
Iaan Reynolds

ABSTRACTION AND SELF-ALIENATION IN MANNHEIM AND HUSSERL

Abstract: In this paper, I explore the approaches to methodological abstraction and self-alienation developed respectively in Karl Mannheim's early sociology of intellectuals and in Edmund Husserl's late transcendental phenomenology. In Mannheim's early and experimental works, the resistance to abstraction and alienation is located in a stratum of intellectuals able to meaningfully combine diverse cultural currents in a social process of cultivation (*Bildung*). In Husserl, to contrast, this resistance is grasped as a constant crisis in the methods of pursuing philosophical truth. While these approaches seem difficult to reconcile, I suggest in closing that this difficulty can be related to their shared emphasis on a theoretical response to the practical and historical reality of self-alienation.

Keywords: Mannheim, Husserl, sociology of knowledge, phenomenology, alienation, abstraction, reification, detachment, methodology.

This paper is an exploratory investigation into methodological abstraction and self-alienation. If we understand these two processes to underlie objectification, reification, detachment, and alienation, we can see the way in which this problem complex is at the core of many contemporary concerns. When experience itself is increasingly ironic and detached, how can we cultivate the possibility of another kind of experience, a dereifying form of life? What would a methodology of dis-alienation require? These questions become particularly urgent, if we grant self-alienation the power it has in many of its earliest expressions, recognizing how even common strategies for

resisting it still fall under its power.¹ In an apparent renaissance of earnestness and vulnerability—seemingly non-alienated manifestations of social life—, the prevailing mode of objectivity and self-objectification can be still traced beneath apparently authentic displays of self-expression. Since contemporary attempts to resist objectification and reification often do not affect the deeper self-distancing process underlying these phenomena, the modification of this process becomes an important philosophical theme in itself.

32 Here, I investigate the approaches to self-alienation found respectively in Karl Mannheim's early sociology of intellectuals and Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, two research programs viewing methodological alienation as a fundamental problem. In each case, the possibility of working critically under conditions of reification and self-alienation is located in the experience of intellectual work. I begin with an experimental essay composed on the cusp of Karl Mannheim's turn to the sociology of knowledge, titled the "Sociological Theory of Culture and Its Knowability (Conjunctive and Communicative Knowledge)" (1982 [1924]), in which intellectual work is understood as a form of cultivation (*Bildung*). Here, Mannheim specifically ties the reversal of detachment—de-reification or dis-alienation—to the intellectual function and its bearers in society. Understanding the "intellectual stratum" in terms of conjunctive and communicative knowledge furthers our ability to grasp the importance of this social group in Mannheim's notorious and often-misunderstood later works on the sociology of intellectuals. The intellectual function is central to the sociology of intellectuals, because it represents the possibility of working through reification without succumbing to its temptations. At the same time, the location of this function in a real sociological group raises other problems. What is distinctive in the intellectual's perspective? Is not a wealth of intellectual perspectives unable to synthesize a new relationship to being and thinking? Is there not a need to

1 An early statement of this problem can be found in Hegel's discussion of the unhappy consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* as the moment, in which self-consciousness transcends the opposition of pure abstraction and pure individuality only in order to find itself split between these two moments without any immediate possibility of transcending them (Hegel 1977 [1807], 126 ff.). The interplay of methodological abstraction and self-alienation is also developed by Marx in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1988 [1844]).

think methodically and fundamentally about the myriad potential directions for intellectual development, specifically with regard to their inner possibility?

In order to build on the account developed in the first section, I will turn in the second section to Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1970 [1938/1954]). This text is an attempt to outline a methodology that does not yield to the tendencies of abstraction and distance characterizing scientific thought. Taking the distancing function of methodology and turning it against thinking itself, Husserl sees phenomenological methodology as an ever-renewed attempt to cultivate a systematic form of philosophical reflection without succumbing to methodology's essential propensity to become, as methodology, superficial. In this way, I view Husserl's later phenomenology as a project productively addressing some of the problems raised by Mannheim's early sociology of intellectuals, but deepening the core antagonisms found there into the object of an infinite task. I close by noting the apparent incompatibility of Mannheim's and Husserl's solutions to methodological self-alienation, and suggest that this is related to their shared attempt to seek the solution to this problem in theoretical consciousness.

