speculation in phenomenology.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, this seems to have been the general direction Husserl was moving in at the time, considering his collaboration with Eugen Fink, and their work on a "constructive" phenomenology. While this approach ultimately has more, and more far-reaching, explanatory potential than the comparatively simple solution I will be proposing shortly, it also triggers a host of other difficult issues we cannot dwell on in this paper.

The other solution would be to reject the notion of experience-as-action Husserl proposes, and the therein implied broad conception of action. This is not an appealing option because it concedes too much, too quickly. For, the notion of experience-as-action does seem to capture something essential about the way we experience the world, namely, on the normative basis of our previous, *practical* experiences of it. Finally, the third option would be to swing the postulating pendulum the other way: instead of placing an absolute beginning on the side of the ego, place it on the side of something non-egological. One obvious candidate would be something like being, "substance," or matter. The problem with this is not that it would commit phenomenology to some or

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36 As Crowell points out, Husserl's vocabulary here is reminiscent of Fichte's *Tathandlung*. (Crowell, 2012: 32) On the whole, Crowell is no friend of the idea of introducing speculation into phenomenology. (See Steven G. Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning. Paths Toward Transcendental Phenomenology* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001], 244–63.) In (Crowell 2012), he offers a sketch of his own solution to the paradox of acquisition, which could be counted as another possible approach, in addition to the three I discuss above. It leads in the direction of a "transcendental naturalism," a position I'm very sympathetic to myself. A more detailed discussion of this approach would unfortunately far exceed the scope of this paper. I do hope to return to it in more detail in the future.

other type of materialism or naturalism, but that it would directly contradict the insight that being in general is acquisition (*Hua* XXXIX: 441), and thereby invalidate the analyses it was meant to undergird. Is there a way to make this approach work?

Husserl recognizes, correctly in my opinion, that the paradox of the acquisition of the world can only be dissolved with a metaphysical commitment. The strong Cartesian impulses of his philosophy prevent him, however, from placing that commitment on the side of ontology. My proposal is that we do just that. In order to be a phenomenologically satisfying *metaphysical* solution of the *ontological* kind,<sup>37</sup> the solution would have to encompass the following elements:

- a) pre-givenness; implying
- b) “being,” which is non-egological and not acquired, but which enables acquisition; i.e.
- c) non-thematic transcendental “being” serving as the precondition for, and the “space” of disclosing of, constitution, by virtue of supplying
- d) the minimal nexus of rules which provide the quasi-normative basis for all our future experience.

Is there anything in Husserl that would satisfy a-d? The transcendental earth seems to be a plausible candidate here. Let me first briefly address a possible objection. It might be argued that the notion of the transcendental earth simply isn't necessary—if one wishes to minimize the import of the Cartesian way, why not simply stop at the “world,” claim *it* fulfills the a-d conditions and leave it at that? Why introduce this additional conceptual baggage into phenomenology? This objection overlooks the fact that, for Husserl, the “world” can

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37 The sketch of a transcendental reinterpretation of the earth that follows is also a concession: the paradox of the originary acquisition of the world, as described by Husserl, *is* a difficulty in need of a solution, and that solution can only be, as it seems, metaphysical. Essentially, what is being proposed here is to substitute one metaphysical stipulation for another. The main advantage of the ontological avenue over the Cartesian one is that it avoids the highly contrived notion of pure, non-deliberate, proto-constitutive action which rests on an equally contrived notion of the transcendental ego. Yet, shifting the function of this “*Urfaktum*” onto the transcendental earth is certainly a speculative leap in itself. It might be preferable here, however, to speak of “metaphysical commitments” rather than of “speculation” for the simple historical reason that the latter term carries strong connotations of Fink's work with Husserl at the time. The present paper, for all its indebtedness to Fink's speculative contributions to phenomenology, proposes a distinctly non-Finkian reading of the transcendental earth. For an attempt to retain and develop non-Finkian notions of speculation and construction in phenomenology, cf., for example, Alexander Schnell, “Speculative Foundations of Phenomenology,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 45/3 (2012): 461–479.

