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The Phenomenology of Personhood: Charles Taylor and Edmund Husserl

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The Phenomenology of Personhood

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‘The great example that I’ve been battling with throughout my life is the whole epistemological tradition from Descartes. Descartes says in one of the letters that we get all our ideas from the impact of the outside world causing representations in our minds.’
Charles Taylor

In this paper I want to reflect on the philosophical resources concerning the person to be found in the phenomenological tradition, specifically in Husserl, in order to bolster and develop Charles Taylor’s challenging analyses and reflections on personhood over the course of his work. Charles Taylor’s approach of attending to sense (*Sinn*)¹, and indeed, ‘making sense’² is a form of *phenomenology* and, indeed, Taylor himself speaks of his account of personal and identity as ‘phenomenological’ in *Sources of the Self*,³ and, more recently, has described part of his approach in *A Secular Age* as phenomenological.⁴ In what follows I shall concentrate on Husserl, but there are also, of course, extremely important resources in some of the more neglected figures of the phenomenological movement, e.g. Edith Stein⁵, Max Scheler⁶, and Hedwig Conrad-

¹ As early as his *The Explanation of Behaviour* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), Taylor acknowledges his proximity to phenomenology and especially to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intentional sense (*sens*), see p. 69 n. 1.

² Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), see Ronald Kuipers’ interview with Charles Taylor in *The Other Journal*: ‘I spent a lot of time in the book describing phenomenologically what it was like to move away from Christianity, to reject Christianity really, and to be excited by Deism, by Jacobinism, by Nietzsche, and then more recently by Bataille, by Robinson Jeffers, and others’.

⁵ See especially Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1964; reprinted Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989) and Edith Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology*

Martius,⁷ but time does not allow us to develop their particular approaches. I want to suggest that Taylor's account is much closer to that of the mature Husserl than, perhaps, he realises. In so doing, I want to defend Husserl against the charge that he is somehow trapped within the tradition of self-consciousness as described by Taylor. I shall develop some relevant aspects of embodied subjectivity shared by Husserl and Taylor; and, finally, I shall reflect on the difficult problematic of the relation between natural and transcendental approaches to personhood.

Personhood as a Philosophical Problem

The concept of the person and personhood has re-emerged as a central concern of contemporary philosophy of mind and action. The concept of personhood is fundamental to morality, law, and the health and human sciences, yet it lacks theoretical definiteness. It belongs, as Taylor says, in the background as part of the moral ontology that grounds our intuitions. Questions arise as to whether fetuses, patients in a coma, dolphins or other creatures are persons. These questions simply highlight how poorly resourced our current thinking about personhood is.

Many efforts have been made to define what uniquely determines personhood. The concept has its roots in Latin philosophy especially among the Early Christian Fathers. The Greek *prosopon* means 'visage', 'face' or 'mask' and Clement of

and the Humanities (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2000).

⁶ Max Scheler was responsible for developing a phenomenological account of personhood in his ethical writings, especially, in his *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values. A New Attempt Toward a Foundation of An Ethical Personalism*, trans Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973. (1913). For Scheler, the person is the 'performer of acts' or 'bearer of acts'. The 'world' is the objective correlate of the person he says in *Formalism in Ethics*. At the centre of the human is what Scheler calls the 'heart', the seat of love rather than a transcendental ego. The person is a 'loving being'. In later writings, Scheler insists that there is always a 'we' before there is an 'I', see his *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge*, Introduction by Kenneth W Stikkers (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 67.

⁷ See Hedwig Conrad-Martius, *Die Geistseele des Menschen* (Munich: Kösel, 1960).

Alexandria complained of those women who turned their faces (*prosopa*) into masks (*prosopeia*).⁸ *Persona* in Latin is thought to come from *per sonare*, the mask through which actors spoke. Boethius played a key role in defining the person as an individual substance of a rational nature as part of his explication of the Trinity.

