

Introduction: Concepts of Tradition in Phenomenology

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Already at its first breakthrough, Husserl's phenomenology demanded a complete suspension of all uncertified theory or meaning inherited from the past. Not only was Husserl's famous return to "the things themselves" meant to dismiss any engagement in traditional, purely logical argumentation, and to draw attention to the significance of the direct presence and self-givenness of things in experience, but from the onset his philosophical program challenged all inherited "habits of thought" (*Denkgewohnheiten*) that determine our naïve reflection, and make it difficult for a purely phenomenological analysis to preserve its specific thematic attitude. Later on, Husserl developed this methodological position—already at work in the *Logical Investigations*—through the introduction of the phenomenological reduction, which was not only supposed to bracket all existential positing in general, but also to suspend any acquiring of previous knowledge as well as the assumed validity of all previously established sciences, regardless of how well-grounded or evident they were taken to be¹. Fundamentally, phenomenology was supposed to offer a radically new *beginning* for cognition. Following Descartes, Husserl claimed in the *Cartesian Meditations* that "anyone who seriously intends to become a philosopher" must withdraw once in his life "into himself and attempt, within himself, to overthrow and build anew all the sciences that, up to then, he has been accepting"². Similarly he contended that phenomenology itself, as a discipline, should begin anew "in absolute poverty, with an absolute lack of

¹ Cf. E. Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die Phänomenologie*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976, p. 122; English translation by F. Kersten, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983, pp. 131–132: "Consequently, *all natural sciences and all cultural sciences*, with their total stock of cognition, undergo exclusion".

² E. Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1992, p. 44; English translation by D. Cairns, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960, p. 2.

knowledge”³, although he nevertheless took phenomenology to be inevitably informed by a historical background⁴.

At the same time, however, the development of phenomenological inquiry gradually lead to a more ambiguous attitude towards history and tradition. *On the one hand*, Husserl himself began, from a *methodological* point of view, to see the philosophical tradition no longer as the source of mere unfortunate obstacles in the path of phenomenological research, but instead as a genuine problem, and even as a necessary intricacy of all experience, that needed to be seriously taken into account, in relation to phenomenology’s strive for original self-givenness. Thus, while Husserl constantly distinguished his genetic method from any sort of historical account in the usual sense, he was nevertheless constantly preoccupied in his later “genealogic” writings, such as *Experience and Judgment*, with the need to critically confront tradition as a whole. For instance, his genealogy of logic involves, among other things, a systematic confrontation with the logical tradition and, as such, it shows a definite transformation of Husserl’s attitude towards this issue, in relation, for example, to his approach in the *Logical Investigations*. Further, in his *Crisis*-work, Husserl initiates an impressive historical retrospection, explicitly conceived as a fundamental part of actual phenomenological research. While Husserl still conceives phenomenology as a primary “beginning” of philosophy, he explicitly states, in a notation pertaining to the same period, that, while a plain worker or civil servant does not need to perform a historical reflection to understand the meaning of his work, a philosopher is bound to do so⁵. Albeit an absolute beginning, phenomenology only comes to terms with the true motivation and significance of its enquiries by engaging with the philosophical tradition in a radical historical reflection⁶. While Husserl himself does not seem to draw the full methodological consequences that arise from this *de facto* re-evaluation of tradition, the task is instead explicitly assumed by Heidegger, already in the 1920s. In several of his early lectures, Heidegger emphasizes phenomenology’s severe neglect of tradition, and attempts to overcome it, by initiating a methodological reform of phenomenological research which is meant to make it more attentive to its inevitable historicity. In his early work, there are various attempts to reconcile Husserl’s phenomenology with Dilthey’s approach to history: they range from a very early project of interpreting history rather than

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See for instance E. Husserl, *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954 (henceforth quoted as Hua VI), p. 185.

⁵ Hua VI, p. 488.

⁶ Cf. to this extent also K. Knies, “The Practical Obscurity of Philosophy: Husserl’s ‘Arbeit der Probleme der letzten Voraussetzungen,’” *Husserl Studies* 27 (2011), pp. 83–104.

Husserl's *Ding*-ontology as the true guideline for phenomenological research,⁷ to the idea of transforming phenomenology as a whole into a proper "historical cognition".⁸ It is precisely in these attempts that his idea of a "destruction" of traditional philosophy is rooted. Regardless of the fact that these efforts do not result in a univocal and reliable solution, they manage to irreversibly establish "tradition" as a key problem of phenomenological methodology, a problem later emphasized by both critics of the phenomenological method and supporters of its so called "hermeneutic turn".

On the other hand, history and tradition also came gradually to be acknowledged *thematically* as the universal, all-embracing phenomena they are, that can and must be explored as such by phenomenological research. In his later manuscript notations of the 1930s, Husserl became more and more aware of these topics, as he was finally inclined to interpret the life-world itself in its full concreteness as a "generative tradition". In a notation from the early 1930s he noted: "But is the concrete life-world not through and through traditional in the broadest possible sense?"⁹ Tradition in this broad sense pertains to all meaning sprung from, direct or transmitted earlier acquisition. Therefore, the concept exceeds its ordinary meaning, exclusively related to inter-subjective historical inheritance, by gaining a fundamental importance for all areas of phenomenological analysis, insofar as they all have the structural characteristic of "traditionalizing". There is "tradition" at work in all purpose-driven action or bodily movement, in every instance of a given situation and in any relation to another thing or being. Understood in this broad sense, the term does not address only the genetic fact of sedimentation, but also a specific, "habitual" quality that all given objects show through themselves, as bearers of a past. Hence, the theme began to permeate various topics in later Husserlian phenomenology, such as historicity, memory, language, action, inter-subjectivity, life-world, culture etc. Similar issues were touched upon by Heidegger, already in the early 1920s, as his growing interest with the historicity of human existence drove him to repeatedly question the meaning of tradition in this respect. Thus, for instance, his lecture from the summer semester of 1921, *The Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression*, offered a

⁷ M. Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie (Wintersemester 1919/20)*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2010, p. 252.

⁸ See for instance M. Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen ausgewählter Abhandlungen des Aristoteles zu Ontologie und Logik (Sommersemester 1922). Anhang: Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles (Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation). Ausarbeitung für die Marburger und die Göttinger Philosophische Fakultät (1922)*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2005, 368; M. Heidegger, *Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung (Wintersemester 1923/24)*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006, 119, or M. Heidegger, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs (Sommersemester 1925)*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994, p. 9.

⁹ E. Husserl, *Die Lebenswelt. Auslegungen der vorgegebenen Welt und ihrer Konstitution. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1916–1937)*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2008, p. 521.

lengthy analysis of “tradition” as part of an attempt to clarify the manifold meanings of the term “history”.¹⁰

It is precisely this dual relation to tradition, of ever growing thematic interest, on the one hand, and methodological acknowledgement and criticism, on the other, that motivates the title of the 2011 issue of *Studia Phænomenologica: concepts of tradition in phenomenology*. It is therefore our aim to explore the two fundamental poles that thus define the phenomenological approach to tradition—the task of understanding thematically the problem of tradition in its universal scope, and the necessity of confronting it methodologically as a residual distortion, as an unavoidable detour for any “direct” experience or description—in an attempt to lay bare their tensions and ambiguities¹¹.

¹⁰ M. Heidegger, *Phänomenologie der Anschauung und des Ausdrucks. Theorie der philosophischen Begriffsbildung (Sommersemester 1920)*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2007, pp. 43-86.

¹¹ The coordinator of this Dossier wishes to thank CNCS-UEFISCDI (project number PN II-RU 26/2010) for supporting his work on the present issue.