33

1. Mannheim's intellectuals and the "common stream of cultivation"

Early in its development, Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge experimentally blended sociology, political economy, and philosophies of experience (including phenomenology, *Lebensphilosophie*, and neo-Kantianism). We can begin to understand Mannheim's view of intellectual work and alienation when we look to an unpublished text written five years before *Ideologie und Utopie*, in his 1924 essay on conjunctive and communicative knowledge. Predating the discussion of the "relatively free-floating intelligentsia [relativ freischwebende Intelligenz]" that would be developed in his most famous text and in the years following it,² this posthumously-published investigation develops an account of intellectuals from a reflection on the philosophy of culture.

² See Mannheim 1936 [1929], 158, 161.

Beginning with a treatment of social experience and its role in forming the concepts found in a field such as sociology, Mannheim draws a distinction between two kinds of knowledge: conjunctive and communicative knowledge. Communicative knowledge is the kind that epistemology seeks to secure, with an agreement or correlation between the subject and object as its touchstone. It is “communicative,” because the ideal form of this knowledge would be communicable to all subjects, and valid for all objects.³ This form of knowledge underlies revolutionary breakthroughs in natural and social sciences, according to which increasing shares of nature and society are able to be operationally defined, quantified, and predicted. The scientific mode of thinking, facilitating these discoveries, subjects nature to a thoroughgoing mathematization, according to which qualitative experience is progressively understood to result from quantitative changes.

34 But the ideas and concepts of the natural-scientific worldview are limited in their scope. By pretending towards universality, the quantitative and calculative methodological vision masks the fact that, “from the very outset it had set about, in attempting to render the world calculable, to know only so much about the world as might be so rendered” (Mannheim 1982 [1924], 155). The dominance of mathematized nature is thus only an illusory dominance, and the “return to nature” represented in the modern rejection of scholasticism is a mere “self-deception” (ibid., 152). The ascendancy of quantitative over qualitative thinking is won at the temporary expense of other “ways of experiencing and knowing, arising out of an altogether different kind of relationship between subject and object” (ibid., 155). Instead of a steady and progressive forward march of quantitative empirical science, the history of thought is presented here as a conflict of various *Weltanschauungen*, in which the defeated force—in this case, qualitative knowledge—is never defeated once and for all, but remains a latent possibility:

Intellectual tendencies battle and conquer one another, but every possibility remains stored up for experience. It is always only a matter of

3 “Universal knowledge is general in both senses of the word: it is valid for many objects and many subjects.” (Mannheim 1982 [1924], 155.)

victory for the time being, and of the unfolding of one of the tendencies: the other one, the one defeated, does come back at a later form of development, if also in altered form. (Ibid., 152–153.)

The ascendancy of the calculative worldview is only possible on the basis of a “repressed” form of life and thought.⁴ The increasing prevalence of abstraction and calculation over all things human and inhuman—which is here aligned with Marx’s treatment of the commodity in the first volume of *Capital* and Lukács’s discussion of reification in the previous year’s *History and Class Consciousness*—thus does not extinguish the possibility of a noncalculative view of nature. Qualitative elements and methods of knowing are crushed by the “structural change in attitude toward things” designated as commodity fetishism or reification, but the old attitudes remain stored up for experience, and capable of redevelopment (ibid., 156).

Mannheim refers to the form of knowledge repressed by the scientific attitude as “conjunctive knowledge.” Conjunctive knowledge is not exhibited through the mathematical description and prediction of objects by a knowing subject, but through the immediate unity of the subject and the object. Mannheim first describes this form of knowledge with regard to a stone:

35

At the moment of touching or bumping up against a stone, for example, I form a unity with it, which then immediately splits up into a duality of the self and the *vis-à-vis*. But our duality is only possible on the ground of this existential contact and the unity which occurs in it. (Ibid., 187.)