The philosopher Lynne Rudder Baker asserts (somewhat pleonistically) that it is possession of the first-person perspective:

...what's unique about us are the features that make us persons, not just animals—features that depend on the first-person perspective (like wondering how one is going to die or evaluating one's own desires).⁹

According to Rudder Baker, personhood is not identical with being an organism:

The person endures as long as she has a first-person perspective; the organism endures as long as it maintains certain biological functions. The person's persistence conditions are first-personal, and the organism's are third-personal. Hence, it is possible for one to exist without the other. So, the person is not essentially biological; the organism is.

Deep and complex theoretical issues are raised by the concept of personhood. Is selfhood the same as personhood? Is (potential or actual) self-awareness or consciousness required for personhood? How does personhood relate to embodiment? Is the person identical with his or her organic body? Is personhood identical with selfhood and the domain of the ego? Is it dependent on memory? And so on. Taylor's approach offers a different picture, one that sidesteps many of these questions.

⁸ See James G. Hart, *Who One Is. Book I: Meontology of the "I": A Transcendental Phenomenology, Phaenomenologica* 173 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).

⁹ Lynne Rudder Baker, *Persons and Bodies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Nevertheless, personhood or selfhood remains central for him. Taylor is a relentless opponent of the definition of personhood in terms of self-consciousness (whether in Locke or Parfit).¹⁰ Furthermore, for Taylor, to be a self is not identical with being an organism.¹¹ Personhood is not a matter of being able to entertain second-order desires.¹² Our condition is best summed up by Taylor's conception of 'embodied agency' which he sees not as a contingent feature but as essential to the human condition: our experience is necessarily that of embodied agents.¹³

Taylor on Personhood

Across his career, Charles Taylor has offered several philosophically rich and provocative reflections on the nature of persons and selfhood.¹⁴ Taylor's concerns generally have been twofold. On the one hand, he wants to map certain assumptions (often unarticulated) about human agency (inwardness, freedom, individuality, and so on) embedded in modern culture, and also to show how they condition, frame ('inescapable frameworks'), and at the same time distort our understanding. He is inspired by the Wittgenstein idea that we can be in the grip of a particularly powerful and insidious picture of how things are (*Ein Bild heilt uns gefangen*)¹⁵.

Secondly, Taylor aims to develop a set of assumptions that counteract the prevailing

¹⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, op. cit., p. 49.

¹¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self* op. cit., p. 34.

¹² See Taylor, 'What is Human Agency?' Human Agency and Language, Philosophical Papers I (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P. 1985), pp. 1-44.

¹³ Charles Taylor, 'Transcendental Arguments', *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 25.

¹⁴ See for instance, Charles Taylor, 'Responsibility for Self', in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amélie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 281-99; and idem, 'The Person', in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins and Steven Lukes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 257-81; and idem, 'The Moral Topography of the Self', in Stanley Messer, Louis Sass and Robert Woolfolk, eds, *Hermeneutics and Psychological Theory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988) pp. 298-320.

¹⁵ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* § 115.

‘representational epistemology from Descartes to Quine’,¹⁶ what he sometimes calls ‘mediational epistemology’.¹⁷ As he acknowledges, Taylor uses the term ‘epistemology’ not to mean just the philosophical discipline, but more broadly to characterize an entire outlook towards knowledge that regards it as a correct representation of an independent reality.¹⁸ Reality is *mediated* to us by irritations on our sensory surfaces, by language or whatever; all these views belong to this picture. Associated with this outlook, moreover, is a conception of the self as a disengaged, dispassionate, rational onlooker on the world. Importantly, as Taylor charts it, this conception of the self has had profound moral and political consequences. Taylor’s approach is to highlight the inadequacies of this picture and offer a different one, inspired largely by Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Hegel and others. On his alternate view, we are embodied and embedded in a world in which we ‘cope’ in ways that are often pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic yet which involve *understanding*.¹⁹ Even in our most detached theoretical approach to the world we are *agents* and agency here means also *interpretative* engagement; we are *construing* the world not simply *reflecting* it.

Taylor is a strongly historical thinker. We can be in the thrall of different pictures over time. In his major studies such as *Sources of the Self* (1989), Taylor has uncovered different models of the self operating in different periods of Western culture: the disengaged controlling self of calculative reason; the Romantic expressivist self that stresses integration of reason and sensibility; the modernist,

¹⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, op. cit., p. ix.

