

PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY AND PHILOSOPHICAL SELF-REFLECTION

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This essay is intended as a step towards a philosopher's Holy Grail, towards that ultimate starting-point, presupposed by all other beginnings in philosophy, which has been the goal of so much past searching inquiry. It takes the form of an examination of the necessary conditions of the meaningfulness of phenomenological discourse, and a meta-theoretical discussion of the nature of philosophical self-reflection, i.e. of philosophical reflection on philosophy

Merleau-Ponty remarks, concerning the Cogito, that "Descartes, and a fortiori his reader, begin their meditation in what is already a universe of discourse."¹ This indicates a direction for philosophical activity, in reflection on the conditions of the existence of philosophy itself, which is developed below; but first, to pre-empt some initial misconceptions of the status there ascribed to questions of meaning and language, I shall briefly distinguish that direction from others which may come to mind.

- I. It is not a direction which can be followed within the horizon of contemporary semantic theory which, as manifest in the work of Davidson, Grice and their many associates, tacitly bases itself on presuppositions which limit, in advance, its possible relevance to fundamental philosophy.
- II. It is not a quasi-phenomenological description, or 'showing', of language-games situated in 'given' forms of life so as to elicit what can and what cannot meaningfully be said.
- III. It is not, at least primarily, a theory of that structure of the conceptualisation of experience necessary to the existence of anything we would call 'experience'; though this

enterprise, the most philosophically sophisticated development of 'conceptual analysis', might be seen to be included.

- IV. It is not, though it is a prologue to, a discussion of the essential relations between language, man, and world. It pushes the traditional demand for definition of terms to its limit, asking for the necessary conditions of any meaningful discourse whatever. Only by first pursuing this demand can any such 'deeper' discussion acquire philosophical validity.

While none of these differential claims can be explicitly made out here, they may gain in substance from what follows. Two more preliminary remarks. First: I shall be concerned with philosophical discourse in a way which might seem to beg the question of the possibility of non-discursive philosophical thought. This is for the sake of simplicity, since even if a case can be entertained for the possibility of *private* 'marks of concepts', as many past great philosophers (including Kant) seem to have done, the dual requirements, explained below, of structure and content still hold: without them there is no thought at all. Hence, when speaking of 'philosophical thought' I have it in mind as embodied in linguistic terms, and shall speak of it, as well as its linguistic expression, as meaningful, meaningless, and so on. What is *not* presupposed here is the existence of a full-blown linguistic communication context, an embodied speaking subject mouthing to an embodied hearing subject in the ordinary world: for the time being Husserl's assertion that the real physical existence of an expression is not essential to the expression as such, can be accommodated. Second: Philosophers of language have, since Frege, increasingly focussed on the sentence, rather than the word, as

1. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962. p. 401.

the basic unit of utterance, and, in a sense, of meaning. I shall speak directly of the meanings of words, rather than of sentences containing those words, but this is not important in any way for my discussion.

What, then, are the necessary conditions of the existence of philosophical thought or discourse? This might not seem to be a very promising beginning, for the very nature of philosophy has been at issue in much of 'the history of philosophy', and any arrogation on my part of the right to pronounce on its essential character seems unseemly. Hence we begin with philosophical thought as thought rather than as philosophical, and ask after the necessary conditions of its existence. An obvious start might appear to be the inference to a thinker of the thought. However, in deference to what I take as justifiable Humean bewilderment, and with regard to the immense complexity of the problem of the nature of such a 'thinker' (one of the central questions in modern Western philosophy), I hold back from this move. There remains one simple essential feature of thought as such which signposts the way forward: thought must have meaning. By this I mean simply that a thought must think something in order to be a thought, and that this is only possible if the words which articulate it have meaning. If they do not, nothing is said, or thought (or whistled) — there is no thought at all, nothing of cognitive value has occurred.² The character of this situation can be more strikingly elicited by considering its explicit denial. "This thought is meaningless" can be ascribed the truth-value 'true' only on pain of accepting it as a piece of gibberish, meriting no truth-value whatever, and little enough of our attention. It can be coherently evaluated only as false.

