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Alexander Schnell's Project for a Constructive Phenomenology

Alexander Schnell

Hinaus: Entwürfe zu einer phänomenologischen Metaphysik und Anthropologie.

Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011. 155 pp.

What is phenomenology? Since Husserl this has never ceased to be a live question for the phenomenological tradition. In providing an answer (as Husserl and so many others have done), the philosopher defines and thus marks out the limits of phenomenology. And yet almost from the beginning phenomenological research has ventured beyond those limits previously drawn for it. If one still wishes to remain within phenomenology, this requires the marking out of new limits and the formulation of a new answer to the question.

In this book Alexander Schnell does precisely that: he gives a bold new answer that goes far beyond Husserl's explicit conception of what phenomenology is. According to Schnell, an exclusively *descriptive* phenomenology is not enough: phenomenology must also be *constructive*. Schnell argues that this methodological revision is necessary for two reasons. First, certain phenomena (even in Husserl's own work) are inaccessible to descriptive analysis, and can be accessed only through phenomenological construction. Second and more importantly, descriptive phenomenology is incapable of providing the ultimate grounding or justification of knowledge demanded by Husserl himself; a constructive phenomenology can provide this ultimate grounding.

Schnell does not intend to provide a full account of constructive phenomenology in this book. Instead he sketches the landscape and lays the groundwork for a more systematic treatment—in part by drawing on constructive elements in Husserl and Heidegger as well as the work of contemporary phenomenologists. (The word *Entwürfe* in the title—in one of its senses—refers to the work's preparatory character.) Schnell thus outlines an ambitious project for constructive phenomenology that promises (1) to provide an ultimate justification for knowledge and (2) to ground a phenomenological metaphysics and anthropology, each of which is centered on the "image" (*Bild*). Insofar as Schnell fills in the details of this outline, his analysis is careful, provocative, and filled with insight. Because of the preparatory character of the work, however,

many of the claims are not developed enough to judge whether the project will ultimately be successful. In particular, the claim that phenomenological construction can provide an ultimate grounding for knowledge requires fuller treatment.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Schnell's book is the depth of his knowledge of the phenomenological tradition (in both German and French) as well as German Idealism. (Though German by birth, Schnell was educated in France and is currently a professor at the Sorbonne. He has published prolifically in French, but this is his first book in German.) Schnell finds "constructive elements" in close readings of Husserl and Heidegger, which in turn provide material—as well as an indirect justification—for his own approach. On the other hand, more recent phenomenological research both confirms the need to go beyond a purely descriptive methodology and offers resources for Schnell's own systematic project—particularly with respect to anthropology. What makes Schnell's work stand out among contemporary phenomenologists, however, is his close engagement with German Idealism and his appreciation for the essential points of continuity between phenomenology and German Idealism. Following Husserl himself, Schnell understands phenomenology as a form of "transcendental idealism," and he draws extensively from Fichte's *Bildlehre* in developing his own phenomenology based on the image.

In this review I cannot do justice to the richness of Schnell's analysis and the full range of topics that he addresses. Instead I will begin with a brief overview of the book's contents, and then focus on some of the main elements of Schnell's systematic project. I will then conclude with some critical observations and questions.

After a short forward, the book is divided into two parts, each of which has four chapters. These chapters appear to have been written independently from one another. As a result, each chapter stands more or less on its own, and readers can choose to read a particular chapter that interests them without needing to read the previous material. The disadvantage, however, is that the book sometimes lacks integration, and Schnell will occasionally treat a theme without indicating that he has a fuller discussion of the same issue in another chapter.¹

1 For example, Schnell notes in part 2 that for reasons of space he does not provide any examples of a concretely executed phenomenological construction, and he refers the reader to examples in one of his other books (100m1). There is no mention of the fact that the long

