

TELEOLOGY BEYOND METAPHYSICS:
HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE
HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF MODERNITY

Timo Miettinen (University of Helsinki)

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Abstract. This article examines the idea of historical teleology in the context of Husserlian phenomenology. Although Husserl derived this notion from the historical thinking of German idealism, the phenomenological concept of teleology differed radically from this current: instead of a deterministic idea signifying the inevitable progress of historical development, the phenomenological concept of teleology was to be understood as a fundamentally critical device of philosophical reflection – something that ought to liberate us from the yoke of the present moment. On the basis of these reformulations, the article defends the phenomenological idea of teleology as an inalienable tool of historical thinking.

Keywords. Husserl, teleology, generativity, modernity, history.

Throughout its history, the relationship of phenomenology to historical reflection has appeared ambiguous. On the one hand, phenomenology – with the help of its founding figures – gave a promise to return from the world-historical speculations of the 18th and 19th century to the phenomenon of lived historicity, that is, to the question *how* historical time is experienced within the life of the individual. On the other hand, phenomenology could not resist the temptation to critically reconsider some of the fundamental historical narratives that define our modern self-understanding – narratives that concerned the revolutionary effect of the natural sciences (Husserl), the birth of the subject (Heidegger), or, the inevitable triumph of the proletariat on the basis of dialectical materialism (Merleau-Ponty). In this regard, phenomenology could not simply accept what Jean-François Lyotard, in his 1979 work, called the *post-modern condition*: the idea according to which the “grand narratives” of the past and the faith in historical progress have lost their force and credibility.¹

Still, phenomenology, especially in its Husserlian currents, has often been targeted with the accusations according to which it has failed to acknowledge the fundamentally historical dimension of human existence, or, that it has failed to develop a sufficient conceptual framework for its critical examination. As already Theodor Adorno put it in his classic article on phenomenology and idealism, Husserl was, unquestionably, “the most static

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

thinker of his period”² who failed to acknowledge the basic historical conditions of human subjectivity. As Michel Foucault later put it, this neglecting was due to the Husserl’s unquestioned adherence to modern subjectivism. “One has to dispense with the constituent subject”, Foucault argued, “to get rid of the subject itself, that’s to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework.”³ This study could be accomplished not by phenomenology but Nietzschean *genealogy*: the investigation of different discourses embodying specific structures of power, which, rather than being at the subject’s disposal, constantly *produce* human subjectivity as well as its normative ideals.

In this article, I would like to answer this criticism by acknowledging a highly relevant, yet often neglected current of Husserl’s work: the phenomenology of teleology. This idea, which already dates back to Husserl’s early analyses on the structure of consciousness, reached its most articulate form in the “teleological-historical reflections” that Husserl carried out in his late work *Crisis* and its respective manuscripts. These reflections, I argue, were not to be conceived as yet another “path” to reduction but as a privileged approach to transcendental phenomenology in general.

While Husserl’s idea of teleology can be seen as a recurrent theme of his entire corpus, I believe it is fruitful to read it against the background of one of the dominant traditions of teleological thinking in modern philosophy: the tradition of German idealism, and the historical thinking characteristic of it. As I believe, it is possible to situate Husserl within the tradition of teleological universal history, to see him as both a *developer* and a *critic* of this tradition. This double role, I believe, is highlighted through Husserl’s radical rearticulation of the concept of teleology: instead implying a retrospective justification of the past in the name of providence, theodicy, or the “cunning of reason”, Husserl aimed at rearticulating the idea of teleology as a fundamentally *critical device of philosophical reflection*, as something that broadens the scope of philosophical self-responsibility. It is only on the basis of a teleological understanding of philosophy that we are able to free ourselves from that historicist preconception according to which all philosophical reflection remains ultimately a prisoner of its own time. Teleological reflection, rather than tying us into the great forces of history, aims at *liberation* and makes possible the emergence of something new.

1.

It is a characteristically modern experience that what we understand by history is not merely the past but *what is yet to come*. History no longer denotes a mere account dealing with past events but the opening up of a new temporal consciousness, which understands

² Theodor W. Adorno, “Husserl and the Problem of Idealism”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 37/1 (1940), 5–18, 7.

³ Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power” in Paul Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 51–75, 59.

the present moment on the basis of a twofold horizon of past and future. Above all, modernity is that period which, as Reinhart Koselleck emphasized, distinguishes between “experience” and “expectation”.⁴ What we understand by history can no longer be defined in terms of past facts but an eschatological expectation, which endows the present moment with its peculiar future horizon.

In the tradition of German philosophy, we are familiar with this distinction by the concepts of *Historie* and *Geschichte*. Whereas the former term retained the classical sense of the Greek *historia* – a “story” or a “study” of the past – it was exactly history in the sense of *Geschichte* that, in the course of the Enlightenment, became to denote the general structures, regularities and goals of cultural development. Following the Aristotelian dictum, this sense of history was called “teleological”: history is a narrative that is defined by a specific goal-directedness (Gr. *telos*), which can be analyzed on the basis of a specific method.

It was namely this type of study – “history a priori” (*Geschichte a priori*), as Kant called it⁵ – that became the central preoccupation for German idealism: it was the basic conviction of Kant, Fichte and Hegel that history should not consist of mere fact-oriented accounts of the past events, but it should assess their meaning and purpose in a more general context. Most importantly, this intention should also include a *normative element*: it should show how historical development is ultimately righteous and leads towards a better world.⁶ As Kant put it in his essay on the idea of universal history, because it is difficult to assume any kind of shared purpose in the “senseless course of human affairs”, the philosopher must set out to discover and articulate “a history with a definite natural plan for creatures who have no plan of their own.”⁷ While the progress of reason does not necessarily show itself in the common affairs of human beings, it must be discovered as the hidden genesis or logic of the world.

Despite the critical reactions, the teleological view of history is still an important part of our modern self-understanding. From Kant’s cosmopolitanism to Hegel’s philosophy of history, from Marxist views of “historical stages” to Fukuyama’s liberal-democratic capitalism, the historical thinking of modernity is still haunted by the idea of an end, which would bring historical progress to its completion. Although these thinkers had fairly different views on the dialectic of history, they all agreed on one basic presupposition: history is on the side of *reason* and *freedom*, and their union will ultimately be secured through societal-political development.

⁴ On the distinction between “space of experience” (*Erfahrungsraum*) and “horizon of expectation” (*Erwartungshorizont*), see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Translated by Keith Tribe. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 267–288.

⁵ On the possibility of “history a priori” in Kant, see *Gesammelte Schriften. Akademie-Ausgabe*. Edited by Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. Berlin: Karsten Worm, 1998. Band VII: 79–80, 108ff. (Hereafter Akad.A).

⁶ See especially the essays “Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht“ in Akad.A VIII: 15–32; and “Zum ewigen Frieden“ in Akad.A, Band VIII: 341–386.

⁷ Kant, Akad.-A, Band VIII: 18.

Although the concept of teleology (*Teleologie*) is often associated only with Husserl's later works, it was already given a central status in his early static analyses of consciousness. Here, teleology referred to the basic associative or synthetic structure of conscious life: to say that our conscious life is "teleologically oriented" simply means that we do not live through mere fleeting experiences but our conscious life aims at cohesion and concordance through concrete unities. For instance, individual perceptions or experiences have their *telos* in the constitution of complete objects such as tables or melodies.⁸ Accordingly, instead of a separate category of being, teleology was to be understood as the "form of all forms" (*Form aller Formen*), that is, as the general structure of all meaning-constitution that we are constantly living through.⁹

Already in *Ideas I* Husserl distinguished his own definition of teleology from all (Hegelian) interpretations referring to a kind of transcendent "theology" guiding the rational development of sense. "The ordering principle of the absolute must be found in the absolute itself", Husserl emphasized, and this absolute was nothing else than transcendental subjectivity.¹⁰ Being "teleological through and through", this subjectivity always embodies a certain constitutive history which delineates a horizon of possibilities for further development.¹¹

This concept of teleology was significantly broadened by the dimension of generativity (*Generativität*).¹² With generativity, Husserl basically denoted the temporal modes of meaning-constitution that take place in the interpersonal and intergenerational forms of co-existence – in different communities, cultures and all kinds of traditions. In this regard, the domain of generativity denoted nothing less than the "unity of historical development in its widest sense"¹³ – those structures of genetic development that constitute the unified character of traditionality and historicity in general. Against the Hegelian idea of universal history proceeding through the development of spirit, Husserl did not conceive generativity

⁸ Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*. Edited by S. Strasser. (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 12–13 (Hereafter Hual); Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie. Edited by Walter Biemel. (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1950), 213 (Hereafter HualII).