What, then, is involved in the meaningfulness of philosophical thought? Firstly, I should say that the confusion between semantic and pragmatic meaningfulness, which occurs for example

at key points in the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, is to be avoided. Only the strict semantic meaning of the linguistic articulation of the thought is to be considered. Secondly, to assert that thought, to be thought, must be conceptually articulated is just to reject, with philosophers from Socrates to Hegel and after, the notion of pure knowledge as simple, unmediated, unstructured 'awareness' of the infinitely rich manifold of experience, an 'awareness' which precludes any *determinate* consciousness, the thinking or saying of anything specific, i.e. of anything at all; and which leaves only the possibility of some mystical inexpressible union with the world. Even philosophical knowledge, as Hegelian 'reason' which goes beyond the limits of the mere understanding, is determinate and conceptual in nature.³ Thirdly: the linguistic expressions of these concepts, to be meaningful and hence capable of articulating meaningful thought, must have both structure and content. Two aspects of meaning are implied here:

- I. A word has meaning only in differential relation to other words in a system. It was the recognition of this diacritical structure of language (at various levels) that provided much of the impulse behind the "Structuralist Movement". Here, however, I want to concentrate on a different aspect of meaning. For while the above assertion may state a necessary condition for the meaningfulness of linguistic expressions, it is not a sufficient one. It is insufficient because words could not have meaning only by virtue of their relations with other words—there would be a bare formal structure enabling nothing to be said, thoughts embodied in such barren 'expressions' would be about nothing. Hence the second point:
- II. A word has meaning only in relation to some extra-linguistic realm. While some expressions can be given their meaning wholly

2. Much has been made of certain paradoxes arising from attempts at philosophical self-reflection; that one has to say what cannot be said, with Wittgenstein, think what cannot be thought with Kant, deny synthetic a priori knowledge in a synthetic a priori proposition with the logical positivists, and so on. Rather than make a cult of such paradoxes, which are in each case founded on a prior metaphysical stance, I would study the necessary conditions of the philosophical discourse within which that metaphysics is originally expressed.
3. Reference might also be made to strains of Zen Buddhism, where the ultimate comprehension is attained only by first pushing the understanding to its limits.

in terms of connections with other expressions—'Bachelor' can be explained in terms of 'unmarried man'—it is notoriously the case that not all words can be so fortunate. At least at the Quinean 'periphery' of the linguistic framework there must be some direct connection with a realm which confers content on basic expressions, and hence, via the interconnections, with higher-order expressions. Without such content we are left with an abstract sterile framework through which, since it is connected with nothing, nothing can be said or thought.

So much, I hope, is ordinary and controversial. Where the difficulties emerge is with the questions of the *nature* of this content-conferring realm, and of the relation that holds between it and the expressions upon which content is conferred—the semantic relation between language and the world. It is the first question which needs investigation here, leaving indeterminate, for the time, the precise nature of the semantic relation.

At this stage we might be wondering about the possible relevance of this question for phenomenology. Fortunately, the case is clear. For an abiding aim of Husserlian phenomenology, as a critical philosophy, was at least the examination and clarification of all presuppositions which could not actually be dispensed with. Schuppe had already interpreted "freedom from presupposition" as acceptance of only those presuppositions which were necessary conditions of the possession of meaning and content by the philosophical enterprise itself, and Husserl echoes this as late as the preface to the English edition of *Ideas*, asserting that: "Philosophy can take root only in radical reflexion upon the meaning and possibility of its own scheme";⁴ it reverts to "that which is already presupposed implicit in all presupposing and in all questioning and answering, and herewith of necessity exists already, immediate and persistent. This is the first to be freely and expressly posited . . ."⁵ The necessary presupposition of a semantic relation between the

terms of phenomenological enquiry and some, as yet unspecified, extra-linguistic realm, is an obvious candidate for such reflexion. This is important for phenomenology because whatever is necessarily involved as a condition of the meaningfulness of the phenomenological enquiry, might subvert the results and the very method of that enquiry: a crucial possibility is that the suspension of the "natural attitude", of the naive "belief-in-the-world", could be undermined if the existence of that world was necessarily presupposed as a condition of the meaningfulness of the enquiry itself.

Even as it begins the work of reduction, which is intended to prepare the way for the clarification of all assumptions, phenomenology needs clarifications of its assumptions: this vaguely paradoxical remark is to indicate that, prior to the investigation of transcendental subjectivity, in which terms alone true phenomenological explication is to be sought, there is need of a form of transcendental argument which traces back the chain of necessary conditions of the meaningfulness of any phenomenological statement or thought. The first link in this transcendental chain has been presented above, and it is the problem of accommodating some of its consequences within the Husserlian framework that I shall now examine.

Let me begin with some banal remarks concerning the explanation of ordinary words. To explain the meaning of "tree" one could mention its meaning-connections with other expressions—a tree is a specific sort of plant, a perennial plant having a self-supporting woody main stem, and growing to a considerable height and size⁶—but, as mentioned above, this form of explanation cannot be general, somewhere a direct connection between the linguistic expression of a concept and its instances must be established. With "tree" this would perhaps be done by pointing at various trees while uttering "That is a tree", and at other, vaguely tree-like, objects (telegraph-poles, etc.) while uttering "But that is not a tree". Whether

4. E. Husserl, preface to the English edition of *Ideas*. Trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson. London: Allen & Unwin, 1931. p. 27.