never be reduced to a mere matter-of-fact stage *on top of which* constitution is then layered. On the contrary, it is always embedded in, and a product of, constitution. This alone would be enough to strip it of any claim to transcendentalism in the sense of a universal precondition for constitution (but not in the sense of a space of disclosure of the achievements of constitution, which is indeed the role it plays). Because the world is always a meaningful aggregate of sense, and the sense it has for us can vary, depending on a number of factors, it follows that it cannot be relied on to provide the absolutely minimal nexus of rules that is necessary for “kicking off” the process of acquisition. The earth, however, provides us with a universality which is singularly suited to serve as the precondition for all experience and constitution, “[f]or all the earth is for everyone the same earth—the same bodies rule over it, in it, above it.... For all of us, [...] the earth is the ground and not a body in the complete sense.” (UKL: 315/123–4). It is precisely this all-pervasive function of the “ground” that first enables us to constitute our world as pre-given, because it provides us with the first and most basic source and space of habitualities and expectations which are built into the having/fore-having structure regulating our experience.<sup>38</sup> Thus, it is the earth, in its transcendental function, that provides the starting point and the ultimate anchorage of experience and demonstration [*Ausweisung*], and not, as Husserl is prone to claim, the transcendental ego (UKL: 311/120).

To be sure, accepting this as a solution to the paradox of originary acquisition would lead us quite far from the *letter* of Husserl, though I’m convinced it wouldn’t be contradictory to the spirit of his philosophy, especially his philosophy of the 1930s. The notion of the transcendental earth would perhaps be the single most explicit point in which Husserl would approach a full-blown metaphysical realism, a doctrine he famously, and unfortunately, rejected as principally absurd (*Hua* v: 151). (Though one must always keep in mind Husserl’s highly specific understanding of terms such as “idealism” and “realism.”) This is a position he rejects in the *Umsturz* manuscript itself. But again, there seems to be somewhat of a gap between the spirit and the letter here:

Admittedly, Husserl seems at times to argue at odds with himself concerning the constitutive role of the earth. On one occasion, the ‘apodictic

38 For instance, it is hard to see how we could develop our kinaesthetic consciousness, or grasp object-constitution, without the sense of basic movement and part-whole relations framing our experience. The framework for this is precisely the earth itself. For the classical exposition of the topic of kinaesthetic consciousness, see Ulrich Claesges, *Edmund Husserls Theorie der Raumkonstitution* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964).

ego' leaps onto the page quite unannounced. (*Ursprung*, 323) But comparatively, the constitutive role of the earth, and the implications it has for refining, if not revising the constitutive role of 'subjectivity,' is by far the more prominent theme in these reflections on the earth-ground.<sup>39</sup>

Another manuscript, written in 1933 or 1934—i.e., between the one on the paradox of acquisition and the *Umsturz*—offers an interesting formulation closely tied to this. Again, we have the notion of experience tightly interwoven with that of action. Again, we have the difficulty that arises, and leads to impossibility and paradox. But this time, Husserl points in a different direction:

The existing world, as the human world, has always already become through us as purposeful subjects (but it constantly retains a core of nature as *last matter*, that hasn't been produced, that doesn't have a state of purposiveness as acquisition).

*HUA* XXXIX: 328

This non-egological core, "last matter," is undoubtedly a controversial topic for phenomenology. To borrow Steinbock's words, it has, at the very least, the potential to refine, if not outright revise, the nature and role of transcendental subjectivity in phenomenology. This means refining phenomenology itself. It perhaps also means pushing it toward a metaphysical realism not incommensurate with transcendental phenomenology.

The notion of the transcendental earth might at first appear to be rather narrow in scope. Indeed, in the only place where it is discussed at any length, Husserl makes no attempt to derive any particularly far-reaching metaphysical implications from it. Yet, we have caught a glimpse of how it could serve as a *metaphysical* solution to an important and difficult problem. The full implications of this solution seem to be worthy of further investigation.

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