In contrast to the universalizing tendency of communicative knowledge, conjunctive knowledge always begins from a partial perspective on nature. It works through a form of essential contact or “contagion” that precedes the splitting of the world into individual objects and subjects (ibid., 188). Mannheim describes contagion as a “kind of existential relatedness, a specific union with the object,” which we can observe in the phenomenon of style or the intuitive

⁴ “But before we turn our attention to the continued existence of these elements repressed by natural-scientific thinking, we must first elucidate the sociological function of the style of thought we have been treating.” (Ibid., 156.)

understanding of the alien other (ibid.). The existential contact between individuals in a community thus gives rise to conjunctive knowledge, which is inaccessible to those outside of this community, but which nevertheless has a distinctive and objective structure. Much of the remainder of Mannheim's text in the following sections describes the dynamics of "conjunctive communities," in an attempt to supplement a sociological perspective of objective social structures with a phenomenological account of the attitude of subjects:

As long as these two types of inquiry are carried on in isolation, and are not set into a broader framework, they remain individual specialized studies. They turn into a new type of philosophical regarding of the world, however, as soon as they are employed as parts of a striving for a totality to comprehend the world. (Ibid., 169.)

36 We can understand Mannheim's aim in this essay as a synthesis of social sciences that study "objective cultural formations," and phenomenological analyses that extend rationality to the subjective "factors which precede objectification and out of which objectification first emerges" (ibid.). The synthesis is ventured through renewed attention to the underlying vital (conjunctive) basis, from which objective social forms are generated, or what Mannheim calls the "contexture of life [Lebenszusammenhang]" in his 1930 "Introduction to Sociology" course (Mannheim 2001 [1930], 3). The objectifications of the mathematized natural sciences are accordingly related to the shared life of a stratum of society, in whose communal existence these ideas attained their initial provenance. The "will brought to the world" by the rising bourgeoisie thus systematizes its form of perception and thought the more thoroughly this stratum attains dominance over the society (Mannheim 1982 [1924], 157). From this perspective, the abstractness and detachment characterizing the natural-scientific worldview is understood as an initially conjunctive formation of a particular group, which, through the dialectical transformations of life and thought, becomes a possibility for all thought in general, irrespective of its conjunctive context.

The way, in which conjunctive knowledge is overtaken by communicative knowledge in the modern world, explains why the former is never fully

extinguishable. In the competition among forms of life and consciousness, earlier possibilities are never lost, but are merely suppressed and stored up for consciousness. The historical and contemporary prevalence of critiques of abstract and calculative rationality across various theoretical and political perspectives betrays the fact that conjunctive attachments—which technical and calculative knowledge always repress—do not have an ideal form, and are not strictly speaking capable of systematization: “While these modes of thinking were once in sole command, fashioning a unified world picture, they now form part of an under-current of our thinking and experience of the world: the thinking of everyday.” (Ibid., 264.) This allows us to make sense of the fact that, even today, the lament over alienation is not found in one part of the social order, but is articulated across otherwise starkly different sectors of the right and the left. The always-partial form of knowledge possessed by individuals as members in a living community mounts an incipient resistance to the quantitative knowledge structuring increasing parts of the social and cultural sphere, but cannot articulate itself into the decisive opposition expressed as a system, as this form of knowledge is unable to transcend the particular conjunctive attachments upon which it is grounded.

37

Mannheim turns, towards the end of the essay, to the possibility of resisting the tendency to abstraction implicit in the capitalist worldview. In one of his earliest treatments of the importance of intellectual work, he distinguishes the intellectual stratum—here described as the group producing “cultivated culture [Bildungskultur]”—by the fact that it is comprised of individuals from various conjunctive groups.⁵ The duality between conjunctive and communicative knowledge present in each individual⁶ is further developed by a group of intellectuals capable of taking this duality itself up into reflection: “the phenomenon we are calling ‘cultivated culture’ arises partly out of the

⁵ This is the way in which the treatment of the intellectuals found in this early essay is helpful for understanding Mannheim’s later theory of intellectuals. See Reynolds 2023, 139–140.