⁹ Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*. Texte aus dem Nachlass. Dritter Teil. 1929–35. Edited by Iso Kern. (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 380 (Hereafter HuaXV).

¹⁰ HualII: 121.

¹¹ Husserl, *Phänomenologische Psychologie*. Vorlesungen Sommersemester 1925. Edited by Walter Biemel. (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 254.

¹² Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie. Edited by Walter Biemel. (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 191–192 (Hereafter HuaVI). Cf. Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*. Ergänzungsband. Texte aus dem Nachlass 1934–1937. Edited by Reinhold N. Smid. (The Hague, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 37, 60ff. (Hereafter HuaXXIX).

¹³ HuaXXIX: 63.

primarily as a universal, formal principle of historical development. Instead, as in the case of individual consciousness, generativity was to be approached through its particular instantiations in individual traditions. As human subjects, we are constantly participating in several generative traditions, which, despite their variations (e.g. family, nation, civilization), all share the general structure of descending and evolving, that is, they are all something that are passed forward, sedimented, forgotten and reawakened. We ourselves, as Husserl puts it in his later works, are “the bearers” of teleology “who take part in carrying it out through our personal intentions.”¹⁴

It is perhaps easy to see why this idea of teleology did not entail a mere descriptive sense but also a normative potency. To say that our historical present is teleological means, first of all, that it is not absolute; it is a product of a certain generative development that endows the present moment with its unique character, its specific normativity.¹⁵ That we are beings, who have been handed down with a certain scientific worldview, particular social and political institutions, is not an ahistorical fact but a result of a certain historical process. In this respect, the teleological horizon was the fundamental premise of genuine social ethics, which does not take the present state of affairs merely as something given, but as a result of a particular historical development. This is also what Husserl means when in *Crisis*, he speaks of the “spell” (*Bann*) of present times¹⁶ – in order to break out from the presence-centeredness of the natural attitude, the seeming naturality of this presence must be challenged.

3.

Philosophy, however, had a somewhat more complex relation to its historicity. Especially in Husserl’s early analyses, philosophy seemed to fall outside teleological considerations because of its essentially ahistorical character: it deals with a domain of truth that is fundamentally unchangeable. As Husserl argued in his early text on philosophy as rigorous science, while the history of philosophy might work as an “inspiration” for philosophers of the present, it does not really provide any concrete assistance in the strenuous work of systematic philosophical reflections. “It is not through philosophies that we become philosophers”, Husserl wrote – and the attempts to arrive at the genuine sense of philosophy via historical reflections lead to nothing but “hopeless efforts”.¹⁷ Because every philosopher must take full responsibility of his or her own labor, the historicity of philosophy presents itself also as a hindrance, as a warehouse of false problems.

In the existing Husserl-scholarship, the historical and the non-historical accounts are most often discussed in terms of different “ways” or “paths” to phenomenology (or to

¹⁴ HuaVI: 71.

¹⁵ The cultural present, as Husserl puts it, “implies” (*impliziert*) within itself the whole of the cultural past. HuaVI: 379.

¹⁶ HuaVI: 59.

¹⁷ Husserl, *Aufsätze und Vorträge*. 1911–1921. Mit ergänzenden Texten. Edited by Thomas Nenon and Hans Rainer Sepp. (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 61.

reduction).¹⁸ As Iso Kern rightfully observes, Husserl's last works represent a transition from the Cartesian way to that of ontology (or the lifeworld), which was motivated by Husserl's need to tackle the critique on the implicit solipsism of the Cartesian way, as well as his insistence of providing a constitutive function to intersubjectivity. Without the ontological way, phenomenology seemed to be unable to answer questions concerning the objectivity of the world, but also the questions concerning its historical and cultural relativity. As Husserl put it in a late manuscript:

