

Dermot Moran: *Husserl's Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction*

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The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology (hereafter: *The Crisis*) has long occupied a position amongst Edmund Husserl's writings of almost singular renown and influence. It is easy to see why this should be so. *The Crisis* offered the reading public its first glimpse of a new Husserl, or at least one strikingly different in tone, mode of presentation, and thematic emphasis from the Husserl of *Ideas I* or *Cartesian Meditations*. In a seeming reversal of the Augustinian dictum that Husserl used to close *Cartesian Meditations*,¹ *The Crisis* looks outward rather than within, toward the body, history, the intersubjective community, and an analysis of the life-world, arguably Husserl's most enduring philosophical contribution and the one with which *The Crisis* is most closely associated. And these concerns are framed against a backdrop of existential urgency previously absent from Husserl's work. The "most burning" questions for Husserl are no longer purely theoretical, but now have to do with nothing less than the "meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of human existence" (Hua VI, p. 4/6).

But as Dermot Moran points out in the volume under review, *The Crisis* is still "a difficult and challenging text" (p. 10). After all, *The Crisis* was composed hastily and left unfinished at the time of Husserl's death, and so the tentative, unsettled quality that characterizes so much of Husserl's writing is even more pronounced. Indeed, Moran suggests that it is better to think of *The Crisis* as a "projected book" (p. 40), "more a collage, a patch-work of fragments, than an actual, unified book" (p. 3). The text bears this out. Time and again problems are outlined only to have their solutions sketched roughly or put off in favor of future analyses Husserl never

¹ "Noli foras ire, in te redi, in interiore homine habitat veritas." ("Do not go outside; return into yourself. Truth dwells in the inner man.")

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lived to complete. And although free of some of the technical jargon that makes reading Husserl so forbidding, *The Crisis* can be digressive and repetitive in ways that obscure the narrative trajectory of the work. Moreover, the very novelty that has drawn readers to *The Crisis* also raises questions about the overall continuity of Husserl's thought. Does *The Crisis* represent a natural culmination, a final recrystallization, or a radical break, which calls into question the legitimacy of speaking of "Husserlian phenomenology" in any unified sense? Moran is keenly aware of these issues and his critical study of *The Crisis* is informed by them. His is a study attuned both to the promise and the challenge of Husserl's last great work.

Moran sets out to provide what he describes as an "explanatory and critical introduction" (p. 1) to *The Crisis*, which will likewise serve to "introduce Husserl's mature transcendental phenomenology" more generally in terms of its "main concepts and methodological moves" (p. 9). In accordance with the editorial policy of Cambridge's "Introductions to Key Philosophical Texts" series, of which his book is a part, Moran assumes no familiarity with Husserl or phenomenological philosophy at the outset. He therefore begins broadly, devoting the first three of his nine chapters (pp. 1–65) to what is in effect an extended introductory section. Moran is more than up to this task, his several recent introductory texts having established him as one of the ablest general expositors of phenomenology.²

The first of Moran's introductory chapters ("Introduction") adumbrates several aspects of *The Crisis*, both historical and philosophical, that help the reader begin to understand the text's significance for the development of Husserl's thought and phenomenological philosophy as a whole. These aspects, which are further elaborated in Chapters 1 and 2, include the circumstances of text's composition and publication, its philosophical motivations, and some of its distinctive contributions to Husserlian phenomenology. Of the contributions mentioned, Moran highlights the method of historical analysis used in *The Crisis*: a process of "backwards questioning" (*Rückfragen*) or "backward reflection" (*Rückbesinnung*) aimed at uncovering the sedimented meanings essential to the emergence and subsequent achievements of the theoretical science. The first chapter also helpfully clarifies the various senses of "crisis" at work in Husserl's text. For despite the fact that Husserl's title is written in the singular, there is not one crisis, but several. In fact, by Moran's count (p. 7) there are no less than six crises concerning Husserl, although they can generally be reduced to two: a crisis of *method* afflicting the various theoretical sciences, and an *existential* crisis having to do with the meaning and value of human life.