5. *Op. cit.* p. 19

6. *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*. Third edition. Oxford, 1959. p. 2239.

an adequate model of language-learning can be elaborated along such lines is not in question here, the point is only that, to explain the meaning of a word, only the indirect or, ultimately, the direct approach can be taken. Now, in the ordinary everyday practice of meaning-explanation, a tacit assumption is that of the existence of a transcendent, independent, objective world, related to our words, such that, in using them, we can think and speak about that world and the things within it. These include trees, lightning flashes, rock music, people, colours, emotions, magnetic fields, after images and much more. It is here that a difficulty is presented to phenomenology. For if acceptance of the existence of such a world were an essential presupposition of phenomenological investigation itself, the transcendental-phenomenological reduction would have none of that metaphysical power customarily ascribed to it. Phenomenology would become the study of the essences within a broad realist framework, the experiential version of linguistic analysis. While such an apparent emasculation of the skeptical forces in phenomenology might not unduly depress the many critics of the later developments of Husserl's thought, it does involve me in my concern to assess the difficulties facing a self-reflexive critical philosophy, for a phenomenology so modified would hardly merit the epithet 'critical' in its capitulation to a naive realist metaphysics. The alternative then, the only means of critical survival, is to arrive at a rival account of the nature of that content-conferring realm, semantic relation with which is a necessary condition of the meaningfulness of phenomenological statement; an account which does not immediately presuppose the existence of the everyday transcendent world and its entities.

How can phenomenology arrange this? The solution requires recourse to the phenomenological reduction. Various interpretations of the reduction exist, and it is not my aim here to fully theorize its nature, but the following points seem centrally involved. In the need to use only

apodictically given evidences, to preserve the absolute purity of the phenomenological project, all presuppositions of experience and judgement must be elicited, explicated and evaluated, nothing being taken for granted, and this involves the suspension of the immanent claims of experience to be experience of actually existing objectivities which *transcend* that experience. This, in turn, involves the suspension of that general, implicit 'belief-in-the-world' which is man's fundamental cognitive orientation. This 'belief' is deactivated by the reduction, enabling the phenomenologist to discover the transcendental ego as the true subject of the stream of pure experience, and to find the world and things within the world *as phenomena*. Objects are considered, not as actually existing independent realities, but only as *intended* in conscious experience. The correlation between every conscious experience of something, and that of which there is, intentionally, experience—the noetic-noematic structure of experience—is brought to our attention, and this enables eidetic intuition of the essences of objects, and the analysis of their intentional horizons, within the phenomenological understanding of objectivities as transcendently constituted in and through the pure stream of experience. Now the 'objective' aspect of an experience, the *intended* as such, the *noema*, has a crucial role in Husserl's theory of meaning. Much has been made of the relation between Husserl's concept of 'noema' and Frege's concept of 'Sinn',⁷ and a salient point emerging from such discussion is that the meaning of a linguistic utterance, for Husserl, is the 'noematic Sinn' of an underlying act of consciousness which is indicated by the utterance, and from which it gains its meaning.⁸ Linguistic meaning, then, is the direct expression of the 'noematic Sinn' of an underlying meaning-giving act, and this seems to provide a solution for the initial problem. Phenomenology escapes the necessary presupposition of the actual existence of the world of the natural attitude as that which gives content to its concepts, and hence meaning to its discourse, by recourse to the ideal realm of noematic Sinne, the core of the 'object'

7. For example, of their 'ideality', being reducible neither to 'real' elements of subjective consciousness, nor to real elements of the physical realm; and of their function as a form of mediation of the object to the knowing/speaking subject.

8. See, for example, Føllesdal, "Husserl's notion of noema", in the *Journal of Philosophy*, 1969; and McIntyre & Smith, "Husserl's Identification of Meaning and Noema" in the *Monist* 1975.

end of pure conscious acts, of transcendently purified experience. The meaning of the expression "tree", if it is to be given directly rather than via its relations to other expressions, is given in terms of the noematic poles of various experiences which are experiences, intentionally, of trees: phenomenology avoids the threat of ground-floor incoherence.

Unfortunately, we cannot pack up and go home just yet. For what at first looks like a solution proves, on further investigation, to be merely a deepening of the problem. If we take the call for the examination of presuppositions seriously, we must ask of phenomenology an explanation of the meaning of "noema" or of "experience", or any of the other theoretical terms used in the initial 'solution', so as to clarify whatever presuppositions might be involved as necessary conditions of the meaningfulness of these terms. This poses, as I hope to show, an intractable difficulty.

