

Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology: Nature, Spirit and Life

ANDREA STAITI

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Andrea Staiti's new book, *Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology: Nature, Spirit, and Life*, delves into the rich philosophical preoccupations that Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) inherits from his encounter with the works of Neo-Kantian philosophers and life-philosophers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Staiti's ambition in this book is twofold: the author wishes to introduce a debate in the history of philosophy and to review Husserl's late work in light of his engagement with his contemporaries. The debate in question concerns the foundations of the human and natural sciences and lays claim to a strong Kantian legacy in 19th century philosophy. In his book, Staiti demonstrates that the scene of this debate acted as no less than "an incubator for the development of Husserl's mature thought" (2) and introduces his reading hypothesis as an attempt to fill a gap left open by a large part of Husserlian scholarship. To this end, Staiti's project is skillfully executed by drawing on primary texts attributed to the Southwestern school of Neo-Kantianism (Franz Böhm, Emil Lask, Heinrich Rickert, Wilhelm Windelband), on those of life-philosophers Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Simmel, as well as on published works and unpublished manuscripts by Husserl himself.

In Chapter 1, "Southwestern Neo-Kantianism in search of ontology," Staiti reconstructs the various criteria put forward by Windelband, Rickert, Böhm, and Lask in the debate concerning the demarcation of the natural and the human sciences. Staiti argues that their concern is ultimately ontological, as they attempt to sketch out an account of the distinction between natural objects and objects irreducible to the laws of natural science. Many problems are, however, left unsolved by these authors, the least of which being a systematic exclusion of the criteria of subjectivity from the sphere of the human sciences.

A second group of philosophers is introduced in Chapter 2, "Life-philosophical accounts of history and psyche: Simmel and Dilthey." Life-philosophers Simmel and Dilthey emphasize the essential role played by psychic life (or the broader notion of life, in general) for human activity and consider it "the ontological marker of the human sciences" (14). Their account, however, threatens to fall into an ontological dualism split between the lifeless phenomena of natural sciences and the life-related facts of human sciences. The following chapters thus progressively elaborate Husserl's conception of transcendental subjectivity as a productive resource to answer problems left unsolved by Neo-Kantian and life-philosophers alike.

In Chapter 3, "Standpoints and attitudes: scientificity between Neo-Kantianism and Husserlian phenomenology," the author offers a comparison between the Neo-Kantian notion of 'standpoint' and the Husserlian notion of 'attitude' (*Einstellung*). While both notions value the constitutive role of subjectivity in shaping objects of knowledge and undermine the copy-theory of cognition, Staiti marks important differences between both accounts. Husserl's notion of *Einstellung* makes room for the possibility of a shift between attitudes, with "one and the same subjectivity [cutting] across [them]," (105). The Neo-Kantian notion of standpoint does not accommodate such shifts, amounting to epistemic and transcendental difficulties.

Chapter 4, “The reception of Husserl’s *Ideen* among the Neo-Kantians,” contains a discussion of the charges led by the school of Neo-Kantian philosophers against Husserl following his publication of the *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (1913). Staiti introduces Heinrich Rickert and Paul Natorp’s criticisms and sketches out a response to them from a Husserlian perspective. Rickert mainly takes issue with the idea of eidetic knowledge as intuition and defends it against a strictly conceptual and discursive conception of knowledge, while Natorp points to the problems raised by an eidetic science of consciousness.

In Chapter 5, “Husserl’s critique of Rickert’s secretly naturalistic transcendentalism: The *Natur* und *Geist* lectures (1919-1927),” Staiti testifies to Husserl’s critical engagement with Rickert’s writings. Husserl criticizes Rickert’s criteria of demarcation between the natural and the human sciences. More so, he argues that the question of the distinction between different fields of research should have been resolved prior to any scientific enquiry and suggests only a regression towards pre-theoretical consciousness through the *epoché* (cf. Chapter 6) can take us back to the sphere where ontological distinctions are constituted.

Husserl’s relationship with the life-philosophers and the exact measure of his appreciation and criticism of their work is further developed in Chapter 6, “*Historia formaliter spectata*: Husserl and the life-philosophers.” Although both projects bear similarities and manifest a keen interest in the pre-theoretical field of experience, Husserl criticizes Simmel and Dilthey’s lack of clear conceptual clarifications between the notions of life and nature, as well as between those of the empirical and the transcendental dimensions of subjectivity. This chapter includes a discussion of intersubjectivity and empathy, historical time and motivation (vs. natural causality).

In Chapter 7, “The life-world as the source of nature and culture: towards a transcendental-phenomenological worldview,” Staiti introduces Husserl’s concept of the life-world in light of Kant’s critical undermining of naturalism *qua* worldview. Although his position regarding the relationship that holds between the notion of worldview (*Weltanschauung*) and the notion of scientificity changes, Husserl’s *Crisis* ultimately goes on to develop a humanist worldview complemented by a ‘deconstructive’ inquiry into the foundations of the naturalistic worldview.

In Chapter 8, “Ethical and cultural implications in Husserl’s phenomenology of the life-world,” the book is concluded by considering the ethical implications and the transformative dimension of Husserl’s transcendental analyses of the life-world. In Husserl’s view, the phenomenological attitude also yielded a specific type of existential transformation and could heighten one’s awareness to her place and responsibility in a community of living beings. This chapter includes a clarification of Husserl’s notion of teleology and a discussion of the specific role played by home-worlds in establishing a shared life-world.

Overall, Staiti’s book exceeds the scope of a specialized textual exegesis and raises essential questions for those interested in Husserlian phenomenology, the philosophy of the human sciences and, to some extent, the history of philosophy in general.