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carmen and Mark Hansen (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), p. 26.

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, ‘Overcoming Epistemology’, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 3.

¹⁹ Charles Taylor, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, op. cit. ,pp. 35-37.

multilevel, decentred self, and so on. He recognizes that selfhood is lived on many levels and is opposed to reductionist forms of explanation that focus on only one of these many levels.²⁰

In part inspired by the tradition of Kant (where persons are essentially moral centres and followers of rational rules set by themselves), he is also deeply influenced by Merleau-Ponty and Hubert Dreyfus' reading of Heidegger, which emphasises the manner in which agents are involved in 'coping' activity engaged in the world, as well as the hermeneutic tradition according to which humans are 'self-interpreting animals'.²¹ Taylor writes:

Heidegger, for instance, shows — especially in his celebrated analysis of being-in-the-world — that the condition of our forming disengaged representations of reality is that we must be already engaged in coping with our world, dealing with the things in it, at grips with them. Disengaged description is a special possibility, realizable only intermittently, of a being (*Dasein*) who is always “in” the world in another way, as an agent engaged in realizing a certain form of life. That is what we are about “first and mostly” (*zunächst und zumeist*).²²

On Taylor's view, persons or selves (in his sense)²³ are those beings whose situations are meaningful and have 'significance'²⁴ and 'import'²⁵, i.e. have relevance for and are not indifferent for the subjects: 'We are selves only in that certain issues matter for

²⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, op. cit., p. 480.

²¹ See Charles Taylor, 'Self-Interpreting Animals', in *Human Language and Agency, Philosophical Papers I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 45-75.

²² Charles Taylor, 'Overcoming Epistemology', in Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, op. cit., p. 11.

²³ *Sources of the Self*, op. cit., p. 33.

²⁴ See C. Taylor, 'Cognitive Psychology', in *Human Agency and Language*, op. cit., p. 202.

²⁵ Charles Taylor, 'Self-Interpreting Animals', in *Human Language and Agency, Philosophical Papers I*, op. cit., p. 54.

us'.²⁶ Emotions such as shame reveal situations which are experienced in a certain way by subjects and without those subjects the concept of 'shame' makes no sense. Or to put it another way, our lives do not take shape and make sense *without us* as actors in, interpreters of, and responders to situations.²⁷ The question 'who' is of vital importance.²⁸ As Taylor writes:

To ask what a person is, in abstraction from his or her self-interpretations, is to ask a fundamentally misguided question, one to which there couldn't in principle be an answer.²⁹

On Taylor's view--as, I shall argue, in Husserl's phenomenology--the heart of embodied selfhood is the *person*, understood as the unified, goal-directed centre of action, bearer of rights and status, responsibilities and moral standing. From the Hegelian tradition, moreover, persons must be understood not as static entities but as having a history and inhabiting a social world with others. Persons connect to one another in social situations. Persons grow and evolve and have a sense of ownership and directedness in their lives (as developed in Taylor's *Source of the Self*). Persons are, in Charles Taylor's terms, *respondents*:

A person is a being who can be addressed and who can reply. Let's call a being of this kind a respondent.³⁰

To be a self is possible only with other interlocutors, involved in 'webs of interlocution'.³¹ I mention in passing that the concept of *narrativity* (as invoked by Taylor) needs to be very carefully applied. Persons do not write their own story in the sense of inventing it as creative authors, although they do tell stories about their

²⁶ *Sources of the Self*, op. cit., p. 34.

²⁷ See Ullrich Melle, 'Husserl's Personalist Ethics', *Husserl Studies*, vol. 23 (2007), pp. 1-15.

²⁸ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, op. cit., p. 29.

²⁹ *Sources of the Self*, p. 34.

³⁰ Charles Taylor, 'The Concept of a Person', in *Human Language and Agency, Philosophical Papers I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 97.

³¹ *Sources of the Self*, op. cit., 36.

evolving personhood and some of those stories themselves accrue to and come to define their personhood in particular ways, just as a rolling snow ball gather more snow that adds to it. How a person views her own childhood or her role as a member of a family is precisely *her* story, albeit that it may grate against the stories of other family members about shared events.