Let this difficulty be first manifest in connection with "experience" (standing in also for "pure consciousness", "conscious act" and related formulations). How can the phenomenologist explain the meaning of this term? Not this way: "experience is what happens when human (and, perhaps, other animal) subjects encounter the world; seeing is a kind of experience; hearing, feeling and so forth"; for unless the terms used *here*, "human", "seeing", etc., presuppose the existence of the ordinary world of the natural attitude as their ultimate, meaning-giving realm — which is what the phenomenologist wants to avoid — they can only be explained, as above, in terms of "experience", or its "noematic" aspect, itself — the very term which is to be explained. Such an indirect explanation of "experience" in terms of its relations with these other terms results either in the fundamental self-defeat of the phenomenological programme, or in a vicious circle — "experience" being explained, ultimately, only in terms of "experience". The same goes even for such a theoretical indirect explanation of "experience" as "the object of phenomenological reflection": for it the latter is to be understood as other than "reflection on pure experience", which gives us back the problem, it can be understood only as "reflection on the residue of the phenomenological

reduction". This last can be explained only in terms of the suspension of objectivity-claims immanent to experience and judgement, and *these* terms can be explained only by presupposing the existence of the ordinary world of the natural attitude, or by referring to the noematic *Sinne* of experience again. Either way there is no escape.

The only alternative to this dilemma of self-defeat or vicious circularity is to try to explain the meaning of "experience" directly; the phenomenologist will have to point to instances of "experience" such that explication of the nature of these cases does not reveal them as essentially mundane, but as independent of the presupposition of the actual existence of the ordinary, mundane world. And this alternative seems, initially, fairly plausible. Having performed the reduction, after all, the pure stream of experience in its living presence is presumed to be accessible to the reflective gaze. What could be simpler than the mental ostension of one or more of these living moments of pure consciousness coupled with the exclamation: "*That* is an experience". — thus establishing, by direct relation between word and 'world', the meaning of "experience". To focus on the real problems here, let us first waive any objections that might arise concerning the presuppositions possibly involved in the performance of the reduction itself, and others concerning the linguistic abilities already presupposed in any 'ostensive definition' as such; for, without arguing the point here, I feel that most of these objections could be met fairly comfortably within the problematic of transcendental phenomenology. Let us also waive objections concerning the immediate accessibility of pure 'reduced' experience itself — which arose as early as Bishop Huet's criticisms of Descartes doctrines on this score — and concerning the possible validation of the claim to apodictic, certain evidence on the part of reflection on such experience; for these objections, though far more serious, are not as fruitful, nor as demonstrably critical, as that with which I am here concerned.

For even apart from such problems, the referent of the demonstrative "that" in the would-be ostension "*That* is an experience", or of any other indexical element which is to play the same

role, is not yet determinate, and cannot be made determinate without a characterization of it which will beg the important question. To elucidate: in absence of additional elaboration, to what can "that" refer in this context? What am I pointing out, ostending? Not a specific content, for experience as such is no 'thing', it is experience of 'things' and not, for Husserl or any other relatively aware philosopher, another 'thing' alongside them. Nor is it some kind of semi-transparent container of contents, such as could be perceived independently of the contents. When the phenomenologist turns from ordinary worldly things to those things as *phenomena* nothing changes: only transcendently existential judgments are suspended. There is no 'more' to experience than its contents and structure, no other 'thing' to serve as the victim of an ostension. "That" can succeed in its explanatory role only if the nature of its referent is already implicitly understood. This pre-understanding, as a necessary presupposition of the success of the ostensive explanation of "experience", must be explicated by phenomenology: but, to enable the appropriate determination of the referent of the demonstrative, this understanding must already be of the thing pointed to, as not itself a content of the realm with which the ostension is apparently concerned, but as a unifying awareness of such contents. That is, the ostension requires, as a necessary condition of its success, a pre-understanding of the ostended 'object' which *already* makes the distinction between consciousness and that of which consciousness is consciousness, between experience qua experience, and its contents. Nothing less will suffice to determine the referent of "that" as an experience as such⁹ (rather than, say, a specific content of an experience); and this gives us right back the problem of explaining what is meant by "experience", since in explicating this presupposition of the success of this attempt to explain "experience", the phenomenologist must already make use of the term "experience" or its phenomenological cognates ("consciousness", "awareness", etc), and hence, remains in the dilemma previously outlined — either he presupposes the actual existence

of the mundane, or his circular "explanations" leave his statements without meaning, strictly nonsense.