We will see that this lifeworld [...] is nothing but the historical world. From this, it becomes understandable that a completely systematic introduction into phenomenology begins and is to be carried through as a universal historical problem. If one introduces the *epoché* without the historical thematic, then the problem of the lifeworld, of universal history, remains unsolved. The introduction in *Ideas* does in fact retain its right, but I now consider the historical way [to reduction] to be more principal and systematic.¹⁹

Why, then, is the historical way more principal and systematic? Because it corresponds with the idea of philosophy as a *teleological notion*. That philosophy develops also as a historical process whose absolute sense is never given in its totality; that philosophy, too, denotes an open horizon of development that can never be exhausted by a single description; that the sense of philosophy lies in infinity – these characteristics point towards an idea of philosophy whose genuine sense can only be worked out through a teleological-historical reflection. “Philosophy,” wrote Husserl, “is nothing other than [rationalism] through and through.” But this rationalism, he argues, is “differentiated within itself according to the different stages of the movement of intention and fulfillment; it is *ratio* in the constant movement of self-elucidation (*Selbsterhellung*).”²⁰ The point of teleological reflection is exactly to uncover this historical logic, which forms the genuine “inner historicity” (*Innengeschichtlichkeit*) of philosophy.²¹ It is important to note here that the concept of teleology does not imply any kind of determinism but rather, it takes the function of a working hypothesis: history of philosophy must be interpreted *as if* it was a common task.

In Husserl's late manuscripts, we find this transition expressed in terms of novel relation to the idea of “presuppositions” (*Voraussetzungen*). As is well known, since the publication of *Logical Investigations* Husserl had considered the principle of presuppositionlessness (*Voraussetzungslosigkeit*) as the fundamental and necessary point of departure of pure phenomenology. What Husserl meant by this concept was basically the idea that all of our philosophical concepts must derive their legitimacy straight from the experience in which

¹⁸ See Iso Kern, “The Three Ways to the Transcendental Phenomenological Reduction in the Philosophy of Edmund Husserl” in Frederic Elliston et al. (eds.) *Husserl: Expositions and Appraisals*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 126–149, 126ff.

¹⁹ HuaXXIX: 426

²⁰ HuaVI: 273.

²¹ HuaXXIX: 417.

they are given, and that we should resist all metaphysical speculations concerning the true character of being and experience. Following the principle of principles, phenomenology was to be *undogmatic*: it was to turn its gaze away from not only the realist presuppositions of the natural attitude but also the traditionally sedimented problems of philosophy.

Here, Husserl's later works took on a somewhat different direction. While he still held on to the idea of phenomenological reduction as the "bracketing" of the natural attitude, he began to treat the "historical presuppositions" of philosophy as something that necessarily accompany the critical-reflexive position. "Without reflecting the totality of our preconceptions", Husserl wrote, "there is no philosophy, no science of the final and genuine responsibility."²² As Husserl had discovered through his reflections on Greek philosophy, both Plato and Aristotle conceived the birth of philosophy as something that is essentially tied with the reflexive stance towards the generative background of one's present situation. Plato's critique of myth as well as Aristotle's comparative account of previous thinkers pointed towards a "positive" account of historical presuppositions: we become philosophers not only by simply abstaining from the traditionally given conceptions, but by discovering their essential finitude and one-sidedness. Genuine progress in thinking is possible only against the background of "historical variation", the greatest amount of historical examples and their relations of foundation.

Indeed, it seems that in Husserl's later works, the early rigid division between *the historical* and *the systematic* begun to falter. As Husserl confirmed in a manuscript, to the over-all sense of transcendental phenomenology "belongs *the* intertwining (*Ineinander*) of historical investigations and the systematic investigations they [the historical] motivate, arranged from the start according to that peculiar sort of reflexivity through which alone the self-reflection of the philosopher can function."²³ Nobody begins at a clean slate: we become philosophers by working out our historical presuppositions.

4.

This idea makes understandable the claim Husserl makes in *Crisis*, namely, that the teleological reflections aim at *liberation* (*Befreiung*).²⁴ Instead of the "negative" idea of liberation of Husserl's earlier works – freedom *from* historical presuppositions – Husserl's later works pointed towards a "positive" concept of liberation through historical reflection. We become free in our thinking only by acquiring the greatest possible variety of different truths, approaches, and possible standpoints, which provide us with an insight into the "historical movement" of this world.²⁵ It is only through a comprehensive account of the past that one is able to surmount the compelling necessity of the present moment, namely, the idea that philosophical reflection – which also nurtures our political and social thinking

²² HuaXXIX: 415.