On this account, in summary, persons are embodied, embedded, socially involved and historically conditioned agents and respondents. Taylor himself take his direction on embodied agency³² from the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (which he thinks parallels insights in Wittgenstein and Polanyi)³³ rather than Husserl. But to my ear he sounds remarkably close to the views of the mature Husserl rather than the anti-subjectivist Heidegger.

It may seem slightly out of tune with the tenor of Taylor's thought to insist on his relation to Husserl rather than with Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, or Gadamer (whom I also count as belonging to the phenomenological tradition, albeit its hermeneutic wing). But Taylor is at least sensitive to the efforts made by the mature Husserl of the *Crisis*. Taylor agrees with Husserl's own break with traditional representationalist epistemology, his rejection of the primary/secondary quality distinction imposed by mechanistic science at the origins of modernity, his rejection of naturalism and of scientific objectivism.

Charles Taylor rejects the representationalist account of the self found in modern philosophy. Husserl too explicitly rejects his own earlier 'bundle' view, his 'complex

³² Charles Taylor, 'Transcendental Arguments', *Philosophical Arguments*, op. cit., p. 22.

³³ *Sources of the Self*, op. cit., p. 460.

of experiences' view, even his 'constructed self' view. For instance Husserl writes in his *Passive Synthesis* lectures:

The ego is not a box containing egoless lived-experiences or a slate of consciousness upon which they light up and disappear again, or a bundle of lived-experiences, a flow of consciousness or something assembled in it; rather the ego that is at issue here can be manifest in each lived-experience of wakefulness or lived-experiential act as pole, as ego-center, ...it can be manifest in them as their outward radiating or inward radiating point, and yet not in them as a part or piece. (APS 17; XVII 363).

Taylor disagrees with Husserl, however, in relation to the latter's continuing affirmation of the central grounding role of Cartesian reflexive self-certainty. In his paper, 'Overcoming Epistemology',³⁴ Taylor argues that reflexive, self-given certainty had the status of a moral ideal in modern philosophy. He writes:

The power of this ideal can be sensed in the following passage from Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* (1929), all the more significant in that Husserl had already broken with some of the main theses of the epistemological tradition. He asks in the First Meditation whether the "hopelessness" of the current philosophical predicament doesn't spring from our having abandoned Descartes's original emphasis on self-responsibility: [Taylor then quotes the following passage from Husserl in German]

Must not the demand for a philosophy aiming at the ultimate conceivable freedom from prejudice, shaping itself with actual

³⁴ In Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 1-19.

autonomy according to ultimate evidences it has itself produced, and therefore absolutely self-responsible – must not this demand, instead of being excessive, be part of the fundamental sense of genuine philosophy?³⁵

For Taylor, Husserl's ideal of self-responsibility, as articulated here, is foundational for modern culture.³⁶ In that paper, Taylor discovers certain anthropological associations which accompany this view of self-responsibility. Chief among them is the idea of human freedom involving a certain detachment or disengagement of the subject. For Taylor, on the other hand, even in theoretical activity humans are *agents* and not merely passive representers of knowledge.

Taylor is insistent that we cannot leap out of the human condition. Hence, objectivism and naturalism always already have failed. We can only understand from within the game that humans play, within the 'web of interlocution'. He is an opponent of the Lockean 'punctual', radically subjectivist, disengaged form of the self where all that matters is self-awareness or self-consciousness³⁷: "The punctual agent seems to be nothing else but a 'self' an 'I'."³⁸ Rather my self-understanding has 'temporal depth' and 'involves narrative'.³⁹

The Mature Husserl on Personhood

There is much more to the concept of subjectivity and egoity in Husserl's

³⁵ See E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* § 2, Hua II 47, trans. Dorion Cairns, p. 6. Taylor in fact quotes the German: 'Sollte die vermeintlich überspannte Forderung einer auf letzte erdenkliche Vorurteilslosigkeit abgestellten Philosophie, einer in wirklicher Autonomie aus letzten selbst erzeugten Evidenzen sich gestaltenden und sich von daher absolut selbstverantwortenden Philosophie nicht vielmehr zum Grundsinn echter Philosophie gehören?', see Taylor, 'Overcoming Epistemology', *Philosophical Arguments*, op. cit., p. 6.