Perhaps, though, there is a clue to a possible solution to be found in the rejection of this last line of argument. For if ostension most naturally seems to point out the content of an experience, and can be understood to refer to an experience itself as such only if a prior understanding of the nature of experience exists, and if that content, after the reduction, is thereby the *noematic* aspect of the experience, then could not the meaning of "noema" thus be directly explained, and the meaning of "experience" also, as the correlational unity of noema and noesis? Thus, the phenomenologist says, or thinks, "That is a noema, and that; that too" and so on. The problem here is not, obviously at least, that the pre-understanding required of the ostended object already involves an understanding of the nature of a noema, for the ostension can be understood as ostending that which is present before the (reflective) gaze and the explication of this understanding does not seem to immediately entail a break with the basic phenomenological problematic. Other difficulties emerge very quickly, however, and destroy our hopes of success with this gambit: I shall focus on two.

To begin with, the applicability of "noema" is universal in the sense that every time one ostends the (intentional) object of an experience, "noema" will successfully apply. Such success, however, brings with it problems. For if "noema" is to be understood as applying to any (intentional) object, to anything experienced (and so to anything that can be ostended), then this must involve the differential understanding of "noema" as *not* applying just to some specific kind of object: generality can only be understood in contradistinction to specificity, and this requires the pre-understanding of objects as, say, trees, rocks, beetles, etc, whose elucidation and explication by the phenomenologist will lead back to the same old problem; "noema" is understood in (negative) relation to specific kinds of objects, trees, etc., and

9. Compare the case of "That is kind", said of an action, to explain the word "kind". For such explanation to succeed a prior understanding of the referent of "that" as an action, rather than, say, the colour of the gift, is necessary.

the word "tree" is understood either by presupposing the existence of the mundane realm of the natural attitude, or circularly 'understood' via the concept "noema".

Secondly, "noema" has to be understood in a way which enables it to play a role in the explication of "experience", and this can happen only if it is distinguished from other terms of similarly general application, like "something". In short, "noema" must be understood as applying to every intentional object rather than to every object, *tout court* since otherwise we can not secure the desired freedom from mundane, non-transcendental presuppositions. But such understanding could be gained only through a pre-understanding of the reduction itself (which has so far been assumed to have been, *de facto*, accomplished) — elucidation of which would again return to us the initial problems — or through some other understanding of the distinction between consciousness and being whose possibility, in its transcendental purity, is now in question. Even after all this remains the question of explaining "experience" as the correlational unity of noesis and noema. How could we explain the character of this unity; how to explain the meaning of "noesis" — it seems clear that "experience" cannot be understood in terms of the concepts of the constituents of experience, but vice versa; and still no satisfactory way of explaining this term has been found.

The upshot of this wrangling is that the necessary conditions of the meaningfulness of phenomenological discourse cannot be accommodated within the confines of the critical phenomenological step of the transcendental reduction: ordinary terms are meaningful ultimately in relation to the pure realm of transcendental subjectivity, but the understanding of the vocabulary of the transcendental in which such an account is formulated is either circular — hence no understanding at all — or involves reference to the decidedly non-transcendental mundane world of ordinary experience.

The reduction now seems a peculiarly futile,

self-defeating gesture, since the meaningfulness of its formulation, and of the discourse which is enabled by it, requires the existence of that ordinary world of the natural attitude, belief in which is to be disconnected in the reduction itself. The meaningfulness of the claim that with the reduction to pure consciousness and the transcendental ego the phenomenologist gains access to absolute existence, presupposes the existence of that ordinary world. Such, at first sight, are the fruits of philosophy; but before undertaking a deeper examination of the conclusions at which we seem to have arrived, it is necessary to consider what Husserl and his more faithful followers would see as a crucial objection to the arguments above.

A vigorous formulation of this objection, underwritten by Husserl himself, appears in the Kant-Studien article "Husserl's Philosophy and Contemporary Criticism", by his assisant Eugen Fink. For Fink, and so for Husserl, phenomenology has from the beginning "a certain unintelligibility precisely because it cannot, in principle, be grasped with reference to mundane problems; with reference, that is, to questions which stand in the horizon of the 'natural attitude'. Its basic problem is concealed in this way: it is at first not an unsettling problem which is somehow present *before* phenomenological theory, so that by virtue of its threatening character it can serve to provoke philosophical reflection. It first originates *as a problem* in and through the phenomenological reduction itself, which is already the first step to be taken in mastering it."¹⁰

Mundane forms of the question of the origin of the world can be at most "symbolic anticipations" of the transcendental problems of the world, which itself can be posed only by transcending the world through the phenomenological reduction. This performance of the reduction, then, cannot be adequately comprehended as a possibility of *human* existence, nor as motivated by any problem given *within* the horizon of the natural attitude. This rather excessively esoteric situation involves the phenomenologist in a certain

10. E. Fink, "The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Criticism". Translated in R. O. Elveton, *The Phenomenology of Husserl*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970, p. 101.

