

Richard M. Zaner

At Play in the Field of Possibles

An Essay on the Foundation
of Self and Free-Fantasy
Variational Method

AT PLAY IN THE FIELD
OF POSSIBLES



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Richard M. Zaner

Ann Geddes Stahlman Professor Emeritus
of Medical Ethics and Philosophy of Medicine
Vanderbilt University

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This book is for my enchanting wife, Junanne, a poet whose work and presence is a celebration of life; we have grown older together, loving every moment.

“It is out of the dailiness of life that one is driven into the deepest recesses of the self.”

--Stanley Kunitz

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PREFACE

A long time ago, I sat down in a rickety chair in a tiny room off a garage at an old desk and with a large stack of blank paper placed just so on it. It was the dead of winter in a place where all this made a great deal of difference—it was on the north shore of Long Island—Port Jefferson, more exactly— in the winter of 1972. I had the idea of sitting down to write about some things that had been nagging me for some time. Not too long, to be sure, for I was still quite a young man, only a whisker past a decade from receiving my doctorate at the Graduate Faculty of The New School in 1961.

I must have been charmed, for I had been able to study with some fabulous mentors: Maurice Natanson first, while I was still an undergraduate (although, it is true, a bit older than most, having already served in the Air Force as a B-26 gunner in Korea, with 50 combat missions behind me); then Alfred Schutz, Dorion Cairns, Hans Jonas, Werner Marx and, after Schutz's death in 1958, Aron Gurwitsch. All of which was not only instructive in the finest sense, but persistently raised a clutch of questions that, I sensed, needed pursuit. They also needed maturity, and I realized that I had to let them settle into my mind, my self. I insistently let them remain unaddressed for as long as I could before I began, ever so slowly and cautiously, to allow them to bubble up and stay a while in the sun, in the soil of my awake mind where I hoped to be able to dig into their grounds, eventually even nurture them to life.

So, that winter in the garage's tiny, cold side-room, I began the long process of airing out and thinking about these questions so

that I might begin to learn whether they really were worth pursuit, worth pondering first this way then that until, eventually, things could be a little settled between us, these questions and myself. And, like a lot of seekings that probe really good questions, things turned out quite a bit differently from what I had first imagined. What eventually emerged was a somewhat lengthy manuscript. Even so, I knew that what I was searching for had yet to be found much less clarified. So I put the thing to rest, back on the shelf where nobody would be likely to look. And forgot it.

I was, I now realized, acting in the best spirit of what I had been absorbing during my studies with those wonderfully keen and always critical mentors. I wanted, in a word, to explore these phenomena myself, on my own, as best as I could, without worrying about what others might have said or not said—even while I surely do recognize the value of that kind of scholarship. I needed, and still need, to explore so that I can see for myself, so to speak. Which is not to deny that others may well have visited this terrain—Husserl surely had done so, and some others, I have no doubt—but, in the spirit of phenomenological inquiry as I came to understand this discipline, I knew that I had to visit there for myself. What follows is the substance of that voyage—one that took a good deal longer than I had ever imagined.

This little book is not the first time I've published my thoughts about some of the matters those questions make prominent. I've done two articles—the first nicely buried in the honorable if neglected cemetery of a *Festschrift* in memory of Dorion Cairns,¹ the second an article several years later, where some of the ideas seemed to me more clearly pursued.² Still others touched lightly on this or that feature of the phenomenon, but

¹ Richard M. Zaner, "The Art of Free-Fantasy Variation in Rigorous Phenomenological Science," in F. Kersten and R. Zaner (eds.), *Phenomenology: Continuation and Criticism, Essays in Memory of Dorion Cairns*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973) 192-219.

² Richard M. Zaner, "Examples and Possibles: A Criticism of Husserl's Theory of Free-Fantasy Variation," *Research in Phenomenology* III, 1973, pp. 29-43

it was especially Cairns, I must say, whose meticulous study of Husserl—with whom he had spent some years on two different occasions—persuaded me that the phenomenon of free-fantasy deserved far more attention than it had received from him or Husserl, for that matter.

To my knowledge, this somewhat fabulous but always extraordinary method has never received very much attention, a circumstance which persuades me, to be blunt, that either of several hypotheses must be correct. Husserl's many strong claims (see below, Chapter II) about the method he conceived based on the phenomena is either (a) totally exaggerated, and thereby, it may be, my own interest as well; (b) the "naturalistic" bend of mind which, he noted more than once, would surely—and deservedly, which is the point here—find much to lampoon in Husserl's claim that "fiction" is the source of all "eternal knowledge;" or (c) Husserl's claim is basically right, but he left too much unexplored for his own claim to deserve more than passing mention; or, finally, (d) Husserl himself, far more focused on establishing the grounds and method for "eternal truths," for reasons that are clear enough in his many works, failed to focus on the phenomenon that underlies the very possibility of those grounds and method—and took most of his students and followers with him in this other route.

I think that (c) and (d) are closest to the truth. In fact, I have found no treatment of the specific phenomenon itself. As I note in Chapter II below, Edward Casey has surely come closest to appreciating what Husserl seemed to have been driving at. He has not only acknowledged Husserl's emphasis, but also appreciates that bringing free-fantasy variation within phenomenological method itself allows Husserl "to view imagining unambivalently and in its full significance."³ Casey's interest, however, is

³ Edward S. Casey, *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, 225.

less to probe the specific method, its roots and grounds, and its “full significance” than it is to inquire into imagination more generally—with which I have no quarrel.

I want to be clear about my interests, however. While I surely do probe the roots of free-fantasy variational method, I must also be very clear about the terrain my study actually explores. It was, in fact, while addressing issues posed by Husserl’s method that I found myself being tugged into what at first seemed a quite different theme: that of so-called “self.” Thoughts of learning what others had to say about free-fantasy quickly faded into the background as I was increasingly fascinated by what had, quite without advance notice, become the principal topic of my reflections. This was, in a certain sense, not surprising, for I had long been attracted to this phenomenon. (CS) Still, from the beginning of this present study, my aim had been to probe the roots of free-fantasy method; yet, as it progressed, the phenomenon of self was persistently being focused.

I make no apologies for this, as one might be tempted to term it, diversion, for as quickly becomes clear the two themes are closely connected, as I hope will become clear as I probe and explore the phenomenon of free-fantasy variation.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- CM = Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*
- DCa = Dorion Cairns, "Perceiving, Remembering, Image-Awareness & Feigning"
- DCb = Dorion Cairns, "An Approach to Husserlian Phenomenology"
- EU = Edmund Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil*
- FTL = Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*
- Ideas I = Edmund Husserl, *General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*
- PCP = Edmund Husserl, "Philosophy as a Rigorous Science," in Quentin Lauer (Editor), *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*.
- SB = Suzanne Bachelard, *A Study of Husserl's Formal and Transcendental Logic*.
- Zaner, CS = *The Context of Self*