³⁶ Taylor, 'Overcoming Epistemology', *Philosophical Arguments*, op. cit., p. 7.

³⁷ *Sources of the Self*, op. cit., p. 172.

³⁸ *Sources of the Self*, op. cit., p. 175.

³⁹ *Sources of the Self*, op. cit., p. 50.

phenomenology than the egoic subjectivism of the *Cartesian Meditations* (which is after all chiefly methodological in approach). Husserl made several eidetic (i.e. a priori essentialist) claims concerning conscious, embodied subjective life. For him, as for Taylor, consciousness is *necessarily* embodied. Furthermore, and this has to be carefully construed to avoid an overly Cartesian emphasis, consciousness is necessarily *egoic* (*ichlich*), i.e. ego centred; all conscious acts and passions radiate from or stream into the ego. An egoless consciousness is, for Husserl, an a priori impossibility.

From *Ideas* I onwards, Husserl characterises it as an ‘I-pole’ (*Ichpol*) or ‘I-centre’ (*Ich-Zentrum*), ‘the centre of all affections and actions’ (IV 105). It is a ‘centre’ from which ‘radiations’ (*Ausstrahlungen*) or ‘rays of regard’ stream out or *towards* which rays of attention are directed. It is the centre of a ‘field of interests’ (*Interessenfeld*), the ‘substrate of habitualities’ (CM Hua I 103), ‘the substrate of the totality of capacities’ (*Substrat der Allheit der Vermögen*, XXXIV 200). This I ‘governs’, it is an ‘I holding sway’ (*das waltende Ich*, XIV 457) in conscious life (IV 108), yet it is also ‘passively affected’. The Husserlian self is never a Lockean punctual self.

Persons in the Kantian tradition are understood as ends in themselves, deserving of respect. The mature Husserl was undoubtedly influenced by the Kantian (and Neo-Kantian) conceptions of the self as person understood as an autonomous (giving the law to itself), rational agent. At the centre of the person, for Husserl, is a *drive* for reason, but it is a drive sitting upon many other affective and embodied elements. In its full concretion’ (XIV 26), it is a *self* with convictions, values, an outlook, a history, a style, and so on. As Husserl writes in *Cartesian Meditations*: ‘The ego constitutes

itself *for itself* in, so to speak, the unity of a history' (CM IV, p. 75; Hua I 109). It is present in all conscious experience and cannot be struck out (*undurchsteichbar*). As the Husserl scholar Henning Peucker has written:

The ego as a person is characterized by the variety of its lived experiences and the dynamic processes among them. According to Husserl, personal life includes many affective tendencies and instincts on its lowest level, but also, on a higher level, strivings, wishes, volitions, and body-consciousness. All of this stands in a dynamic process of arising and changing; lived-experiences with their meaningful correlates rise from the background of consciousness into the center of attention and sink back, yet they do not totally disappear, since they are kept as habitual acquisitions (*habituelle Erwerbe*). Thus, the person has an individual history in which previous accomplishments always influence the upcoming lived-experiences.⁴⁰

This mature Husserl clearly casts the shadow which Merleau-Ponty felt on him as he wrote.⁴¹

The Objectivist Threat

Both Husserl and indeed Charles Taylor identify the threats posed by *scientism*⁴² and *objectivism*, which denies that the way humans experience the world is relevant to the objective description of the world. Objectivism maintains that there can be an observer-independent or so called 'third-person' *absolute* description of the world, one which removes all reference to anthropocentric conceptions and qualities, and indeed all human culture. This would be the true 'view from nowhere'. Both Husserl

⁴⁰ Henning Peucker, 'From Logic to the Person: An Introduction to Husserlian Ethics', *Review of Metaphysics* 62 (December 2008), pp. 307-325, see p. 319.

⁴¹ See Merleau-Ponty, 'The Philosopher and his Shadow', in *Signs*, trans. R. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern U.P., 1964), pp. 159-81.