pedagogic paradox. Since, as Fink continues, "the reduction is its own presupposition insofar as it alone opens up that dimension of problems with reference to which it establishes the possibility of theoretical knowledge," any attempt to explicate the phenomenological reduction to someone who has not himself performed it, as an attempt to lead out of and from the natural attitude to the transcendental attitude, is in a unique way *false*: "no exposition which takes the natural attitude as its starting-point can satisfactorily explicate that reduction comprehension of which can emerge only after its performance."¹¹ Here is the phenomenological equivalent of Hegel's Owl of Minerva. The most a phenomenologist can do for the unenlightened is to point, vaguely, to symbolically anticipate, in an attempt to effect some sort of leap from the natural to the transcendental attitude.

If, as successful noviciates, we manage these rites of passage, we are then in a position to understand this didactic difficulty as a special case of what Fink leaves to us as "the paradox of the phenomenological statement." For the phenomenologist, there is both a mundane and a transcendental meaning to his words. The crucial terms "existence", "experience", "ego", "intentional", etc., have a meaning acceptable to those *within* the natural attitude, and another accessible only to those who have achieved, via the reduction, the transcendental viewpoint. His problem, then, is to express the results of his phenomenological analyses when the only concepts at his disposal are worldly, mundane concepts, and Fink concludes that "For this reason no phenomenological analysis . . . is capable of being presented adequately."¹² This seems to remain, for Fink, essentially only a pedagogic problem. "This inadequacy of all phenomenological reports, caused by the use of a mundane expression for a non-worldly meaning, also cannot be eliminated by the invention of a technical language. Since phenomenological communication is chiefly a communication to the dogmatist, such a language would be devoid of meaning. Phenomenological statements necessarily contain an internal conflict

between a word's mundane meaning and the transcendental meaning which it serves to indicate. There is always the danger that the dogmatist will grasp only the mundane meaning of words and overlook their transcendental significance to such an extent that he will imagine his mistaken explication of phenomenology to be correct and capable of calling upon the text for its justification."¹³ This passage is revealing in a number of ways. Firstly, the difficulty is greater than Fink suggests: there is not merely a danger that the dogmatist will overlook the transcendental for the mundane significance of the phenomenological word, but a necessity; for the dogmatist, as such, has no access to the transcendental realm of meaning—the only communication worth the effort seems to be that inductive of the performance of the reduction, only then can the audience grasp any of the *real* meaning of phenomenological utterances. More important, here though, is the question of the possibility of a purely technical language, adequate to the expression of transcendental meaning, available for the self-expression of, or communication between, phenomenologists themselves; and we already have reason for suspicion on this point. For even if we allow that an understanding of the transcendental, and of the mundanity of the natural attitude as such, can come only from a standpoint *exterior* to that attitude; and even if we accept that such a move from the interior to the exterior is in some sense a possibility—though comprehensible as such only from the position of the transcendental attitude—how could even the strictest phenomenologist explain his transcendental vocabulary? A phenomenological thought must be specifiable in terms of its differential relations with other possible thoughts, and be indirectly or directly given some content. Without these aspects of structure and content it is not a thought, however transcendental its import. But we have already seen some of the snags in attempts to explain the meaning of the terms in which the phenomenologist thinks and expresses his thoughts. Without that reliance on the mundane world of the natural attitude which the phenomenologist seeks to eschew, the only way

11. *Op. cit.* p. 105.
12. *Op. cit.* p. 143-4
13. *Op. cit.* p. 144.

of giving content to any of the expressions of the transcendental already presupposes a comprehension of the transcendental. Nothing but a purely circular conceptual explanation is available; one which makes no contact with anything beyond that circle, with any extra-linguistic realm — not even that of transcendental subjectivity itself, since to understand any 'ostensive definition' of a transcendental term again already presupposes an understanding, if only implicit, of the transcendental as such. The only escape route now seems to be a recourse to an almost Tractarian mysticism; expressions of mundane concepts through whose semantic connection with the mundane world the transcendental terms gain their content, are used, like Wittgenstein's ladder, to reach a stage of ineffable and strictly unthinkable, unsayable, 'insight' which is then rendered independent of the means through which it was achieved — the ladder can be thrown away.