The first part of the book is entitled “Appearance, Time, Making Possible: On the Method of a ‘Constructive Phenomenology.’” Here Schnell presents various elements of his methodological revision through a critical engagement with the writings of Husserl, Heidegger and Fichte. In the first chapter (“The Concept of Phenomenon and Phenomenological Construction in Husserl and Heidegger”), Schnell develops his claim that phenomenology is a form of transcendental idealism by examining the concept of phenomenon in Husserl and Heidegger. He also introduces the notion of a phenomenological construction, citing precedents in Husserl’s own work. In the second chapter (“On the Ground of Appearing: Husserl and Fichte on Transcendental Circularity”), Schnell discusses several remarkable parallels in the methodologies of Husserl and Fichte—including the parallel between the elimination of “being” in Fichte and the *epoché* in Husserl. The second half of this chapter aims to show how Fichte’s transcendental approach can be made fruitful for phenomenology. Fichte demonstrates that a transcendental circularity precedes the act of consciousness and first makes it possible, and this reveals the way to an ultimate grounding of knowledge through a “genetic construction.”

The third chapter (“Husserl’s Phenomenology of Time in Light of His Time Diagrams”) is a meticulous reconstruction of the development of Husserl’s attempts to formalize time consciousness. In particular, Schnell traces Husserl’s phenomenological construction of a pre-immanent temporality in the *Bernau Manuscripts*, and this construction provides material—and justification—for Schnell’s own project for a constructive phenomenology. In the fourth chapter (“Heidegger’s Contributions to Transcendental Philosophy”), Schnell argues that Heidegger belongs to the tradition of transcendental philosophy—at least in the period from the middle to the end of the 1920s. Schnell sees this transcendental approach in the various shapes of “making possible” in Heidegger’s work—especially in its doubling back in the form of “making possible that which makes possible.”

The second part of the book is entitled “Phenomenology, Metaphysics, Anthropology,” and it presents the systematic elements of Schnell’s project in critical engagement with more recent phenomenological research. In the fifth chapter (“Phenomenon, Image, Reality: Basic Features of a Phenomenological Metaphysics”), Schnell again treats the concept of phenomenon, adding a third sense to the two found in Husserl (see below). At the end of the chapter, he briefly draws the consequences that his discussion of the “image” (*Bild*)

chapter on Husserl and temporality in part 1 provides an extended example of a phenomenological construction in Husserl.

as ur-phenomenon has for the status of reality. Here Schnell makes the provocative claim that the imagination has priority over the power of perception for constructive phenomenology, since imagination plays a decisive role in the construction of the “image” (105–6).² Schnell also provides a suggestive but undeveloped account of phenomenization (*Phänomenalisierung*) as a double “standing”—both ecstatic and transcending as well as internalizing.³ In the sixth chapter (“Reflection and Sight: The Phenomenological Anthropology of Hans Blumenberg”), Schnell discusses the fundamental features of Blumenberg’s anthropology, which counters the “anthropology-phobia” of transcendental phenomenology. Blumenberg turns to the human being to find answers to basic questions of transcendental phenomenology that it is unable to resolve on its own. Schnell seeks to build upon Blumenberg’s reflections in finding a point of convergence between transcendental phenomenology and phenomenological anthropology.

The seventh chapter focuses on the concepts of “transcendence” and “self” in Richir’s most recent work.⁴ The moment of the sublime originally constitutes the self as well as the origin of consciousness. The distance of the self from itself makes reflection possible, and this distance marks the trace of absolute transcendence. In the eighth and final chapter (“*Homo imaginans*: On a New Phenomenological Anthropology”), Schnell first briefly reviews the phenomenological anthropologies of Blumenberg, Richir, and Jean-Christophe Goddard, highlighting aspects of their work that are helpful for his own project. The last seven pages of the book are devoted to Schnell’s original anthropological reflections in which he proposes a new definition of the human being as *homo imaginans*. He states boldly: “‘Before’ the human being can be determined as sensible or rational, ‘before’ the human being belongs to an already presupposed world, the human being is ‘imaging’ [*bildend*] (*‘imaginans’*)” (150). In relation to the world, the human being is characterized by a threefold imaging function: (1) Human beings make images for themselves (summed up as “image of the world”). (2) The self originates in the self-reflection of the world as *image* (“image of the self”). (3) The human being is characterized by a capacity to become conscious of the “enabling doubling” of reflection itself