²³ HuaVI: 364.

²⁴ Cf. HuaVI: 60.

²⁵ HuaXXIX: 397.

– always remains tied to the present moment, to the present conceptuality and its presuppositions.

We can perhaps now observe why Husserl's idea of teleology distinguished itself, sharply and distinctively, from its idealist predecessor. For Kant and Hegel the teleological idea of culture was employed primarily in order to account for overarching rationality of historical development. Through the idea of "providence" and "cunning of reason" (*List der Vernunft*), both Kant and Hegel were able to show how even the seemingly irrational or unjust deeds and events contribute to the necessary development of spirit and consequently to the progress of human freedom. As Hegel emphasized in his lectures on world-history, "philosophy concerns itself only with the glory of the idea mirroring itself in the history of the world,"²⁶ so that ultimately, the "transcendental" ideal of spirit and the "empirical" history of the world are reconciled. "This is the true *Theodicy*," writes Hegel, "[...] that what has happened, and is happening every day, is not only not 'without God', but is essentially his work."²⁷ Here, it is exactly the metaphysical, universal teleology of the world that *justifies* the present moment as the indispensable result of spirit's progression.

For Husserl, however, the expansion of the phenomenological reduction to the domain of historicity implied a sharp distinction between empirical and ideal aspects of history. The teleological horizon of the past was not called upon in order to reconcile empirical history with the "transcendental" idea of world-historical teleology – to see the present as a result of a necessary development – but instead, the very notion of teleology was employed *in order to demand a creative transformation on the present state of affairs*. For Husserl, teleology became ultimately a *critical requisite* of thinking – both philosophical and societal – that does not merely confine itself to the present moment and its factual accomplishments but aims at showing their necessary finitude and incompleteness in regard to infinite horizons of ideas. It is only on the basis of teleology that the essential one-sidedness that characterizes our thinking can be turned into a productive idea – the idea that we can and ought to learn from the mistakes of the past with the help of the greatest possible variation of historical examples.

Teleological thinking implies, like phenomenology in general, a constant struggle against metaphysics, understood here as a commitment to "historical presuppositions" that concern inevitable providence or unavoidable decadence, historical optimism or pessimism. Teleological reflection is indispensable, because we are "not yet" at the end of history, or, to be more precise: because we constantly think we are.

Conclusion

The phenomenological concept of teleology, I conclude, resists all forms of historical determinism. That certain ideas necessitate the existence of others – that certain cultural

²⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by J. Sibree. Revised Edition. (New York: The Colonial Press, 1899), 457.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

objects can be created only on the basis of certain material and intellectual conditions – means that the development of culture adheres to a certain teleological pattern. It is exactly here that history has its own “a priori” – not in the sense of a pre-established harmony but as necessary relations of foundation, that can only be discovered on the basis of the present moment and thus articulated anew at each presence. As Husserl emphasizes, this narrative element in the historical “a priori” should not be understood as a pre-written “novel” (*Roman*) but as an “interpretation” or even a poetic act of creation (*Dichtung*).²⁸ The teleological sense of history can only be called upon to describe or make sense of a particular historical situation or a singular generative history, such as the triumph of naturalism and the crisis of sciences in Husserl’s own age. But as Aristotle claimed in the first book of *Poetics*, what makes poetry more philosophical than history is exactly that it does not satisfy itself with the particular but aims at the universal, so it is with the “poetics” of Husserl’s historical teleology: without the horizon of universality, all historical thinking remains susceptible to the historicist prejudice according to which the limits of truth are inscribed to the limits of presence.

Following the depiction of Gurnemanz in Wagner’s *Parsifal* – “*Du siehst mein Sohn, Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit*” – we can say that the objective of Husserl’s teleological-historical reflections was to open up a creative “space” of action through a thoughtful encounter with historical “time”. Like for Parsifal, for whom “the wound can be healed only spear that caused it”, the loss of teleology and progress in post-modernism can only be answered through a radical rearticulation of these notions.

²⁸ HuaXXIX: 47.