⁶ “If a layer of conjunctive knowing which is relatively unspoiled, even if flecked with scientific insights, remains present in us, and if a communicative layer is added to this quite soon, what results in practice is a duality in the ways in which individuals bear themselves in relation to concepts as well as to realities.” (Mannheim 1982 [1924], 265.)

widening of the community, but also from a mixing of social spheres” (ibid., 265). Due to its heterogenous nature, and its relative detachment from the conjunctive communities from which its members originate, the intellectual stratum names a group of people for whom self-alienation is a persistent possibility. Mannheim thus suggests that this type of community is potentially able to develop the necessary self-alienation of culture in a productive way. Thinkers in such a stratum are still just as conditioned by their conjunctive life, but they experience other kinds of conjunctive ties as well as other world-volitions (*Weltwollen*), allowing them to loosen these attachments. The community of intellectuals is thus a group capable of contextualizing and limiting the various world-volitions, consciously developing a polyphonic and dialectical “common stream of cultivation” (ibid., 267). The possibility of a sociology of culture synthesizing structural and experiential, sociological and phenomenological dimensions of life is thus predicated on an existential community bearing a multiplicity of attachments. Within this community, the ability arises—not on any one individual’s part, but within the community as such—of clarifying the overall composition of conjunctive and communicative knowledge through an intentional and systematic study of their orientation.

Here, however, we encounter a problem different from that typically found in Mannheim’s treatment of the intellectuals. It lies in the possibility of such a synthesis from out of a “common stream” of varied elements—many of them mutually antagonistic. How is the self-clarification meant to be attained in this sociology of culture guaranteed? Are there not overwhelming tendencies—already apparent to Mannheim, but perhaps more prominent now—towards the operationalization and quantification even of the humanities? From this perspective, is it sufficient to designate a sociological group as the standpoint, from which social reflexivity—or the “new philosophical regarding of the world” (ibid., 169)—can become possible, or is it necessary to further designate a methodological account of the inner process of such a “cultivation of culture”?

2. Detachment from detachment in Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology

It is from a similar set of problems that Husserl’s final unfinished work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, undertakes

its discussion of the method and aims of phenomenology. Here, too, the prevalence and dominance of a mathematized form of rationality is thematized with an eye to its limitations. Husserl understands the limitation of the natural scientific perspective to relate to its need to idealize nature. The perspective able to discern laws and correlations between natural objects is only able to do so by falsely taking these objects as “given”—thus adopting an uncritical perspective towards experience. Husserl writes:

Thus all the occasional (even “philosophical”) reflections which go from technical [scientific] work back to its true meaning always stop at idealized nature; they do not carry out the reflection radically, going back to the ultimate purpose which the new science, together with the geometry which is inseparable from it, growing out of prescientific life and its surrounding world, was from the beginning supposed to serve: a purposes which necessary lay *in* this prescientific life and was related to its life-world. (Husserl 1970 [1938/1954], §9, 50.)

39

As in Mannheim’s account of conjunctive and communicative knowledge, the technical methods of the sciences are understood to arise from out of the needs and volitions of a broader life-context. In the same way that communicative knowledge’s origin in a conjunctive community becomes obscured by its apparent universalizability, the philosophical and scientific worldview outlined here becomes so ubiquitous as to forget its original orientation in this context. Problematically, the mathematical methods of the natural sciences presuppose the being of the world, and its being in such and such a way, without establishing this world’s distinctive possibility in itself.⁷ In this sense, the abstractions of science rest on prescientific forms of experience. Since the work of abstraction requires taking distance from prescientific life,

⁷ “Objective science [...] asks questions only on the ground of this world’s existing in advance through prescientific life. Like all praxis, objective science presupposes the being of this world, but it sets itself the task of transposing knowledge which is imperfect and prescientific in respect of scope and constancy into perfect knowledge—in accord with an idea of a correlative which is, to be sure, infinitely distant [...]” (Husserl 1970 [1938/1954], §28, 110–111.)

however, these sciences tend to cover over their own starting point, rendering it utterly inarticulable in their own terms.