If this state of inarticulate meaningless 'awareness' is the end result of the Fink-Husserl characterization of the nature of the reduction and of the transcendental attitude — despite their disavowals of mysticism — it might be more fruitful to follow other paths. But where might these begin, and where could they lead? Are we just led to a grateful recognition of the status of a realism to which we return, humbled and chastened, no longer naively unaware of critical philosophy, but with a mature understanding of the value of the natural attitude from which we rebelliously attempted to free ourselves? Fortunately not. Or do we depart from Husserl with Heidegger, who, with his intuition of the dependence of the theory of transcendental subjectivity on the ordinary world of everyday experience, sought a hermeneutic explication of the essential primordial structures of that Being-in-the-world from which the pure transcendental ego was a derivative abstraction? Again, the answer is no, and for essentially the same reason. For despite the height at which Heidegger, in philosophical and methodological rigour and insight, stands in relation to his Anglo-American contemporaries, he treats the transcendentalism of critical philosophy as essentially only a philosophical *digression*, heuristically but not dialectically relevant to philosophical progress. But such a summary

dismissal leaves us with a broad realism which, if not, as Husserl commented on Heidegger's work, merely naive, still leaves many important questions unanswered.

Even if the transcendental positivism of Husserlian phenomenology must be rejected, and with it the possibility of general scepticism which attends the universal epoché, the negative critical tendency of that philosophy remains almost entirely unaffected. For if general scepticism concerning the existence of the 'external world' is no longer tenable, since strictly either meaningless or false, there nevertheless survives an infinity of possible particular scepticisms, possible limited epochés. Every aspect of belief and knowledge can be subject to the critical-sceptical response, within the broad horizon of the *acceptance* of the existence of that 'external world' of the natural attitude. Some of our concepts, it seems, must have genuine application, to provide for the very possibility of meaningful statement, but we have no principle for deciding *which* are the privileged ones: certainly no general principle of arguing from paradigm cases is acceptable, and any specific claim to knowledge is left under the threat of sceptical attack. Some of the force of the arguments against the phenomenological project seems thus to have dissipated. Its methodological equipment is intact: the phenomenologist now works within the bounds of specific epochés, using his eidetic intuition, undertaking constitutional analysis and so on, producing all the substantive results of phenomenology while abandoning the embarrassing transcendental metaphysics. Or, in a different philosophical climate but within basically the same theoretical framework, the 'linguistic phenomenologist' pursues the description of language-games and its implications about what can or cannot sensibly be said when playing them. These reactions to the defeat of critical phenomenology are certainly seductive of those who could not accept Husserl's transcendental interpretation of his earlier investigations, and of those who altogether dislike the very possibility of metaphysics; but such conquest is gained only at the price of having little or nothing to say about the essential relations between existence and essence, between language and the world between the knowing subject and

the known object, between theory and practice, and so on — questions to which transcendental phenomenology at least addresses itself and offers some important answers, but which the grateful acceptance of the broad unselective realism I have described permits only those formulations and 'solutions' visible from its own inadequate and pre-given metaphysical stance.

We seem to have lodged in a dilemma: either a philosophically impoverished realism, or a rigorous but ultimately incoherent transcendentalism. In the second part of this paper I shall consider the way out, and examine a fundamental possibility of contemporary philosophy as it appears in this context.

II

Here I shall return to the question of philosophical self-reflection posed at the beginning of this paper. First, the history of modern philosophy. Since Descartes philosophy has mostly begun with reflection on something *other* than philosophy itself, namely experience. By such means an apodictically certain starting-point is to be established, from which much else is to be derived: the existence of God and the external world in Descartes, the necessary forms of objects of thought in Kant, the location of all modality in the subject again in Hume, resulting in a catholic scepticism; the internal contradictions leading inevitably to the self-knowledge of the Absolute in Hegel; the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl, the neutral monism of James, Mach and Russell, the positivist empiricism of Ayer; phenomenalism, even the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger — all these have a positive beginning in reflection on experience.¹⁴ Naturally an adequate evaluation of these frameworks and their failures is somewhat beyond the scope of this essay, but a problem that accompanies any such positive starting-point is that of the theorization of the starting-point itself. Where is the justification for the claim to the apodicticity of reflection and reflection and experience? How can we be certain that we can be certain here? Answers cannot be found *after* the beginning, since they will presuppose

that beginning in its indeterminate epistemic modality. But how could they be given *prior* to the beginning? What alternative could there be to critical reflection on experience as the starting-point of philosophical enquiry, if that indiscriminating thick-skinned realism referred to above is to be avoided? It is here that the project of philosophical self-reflection recommends itself, but what must be meant by this?