2 Schnell even refers here to the “imaginary character of reality.”

3 Cf. 104–5, 106–7. Alexander Schnell has told me in conversation that the book’s title (*Hinaus*) refers primarily to the double character of this phenomenization. In a secondary sense, the title refers to going beyond Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology (i.e., *darüber hinaus*).

4 It is of interest to note that Schnell dedicates the book to Marc Richir.

(“image of the image”).⁵ The centrality of the image allows Schnell to conclude provocatively: the world first becomes accessible, not by means of perception, but through the *imagination*.

Having given this brief overview of the book's contents, I would now like to focus on some of the main elements of Schnell's systematic project for a constructive phenomenology.⁶ At the beginning of this review I indicated that Schnell's project for a *constructive* phenomenology is a revision (or expansion) of phenomenology's traditional methodology, which is *descriptive*. This methodological expansion is made necessary by a corresponding expansion of the concept of phenomenon: Schnell in fact distinguishes three senses of phenomenon, the second and third of which are only accessible through a phenomenological construction. As Schnell observes: “A deeper understanding of the concept of phenomenon demands a revision of the phenomenological method” (10). The first concept of phenomenon (the traditional one) includes everything that appears within the sphere of consciousness. This includes the noema, the acts of consciousness that constitute appearances, and the sensible data upon which the noetic acts build. Phenomena in this sense are accessible to descriptive analysis. Only this first concept of phenomenon is prevalent in Husserl's programmatic writings, and here the traditional descriptive phenomenological method suffices.

However, Schnell identifies a second concept of phenomenon, which Husserl develops in his unpublished manuscripts—above all, in the manuscripts on the constitution of internal time consciousness and passive synthesis. This second concept marks out phenomena at a deeper level than the first concept. Indeed, phenomena in the second sense are what originally constitute the phenomena in the first sense. For example, Husserl, in his time-consciousness analysis, asks about the phenomena that originally constitute the temporality of the retentions; he refers to these “originally constituting phenomena” (*die ursprünglich konstituierenden Phänomene*) as the “functional operations” (*die fungierenden Leistungen*) of transcendental subjectivity (cf. 95). These phenomena are part of a “pre-immanent sphere,” which lies before the distinction between subject and object, man and world. But descriptive analysis can only access phenomena in the immanent sphere of

5 However, Schnell immediately adds that this is merely a necessary condition for the human being, and he does not rule out that other living beings might share this capacity; see 154. It is therefore not clear in what sense this capacity is characteristically human.

6 For the most part, these elements are found in the first chapter of part 1 and the first and last chapters of part 2.

consciousness; a phenomenological construction is required to gain access to the “originally constituting phenomena.”⁷

The third concept of phenomenon is the most fascinating but also the most difficult to grasp. Schnell had based his account of the first two concepts in Husserl’s own work. Here Schnell leaves Husserl behind and identifies a phenomenon at an even deeper level than the second concept. This ur-phenomenon forms or images itself (*sich bilden*) and thereby provides an ultimate grounding for all knowledge. Schnell calls this original phenomenon the “image” (*Bild*), and he acknowledges in a footnote that he is here attempting to make Fichte’s *Bildlehre* fruitful for an ultimate phenomenological grounding of knowledge (102n19).⁸ Though this “image” is a phenomenon, it is a peculiar phenomenon in at least two respects: (1) it is the sole phenomenon in this third sense, in contrast to the multiplicity of phenomena in the first two senses; (2) it is an “unapparent” (*unscheinbar*) phenomenon, since it is never thematically and explicitly given. We can then pose the question: in what sense is it a phenomenon, if it is unapparent? I will return to this question below.