Through a historical account, Husserl seeks to re-vitalize the originary impulse, the *meaning*, underlying this philosophical and scientific worldview. This work of meaning-formation (*Sinnbildung*) must move back and forth, between the methods and aims of scientific understanding in the present, and those historical events, through which its sense was initially realized.⁸ The fidelity to intuition required by this method of “historical critique” is thus unable to express itself in purely scientific terms (*ibid.*, §9, 58). Bringing “original intuition to the fore—that is, the pre- and extrascientific life-world, which contains within itself all actual life, including the scientific life of thought, and nourishes it as the source of all technical construction of meaning—[...]” (*ibid.*, 59), requires an abdication of technical or operational scientific language, and a commitment to the naïve sense of everyday life.

40 On the one hand, then, as far as our problem complex of methodological abstraction and self-alienation is concerned, Husserl points out that the methods of the natural sciences, including the sequence leading from the origin of geometry, through various developments, finally to the system of universal physical laws expressed as mathematical relationships, take their start from a form of distantiation. The abstraction, upon which geometry rests, necessarily sets aside the particular qualities of any of the bodies it studies, understanding them only according to the ideal constructions of shape, magnitude, number, etc. An entire ideal world can be built on the basis of such a separation—one which is understood to map at every point with the world of experience. But the division making the construction of this ideal world possible—which is that between the perceiver and the perceived, or between the body as a physical object and the body as the lived site of perception (*ibid.*,

8 In an illuminating reading that understands Husserlian phenomenology as critique “through and through,” Andreea Smaranda Aldea describes the “zig-zag pattern” between present scientific consciousness and its historical genesis as a “critique of the present,” which is “oriented toward *clarifying* precisely what binds and conditions us” (Aldea 2022, 57). Even on a superficial level, this conception of phenomenological methodology has a striking consonance with Mannheim’s reflections on the conditioning of consciousness in the 1936 English introduction of *Ideology and Utopia* (Mannheim 1936).

§9, 50)⁹—can in no way be indefinitely maintained, since the sense taken by this division is hidden from view in the course of the ensuing investigations, with their endless stream of results.

On the other hand, however, phenomenology repeats the distancing gesture of the natural sciences, creating a space between the methodologies of the latter and its own, developing and thematizing this space as a philosophical problem. The phenomenological reduction, which sets aside both the scientific and prescientific perspectives to stay with the achievement of perception itself, can in this way be understood as a *detachment from detachment*. The separation between *epistemē* and *doxa*, initially adopted by scientific theory in opposition to everyday experience and opinion, is thus radically extended to take distance from every instantiation of the natural attitude, including its methodological elaboration in science. This kind of separation is unavoidable, however, as it is the condition for the possibility of theoretical knowledge itself. So, while Husserl is critical of certain ways, in which scientific thinking distances itself from the prescientific attitude, the problem he identifies in these modes of thinking lies more in the specific kind of separation they effect than in its status as a separation. This is the sense, in which Husserl describes the intention to return to the naïveté of life, “in a reflection which rises above this naïveté,” by transcending the “philosophical naïveté” of objective natural science (*ibid.*, §9, 59). Phenomenological methodology strives to work through its simultaneous participation in and distance from naïveté through a historical-critical apprehension of this self-alienation.

41

The way in which phenomenological methodology sets aside the natural attitude causes a well-known set of problems related to the ability of such a distancing gesture to meaningfully sustain itself. In his discussion of Descartes, Husserl thus shows how an early and radical separation of *epistemē* from *doxa* nevertheless reverted to a common-sense belief in the objectivity of the world:

We can see how difficult it is to maintain and use such an unheard-of change of attitude as that of the radical and universal *epochē*. Right away “natural common sense,” some aspect of the naïve validity of the world,

9 On these two irreconcilable senses of the body, see also: Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964].

breaks through at some point and adulterates the new kind of thinking made possible and necessary in the *epochē*. [...] This nearly ineradicable naïveté is also responsible for the fact that for centuries almost no one took exception to the “obviousness” of the possibility of inferences from the ego and its cognitive life to an “outside,” and no one actually raised the question of whether, in respect to this egological sphere of being, an “outside” can have any meaning at all—which of course turns the ego into a paradox, the greatest of all enigmas. (Ibid., §18, 80.)