Not, surely, just looking at other philosophers, at the 'content' of their work, but rather eliciting the essential features of philosophical thought, and thence the necessary conditions of its existence. But surely philosophy has to exist, before we reflect on it; don't we need something there before us to work on? A purely self-reflexive thought, for example, "This thought is being thought" has no essential determination, in terms of what the thought is about, or thinks and can only enter a infinite process of self-reference. Any determination of the thought must be *external*, for example, "The thought being had at 1.30 p.m. on Tuesday", but here the identity of the thought is fixed at the cost of adulterating its purity as a philosophical beginning. The thought *itself* has no specific content, it forever refers to itself without any concrete determination of what 'itself' is; and in being thus indeterminate, contentless, it is not a thought, as such at all. The point here is that the self-reflection of philosophy cannot be pure, immediate, it must be mediated. But in what way? And if reflection on philosophy itself is to be mediated by reflection on something other than that reflection, are we not back with the problem of a purely positive beginning for philosophy? In which case is not philosophy condemned to reflection on that positive moment, and reflection on that reflection, and so on, caught in an endless orgy of eternal return, unable to achieve that absolute yet mediated self-reflection which ties up all the ends and establishes philosophy for once and for all? It is to these very abstract questions that I hope to sketch a possible approach. The heuristic guideline is the notion of a form of inquiry whose findings will apply to that inquiry itself: the essential feature of any inquiry is that it be meaningful, and this

14. I realise that these brief characterizations, especially those of Hegel and Heidegger, beg certain central questions; for now, at least, they are left begging.

is all that can be specified in advance concerning the philosophical inquiry.

Let us begin, then, with the question of the necessary conditions of meaningful discourse, and see how this question fulfils the requirements for the beginning of philosophy. How does it avoid the need to establish the existence of that of which it seeks the necessary conditions? Talk of the necessary conditions of experience can only produce interesting conclusions if we have already assured ourself of the existence of experience, which involves the difficulties already referred to concerning the positivity of such a beginning. The question of the necessary conditions of meaningful discourse is in the same logical situation, but here the existence of meaningful discourse is provided for by the question itself, and secured by the fact that there can be no coherent denial of the existence of meaningful discourse, since any such denial must, as such, presuppose its own meaningfulness. The initial attractiveness of this question has of course been recognized by philosophers, mainly in the present century, but without being afforded the rigorous examination it requires. A second essential characteristic of this question is its *self-closure*; that is, any discussion of the meaning of the first question itself, or of its constituent terms, will follow the same course as that undertaken and followed by the initial question. Any other questions, including other philosophical questions, the relation between mind and body, between knowledge and action, even between language and the world are brought back to the beginning by strict consideration of their meaning and the necessary conditions of their meaningfulness.¹⁵

At least two queries might be raised here. First, is this investigation of the meaning of philosophical questions not merely a preliminary methodological step, establishing the meaning of your terms as a precondition of fruitful argument? Second, how is the sceptico-critical attitude in philosophy to be accommodated by the project so far sketched? The replies are interrelated. The

sceptical attitude in philosophy is rooted in the recognition of the possible disparity between how things are experienced and how they are: so that what we may be utterly convinced of might not really be the case. This possibility is first brought to bear, in the context of the search for the conditions of meaningfulness, on the nature of that extra-linguistic realm which provides content for linguistic expressions; and the first part of this paper was concerned to show the ultimate incoherence or unintelligibility of the positive metaphysic, as well as the sustained force of the negative critical challenge, once limited to a general acceptance of the existence of a non-immanent 'content-conferring realm'. No area of philosophy can be adequately grounded without taking up this challenge from the beginning, since otherwise it runs the risk either of undermining its own results through the exigencies of justifying its progress against scepticism, or of resting on a naive or dogmatic foundation which vitiates any claim to philosophical truth. The only way to avoid both this, and the leap into transcendental aphasia associated with the positive aspect of critical philosophy, is to elicit the necessary conditions of the possibility of critical enquiry itself. This will involve, essentially, discovering the necessary conditions of the meaningfulness of the term "experience", or "consciousness" or any of the other terms (e.g. "cogitatio", "impression", "idea", "sense-datum") which have played the same role in philosophy.

If this can be achieved philosophy will have been inoculated against scepticism, since any such attack would be an attempt to question the necessary conditions of its own meaningfulness, which is not a coherent strategy. Given the earlier arguments concerning Husserlian transcendental phenomenology it can be seen that such assurance can be bought only at the price of breaking out of the critical philosophical problematic; but the fact that the critical philosophy will have been not merely dismissed, but dialectically transcended, means that instead of the hapless realism discussed earlier, a *determinate* denial will be

15. These two characteristics of the initial question are closely related to that 'self-referentiality' which R. Bubner sees as essential to transcendental philosophy. See R. Bubner, "Is transcendental hermeneutics possible?" in Manninen & Tuomela (Eds.), *Essays on explanation and understanding*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1976, pp. 59-77.

effected. That is, rather than a pure, stark rejection, a dialectical overcoming of the critical approach will advance to something important in its own right: the negative moment in Western philosophy will have been taken up and trans-

formed into something positive; namely, that structure of the world necessary to the meaningfulness of all discourse, and to the fullness of all thought.

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