What motivates Schnell to turn to this difficult third concept of phenomenon? In short, this ur-phenomenon is the only way to provide an ultimate grounding for knowledge. Following Husserl, Schnell understands phenomenology as a form of transcendental idealism in a tradition going back to Kant. This means that phenomenology has for its subject our way of knowing objects to the extent that this “ought to be possible a priori” (cf. 100–101). It also means that phenomenology has the task of providing an ultimate grounding and justification of knowledge. Schnell argues that Husserl was never able to accomplish this because he believed that an ultimate grounding was possible with exclusively intuitive evidence. But intuition cannot provide an ultimate grounding of knowledge. That can only be provided by the “image” or ur-phenomenon—a self-grounding of knowledge that arises only in the process of a phenomenological construction.

If both the second and the third concept of phenomenon require a phenomenological construction, what exactly does this construction involve? Schnell’s methodological accounts in this book provide only the general outlines of the process. In part, this is because of the very nature of phenomenological construction: different constructions are *sui generis* and can only be understood in the enactment of the construction itself. Thus Schnell notes

7 More precisely, Schnell remarks twice that the “originally constituting phenomena” are “not always” accessible to descriptive analysis; see 23 and 96. This seems to imply that they are *sometimes* accessible to descriptive analysis. But when and how?

8 Elsewhere Schnell calls Fichte “the greatest thinker of transcendental idealism” (20).

that phenomenological construction is not a universal method but depends on what is to be constructed. In particular, he distinguishes the construction that gives access to the ur-phenomenon (the third concept of phenomenon) from the construction that gives access to the phenomena in the second sense (101n17).

Nevertheless, there are some general features of phenomenological construction that we can note. First, phenomenological construction is not a metaphysical construction (it has nothing to do with deduction), nor is it what Heidegger and Fink call “phenomenological construction” (96). According to Schnell, a phenomenological construction does not presuppose the necessity of what it constructed or the rules according to which the construction proceeds: these all arise in the construction (cf. 12, 99–100). That which is constructed is nothing in itself and only comes into being for the one carrying out the construction. This accounts for the grounding or foundational character of phenomenological construction—the feature that allows it to provide an ultimate grounding for knowledge (cf. 96). Schnell also describes at least one form of construction in terms of certain limits or “borderline facts” (*Grenzfakten*), which one bumps up against in the course of a descriptive analysis (23). The phenomenological construction is a descent in a zig-zag movement from the “borderline facts” into the dimension that is supposed to be constructed (22, 96).

These descriptions are rather schematic. What does an actual phenomenological construction look like? For this the reader can turn to the chapter on Husserl’s phenomenology of time, in which Schnell provides a very close analysis of a phenomenological construction in Husserl (6off.). And the reader can turn to the chapter on metaphysics, which contains a construction of the “image” or ur-phenomenon (the latter construction appears to be abbreviated, however) (102–4). Schnell also refers us to his book on Husserl and the foundations of constructive phenomenology.⁹

With these general elements of Schnell’s constructive phenomenology in mind, I would like to conclude with a question and some critical observations concerning the nature of his revision of phenomenology. First, how does Schnell now understand phenomenology to constitute a *whole*? That is, in light of his revisions, what is it that gives phenomenology the unity of a single science (*Wissenschaft*) or philosophical discipline? There seem to be two traditional answers to this question: (1) the object of phenomenology (it concerns what is intuitively given in consciousness) and (2) its method (descriptive analysis). In both respects Schnell proposes an expansion of phenomenology

9 *Husserl et les fondements de la ~~phenomenology~~ constructive* (Grenoble: J. Millon, 2007).

beyond its Husserlian boundaries. Its objects now include pre-intentional phenomena that do not appear in consciousness, and its method now includes phenomenological construction, which is not (purely) descriptive.