42 Phenomenology is able to effect a distance from the methods of the natural sciences and the more encompassing natural attitude, but it is thus still subject to what Husserl calls the “tendency to superficialize itself in accord with technization” belonging “[t]o the essence of all method” (ibid., §9, 48). The perennial struggle against this tendency, against the encroachment of common sense and its scientific articulations, is the reason, because of which phenomenology must ever begin anew, viewing its task—a methodological and systematic attempt to think inner experience—as an infinite one. We can see here that transcendental phenomenology develops the inner methodological possibility of an essential grasp of the lifeworld that Mannheim tied to external, sociological factors. The aim of this methodological work is a form of reflexive clarification:

[...] a transcendental philosophy is the more genuine, and better fulfills its vocation as philosophy, the more radical it is and, finally, that it comes to its actual and true existence, to its actual and true beginning, only when the philosopher has penetrated to a clear understanding of himself as the subjectivity functioning as primal source [...] (Ibid., §27, 99.)

What is also clear here is the way in which this vocation results in a *constant methodological crisis*, whose horizon is a mode of philosophical study never terminating in clarity and distinctness once and for all, but instead in a continually growing form of historical self-awareness.

3. Conclusion

We have seen the way in which two early twentieth-century projects conceive of the intellectual response to methodological abstraction and self-alienation—relating this response in Mannheim’s case to a concrete sociological stratum, and in Husserl’s to a constant crisis in methodology. Questions remain concerning the ability to unite these aspects under a single project. Is the critical historical view of phenomenology found in Husserl able to transcend a small group of intellectuals, and to become a generalized process of historical transformation? How is this inner possibility related to the intellectual stratum, either the one developed in Mannheim’s account, or in other treatments of intellectuals? In closing, we might recognize the apparent perplexity faced by the combination of these aspects to be related to their shared emphasis on the intellectual side of this response to abstraction and self-alienation, rather than the practical and historical side. This suggests that the treatments of the intellectual reaction to methodological abstraction and self-alienation found in these works might be productively brought into conversation with the philosophies of praxis developed in the same time period, for which dereification is not merely a matter of transformed theoretical consciousness, but a matter of knowing practical action.¹⁰

43

Bibliography

- Aldea, Andreea Smaranda. 2022. “Husserlian Phenomenology as Radical-Immanent Critique – Or How Phenomenology Imagines Itself.” In *Phenomenology as Critique*, ed. by A. S. Aldea, D. Carr, and S. Heinämaa, 56–79. London: Routledge.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1977 [1807]. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1970 [1938/1954]. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Trans. by D. Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

¹⁰ An example of a philosophical account, in which the resistance to methodological self-alienation can be found in the work of practical struggle, is Lukács ([1923] 1971). I touched upon this connection in Reynolds 2021a.

- Lukács, Georg. 1971 [1923]. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans. by R. Livingstone. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Mannheim, Karl. 1936 [1929]. *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. Trans. by L. Wirth and E. Shils. New York: Harvest Books.
- . 1982 [1924]. "A Sociological Theory of Culture and Its Knowability (Conjunctive and Communicative Knowledge)." Trans. by J. Shapiro and S. Weber NicholSEN. In *Structures of Thinking*, ed. by D. Kettler, V. Meja, and N. Stehr, 142–288. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- . 2001 [1930]. "An Introduction to Sociology." Trans. by D. Kettler and C. Loader. In *Sociology as Political Education*, ed. by D. Kettler and C. Loader, 1–78. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Marx, Karl. 1988 [1844]. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Trans. by M. Milligan. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1968 [1964]. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. by A. Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Reynolds, Iaan. 2021a. "Immediacy and Experience in Lukács' Theory of Reification." *Metodo: International Studies in Phenomenology and Philosophy* 9 (2): 89–119.
- . 2023. "The Sociologist of Knowledge in the Positivism Dispute." *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 24 (1): 133–155.