After a general overview of Husserl's life and writings (Chapter 1), Moran concludes the introductory portion of his book in Chapter 2 ("Husserl's *Crisis*: An Unfinished Masterpiece"), which provides a more detailed account of the genesis and structure of *The Crisis* and discusses a number of technical phenomenological notions (static vs. genetic analysis, sense, constitution, intentionality, etc.) that Husserl relies on, either explicitly or implicitly, throughout *The Crisis*. Chapter 2

² These texts are *Introduction to Phenomenology* (2000), *The Phenomenology Reader*, edited with Timothy Mooney (2002), *Edmund Husserl: Founder of Phenomenology* (2005), and *The Husserl Dictionary*, written with Joseph Cohen (2012).

also makes it a point to emphasize what can easily be overlooked with so much of the discussion surrounding *The Crisis* focusing on its differences from Husserl's other work: Husserl intended *The Crisis* as an introduction to transcendental phenomenology, the same transcendental phenomenology he had been pursuing since his discovery of the reduction in 1905. The form this final introduction takes, however, is completely different from the one taken in earlier works like *Ideas I* and *Cartesian Meditations*. On the one hand, *The Crisis* employs its lengthy historical reflection on the meaning of modern science in order to position transcendental phenomenology as the teleological culmination of Western intellectual culture. On the other hand, *The Crisis* presents phenomenology as a powerful curative science—"cultural medicine" in Moran's phrase (p. 9)—uniquely capable of resolving the methodological crisis of the sciences as well as the existential crisis of modern human life.

Needless to say, these are grand claims and the central critical task of Moran's book is to examine them. As he announces:

We shall have to consider in the course of this work whether Husserl's vision of philosophy's role in its relation to the crises of contemporary culture offers the necessary challenge needed to address the situation, or whether it remains a merely rhetorical call to arms on behalf of a universal rationality which remains ungrounded (p. 39).

In order to accomplish this most effectively, Moran elects to proceed thematically rather than follow the text of *The Crisis* in its linear development. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 cover Husserl's analysis of the natural, psychological, and historical sciences respectively, ostensibly with an eye toward revealing their methodological shortcomings. Among these shortcomings is a neglect of the life-world, which Moran treats in Chapter 6. The stage is then set for a final consideration of transcendental phenomenology, focused particularly on transcendental idealism and issues related to the ego (including the "paradox of subjectivity"), in Chapter 7. A final chapter on the reception and influence of *The Crisis* concludes the book.

Chapters 3–7, which compose the critical study proper, do several things well. Displayed throughout, for example, is a remarkable grasp of the full scope of Husserl's corpus as Moran expertly situates *The Crisis* with respect to Husserl's many publications, manuscripts, and lectures. In doing so, Moran is able to make a case for the continuity of Husserl's thought, showing both that the features of *The Crisis* often taken to be wholly new (e.g., the concern for history, intersubjectivity, the life-world as the pre-given surrounding world) have some precedent in other works and that earlier phenomenological ideas (e.g., transcendental idealism, the primacy of the individual ego) remain in play. Moran also illuminates various points of contact and conflict between *The Crisis* and a wide range of philosophers (e.g., Descartes, Kant, Dilthey, Heidegger, Derrida) and intellectual traditions (e.g., Gestalt psychology, anthropology, Neo-Kantianism, psychoanalysis, the history of science). Most important, however, is the way Moran thoroughly unpacks the text of *The Crisis* and takes stock of its abundant philosophical contents. Moran shows that despite its incompleteness, *The Crisis* is a fertile work, rich with philosophical promise.

Unfortunately, in the midst accomplishing these things Moran allows the focus of his commentary to drift from the theme of crisis and phenomenology's unique role in addressing it. This is apparent from the outset in Chapter 3, "Galileo's Revolution." Chapter 3 is devoted primarily to §9 of *The Crisis*, where Husserl carries out the first of his historical, "backward reflections" on the emergence of the modern scientific worldview, in this case focused on Galileo and his application of pure geometry to the traditional concept of nature. Moran explains what Husserl takes this "mathematization of nature" to have accomplished—and Husserl never fails to acknowledge it as an accomplishment of great genius—but says little about why this accomplishment is problematic, so problematic, in fact, as to precipitate a crisis in the very science it inaugurated. Moran does mention early on in the chapter how it is "the greatest danger [...] to substitute this ideal entity [i.e. nature as conceived by mathematical physics] for the concrete experiential world," that the former "should never be substituted" for the latter (p. 69), but he drops the issue without elaborating the nature of this danger. Moran only picks the issue up again in the chapter's concluding section (pp. 96–99), writing how the aforementioned substitution "threatens the foundations of the scientific achievement" and "is precisely why science is in a crisis" (pp. 96, 98). As statements of Husserl's view, these remarks are unimpeachable. However, they leave unexplained *why* Galileo's revolutionary innovation, which launched a theoretical endeavor of unprecedented success, should produce such a seemingly paradoxical consequence.³