Perhaps the answer is quite simple: descriptive and constructive phenomenology form a single science because they both concern the phenomena. Along these lines, Schnell writes more than once: “Phenomenology has to do with phenomena (10, 101).” Thus by broadening the concept of phenomenon, Schnell would be able to expand the scope of phenomenology but retain its unity, because it still concerns phenomena. The difficulty is that Schnell never explicitly states what the different senses of phenomenon have in common—besides the fact that they are all given the name “phenomenon.” Indeed, when defining the second and third senses of “phenomenon,” Schnell specifies what “objects” are to be included in each of these senses but does not say explicitly *why* or in what precise sense they are phenomena.¹⁰ There are, however, clues in the text that point to the possibility of an over-arching concept of phenomenon—one that would include all three senses that Schnell distinguishes. When discussing the third sense (the image or ur-phenomenon, Schnell writes: “We require a principle for the justification of knowledge that . . . must be demonstrated [*sich ausweisen*] phenomenologically—namely, in a continual, gradually *internalizing* reflection” (104). This suggests that phenomenological “demonstrability” (*Ausweisbarkeit*) is what makes the ur-phenomenon a phenomenon and unites it with the other two senses.¹¹ Of course, the precise meaning of this demonstrability would need to be clarified. A connection to intuition (albeit an indirect one) may also unite the different senses of phenomenon. Schnell notes that intuition plays a role in the phenomenological constructions that give access to the phenomena in the second and third sense, since they unite an intellectual projection with an intuitive viewing—

10 They are therefore definitions by extension rather than intension (to use the logical terminology). In the case of the second sense, Husserl himself uses the word “phenomena,” but Husserl’s authority does not explain why they are phenomena. In introducing the third sense of phenomenon Schnell writes: “There is no reason why that which *founds every* [instance of] knowing *as* knowing could not also itself be thematized as ‘phenomenon’” (101). Although this may appear to be almost stipulative in assigning a new meaning to the word, Schnell seems to have in mind Heidegger’s phenomenological concept of phenomenon in *Being and Time*: the phenomenon is that which makes the appearing possible (and thus grounds it). Cf. 25.

11 Cf. “Science ‘of’ the phenomena means that [phenomenology] grasps its objects in *such* a way that everything about them to be discussed must be directly indicated and directly demonstrated [*in direkter Ausweisung abgehandelt*]” (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, rev. Dennis Schmidt [Albany: SUNY Press, 2010], 33 [§7c]).

although the intuitiveness is made evident only through the construction. The connection to intuitiveness (*Anschaulichkeit*) is what makes it a phenomenological construction and not a metaphysical or speculative one (99).

However Schnell conceives the unity of the concept of phenomenon and the corresponding unity of descriptive and constructive phenomenology, the outline this book provides for the latter is both rich and immensely promising. Beyond the suggestiveness of Schnell's own project, however, the book is especially rewarding for what it reveals about the profound connections between German Idealism and the phenomenological tradition. These appear, of course, in the chapter on Husserl and Fichte, which demonstrates the remarkable proximity of these thinkers on a range of issues. And they appear more systematically in Schnell's consistent and convincing efforts to think phenomenology within the tradition of transcendental idealism and to find an ultimate principle of knowledge (the same ambition as Kant's early successors). But just as striking are the implicit parallels between Schnell's project and German Idealism. Both take as their point of departure a foundational figure—Husserl, Kant—who had set strict methodological limits for his philosophy but was unable to provide an ultimate grounding for philosophy within those limits. And both Schnell and the German Idealists go beyond the previously circumscribed methodology, but not without finding the seeds for their own approaches in the texts of the foundational figures. Because *Hinaus* only lays the groundwork for Schnell's project, one cannot judge from this book alone the full fruit that these seeds may bear for a constructive phenomenology. But one can certainly observe the same richness and systematicity found in German Idealism as Schnell pursues phenomenology beyond its previous limits.

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