A similar explanatory shortcoming occurs in Chapter 4, "The Crisis in Psychology," which centers on Husserl's critique of empirical psychology. In Chapter 3, Moran keeps the theme of crisis more securely in the foreground and makes clear precisely where Husserl finds fault with psychology: its "unquestioned commitment to naturalism" (p. 108). It is owing to this naturalism that "[p]sychology is in a permanent state of crisis" (p. 100). The term "naturalism" can mean many things, depending on context, and Moran never formally defines his use of the term, but he seems to have two component notions in mind. The first notion is *methodological*: psychology is naturalistic because of "its aping of the methods of the natural sciences" (p. 100). The second notion is *ontological*: psychology is naturalistic because, like the natural sciences, it assumes that the only objects amenable to scientific investigation—indeed, the only objects there *are* at all—are those belonging to the physical world, that is "a world of causally interacting bodies in space and time" (p. 110).⁴ The problem with Moran's discussion of naturalism is that he never adequately explains just what is so

³ In a curious move, Moran chooses to devote much of the final paragraph of his conclusion to a discussion of the historian of mathematics Jacob Klein, rather than elaborate the dangers of substituting "the mathematically ideal for the intuited-real" (p. 98). This is a case where the scholarly scope of Moran's text works to its detriment.

⁴ This second, ontological notion seems to accord most closely with Husserl's understanding of naturalism, at least as expressed in "Philosophy as Rigorous Science." There Husserl characterizes naturalism as the view that "[w]hatever is is [...] physical, belonging to the unified totality of physical nature," where "physical nature" means "a unity of spatio-temporal being subject to exact laws of nature" (Hua XXV, p. 9/79).

problematic about it. Statements that a naturalistic psychology is deeply problematic because “it concerns real people, must make reference to the real spatio-temporal world and to embodied individual subjects in their causal interactions with nature” (p. 109) or because it “takes, for instance, *the person I married* to be a real, extant person in the world, whereas this person is actually an intentionally constituted entity” (p. 120; Moran’s emphasis) will surely be unhelpful, likely even bewildering, to those readers not yet familiar with the tradition of transcendental philosophy. (Moran does discuss transcendental philosophy in detail, but not until Chapter 7.) At points, the problem reads as if psychology is at fault simply for not being phenomenology. That is, when we are told that psychology suffers from a “lack of a true account of inner life” (p. 108), that it “misconstrues the essential character and meaning” of human subjectivity (p. 100), this is because it does not paint a portrait of subjectivity as the phenomenologist sees it, namely, as a nexus of “intentional syntheses, implications, sedimentations, habitualities, and horizons” (p. 111). However, absent reasons for preferring the phenomenologist’s picture, this strikes the reader as dogmatic and question-begging, since part of the point of illuminating the crisis in psychology is to motivate the necessity of phenomenological inquiry in the first place.⁵

After Chapter 4 the theme of crisis disappears almost entirely. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with Husserl’s conception of history and the life-world respectively, and there is much that is useful in them. For example, Chapter 5, “Rethinking Tradition: Husserl on History,” shows how there is more to Husserl’s historical reflections than a history of philosophy and science; there is, at least implicitly and in an inchoate form, a philosophy of history at work as well, which seeks to illuminate “how a sense of history comes to be established, how humans situate themselves in cultural contexts and traditions, and [...] the necessary a priori features that make such living possible” (p. 140). And Chapter 6, “Husserl’s Problematical Concept of the Life-World,” succeeds in carefully prizing apart the various, sometimes disparate, notions that Husserl clustered together under the single title “life-world.” But in neither chapter do we find any explicit attempt to connect the analyses contained therein to the theme of crisis. How, for example, can Husserl’s novel treatment of history in terms of tradition, sedimentation, habitualities, generativity, communalization, etc.

⁵ Moran does try to motivate Husserl’s criticism from another angle, by focusing on how psychology’s “methodological individualism” (p. 111) supposedly undermines any attempt to provide a proper treatment of intersubjectivity (p. 125). Whatever the cogency of this criticism may be, it is unclear how it would not equally apply to phenomenology. For as is well known and as Moran himself emphasizes, Husserl was unwaveringly committed to a strong form of individualism, both of a methodological and ontological sort. Moran writes, for example, of how Husserl “begins from the first person experience of the self or ‘egoic subjectivity’” (p. 124) and how this “egoic core to the self [...] is essential to it at a level prior to intersubjective engagement” (p. 254). Indeed, according to Moran, “the exercise of the transcendental reduction is supposed to lead beyond [the] intersubjectively communicating self to uncover the transcendental ego as an absolute singularity” (p. 254). On Moran’s view, Husserl “never abandons his commitment to the *ontological priority of the transcendental ego*” (p. 230; Moran’s emphasis). This individualism proved notoriously troublesome for Husserl’s own attempts to account for intersubjectivity phenomenologically. See, for example, Husserl’s dissatisfaction with the fifth of his *Cartesian Meditations* or Moran’s own admission in Chapter 7 that *The Crisis* “never manages to sort out [the] transcendental relations between ego, temporality and the constitution of the other” (p. 255).

provide an understanding of culture adequate to restoring a sense of meaning and purpose to human life? Or: How does phenomenology's discovery of the life-world represent an accomplishment capable of providing a new, fully adequate foundation to the objective sciences? Chapters 5 and 6 are silent on questions of this sort, making no attempt to answer or indeed even raise them.

In the final chapter of the commentary portion of his text, Chapter 7, "Phenomenology as Transcendental Philosophy," Moran deals with some of the most difficult issues not only in *The Crisis* but in Husserl's philosophy as a whole. Husserl's "unwavering commitment" (p. 218) to transcendental idealism is Moran's central focus, but he also discusses the relationship between mundane and transcendental subjectivity, Husserl's remarks on transcendental intersubjectivity, and the "paradox of subjectivity." Chapter 7, however, is inconclusive in two respects. First, we are told at the chapter's end that Husserl "never manages to sort out [the] transcendental relations between ego, temporality and the constitution of the other" (p. 255) and that these issues resist any definitive interpretation because of "the fragmentary nature of Husserl's late texts on these topics" (p. 256). Thus whether phenomenology is, as Husserl thought, "the highest form of transcendental philosophy" (p. 8), or whether it offers a successful non-psychological account of subjectivity is left undecided. Second, we are not told why Husserl believed that transcendental phenomenology, of all things, was the only possible solution to Europe's crisis situation. Indeed, as was the case in Chapters 5 and 6, the theme of crisis never surfaces at all. In light of this neglect, I question Moran's choice to close the book with a long chapter (the longest of the book) dedicated to the reception and influence of *The Crisis*. This space would have been put to better use by returning to the critical task originally announced on p. 39: considering "whether Husserl's vision of philosophy's role in its relation to the crises of contemporary culture offers the necessary challenge needed to address the situation."

In the final analysis, then, it is hard not to see Moran's book as, at least in part, a missed opportunity. *The Crisis* is a text eminently worthy of a full-length critical study and Moran, to his credit, raises many of the questions one would want such a study to answer. However, by allowing the theme of crisis to gradually recede from view and, hence, never explaining how phenomenology is to administer its "cultural medicine," Moran falls short of achieving his full critical aspirations. The question of whether or not *The Crisis* lives up to its promise therefore falls to the reader. Having been exposed to the richness and complexity of Husserl's final philosophical reflections, the reader must take it upon herself to consider their ultimate philosophical worth, particularly in relation to the scientific and cultural crises of modern life. And perhaps this is just as Husserl would have it. After all, Husserl always insisted that the task of thinking should be the philosopher's own personal affair. My worry, however, is that the beginner reader, who, unlike the scholar, is not already convinced of the value of coming to terms with Husserl's philosophy, will not have been sufficiently motivated to take up this task. What's worse, I fear that she might be left with the impression that Husserl's final, urgent appeal on behalf of transcendental phenomenology really *is* nothing more than a "merely rhetorical call to arms on behalf of a universal rationality which remains ungrounded" (p. 39).

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