⁴² C. Taylor, 'Peaceful Coexistence in Psychology', in *Human Agency and Language*, op. cit., p. 135.

and Taylor have shown what extraordinary problems arise when this methodological approach of the natural sciences is applied to the human sciences. There is a kind of false conception of objectivity in the social sciences (I have heard it explicated recently in a lecture by Peter Berger who claimed that as a sociologist he could simply put his own religious views out of account when investigating the religious beliefs of others). This is sometimes expressed (e.g. by Daniel Dennett or Oliver Sachs) in terms of the ‘visiting anthropologist from Mars’ who somehow can do ‘third-person’ ‘heterophenomenology’.⁴³ But the Martian anthropologist, just like the British colonial observer, is going to incorporate his or her own values and convictions. Martian anthropology, though more distant from the human, is not more *objective* than anthropology or psychology done by humans on each other. It simply displaces the interests in the interest-relative descriptions—it is anthropology *by Martians*.

We are stuck then with human sciences done by and for humans. As one of my students once put it, ‘the problem with psychology is that it is done by humans’—as if somehow a human psychology written by dogs would be more ‘objective’.

The lack of a truly objective third-person (or observerless) platform does not mean that an appropriate level of (already interpreted) description cannot be found. It also does not mean that we descend into relativism or that all interpretations are equally valid. Husserl’s conception of the disengaged transcendental spectator is certainly rejected by Taylor as belonging to the tradition of self-consciousness epitomised by Descartes. I don’t think this the whole picture for Husserl—remember he wrote the *Cartesian Meditations* as one kind of introduction to transcendental phenomenology

⁴³ See Daniel Dennett, ‘Who’s On First? Heterophenomenology Explained’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, *Special Issue: Trusting the Subject? (Part 1)*, 10, No. 9-10, October 2003, pp. 19-30.

and the way in through the life-world shortly afterwards in his *Crisis of European Sciences*. Husserl believes in the social, embodied, engaged self. But there is still need, I believe for recognition, albeit qualified, of a self-reflexive or self-aware core in our conception of the socially situated, embodied person. Taylor also believes this. He writes:

Our humanity also consists, however, in our ability to decenter ourselves from this original engaged mode; to learn to see things in a disengaged fashion, in universal terms, or from an alien point of view; to achieve, at least notionally, a “view from nowhere.” Only we have to see that this disengaged mode is in an important sense derivative.⁴⁴

The Natural Attitude is an Attitude

In many respects Charles Taylor is a transcendental philosopher, identifying the conditions that make human experience possible. This allows a greater confrontation with Husserl. Taylor’s acceptance that disengaged reason is one possibility of our embodied agency is crucial here.

One of the greatest discoveries of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology is that the ordinary, everyday world of experience, the world of things, plants, animals, people and places, the pre-theoretical, pre-scientific world, is not just simply *there*, in itself, but is the correlate of a very specific attitude, namely, the *natural attitude*. The phenomenological concept of ‘attitude’ (*Einstellung*) here is very close to what Taylor calls ‘orientation’⁴⁵. One asks questions from within one’s orientation and rarely if ever reflects on the orientation itself. Once one recognises the natural attitude, the

⁴⁴ Taylor, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, op. cit., p. 46.

⁴⁵ *Sources of the Self*, op. cit., p. 28.

position known as naturalism can never be more than the objectification or reification of the correlates of an attitude.

For Husserl, moreover, as he makes clear in *Ideas II* (which was deeply influential on Merleau-Ponty), the natural attitude is the *personalistic attitude*. Husserl explains the personalistic attitude as

...the attitude we are always in when we live with one another, talk to one another, shake hands with another in greeting, or are related to another in love and aversion, in disposition and action, in discourse and discussion. (*Ideas II* § 49, p.192; Hua IV 183)

Husserl further claims that the natural attitude (and its derivative the naturalistic attitude – which construed the world naturalistically, i.e. a dogmatising naturalism) is actually only a one-sided (Hegel would say ‘abstract’) aspect of the fully concrete *personalistic* attitude. He even speaks of the ‘interlocking’ (*ineinandergreifen*) between natural and personalistic attitudes (*Ideas II* § 62). Nevertheless, he explicitly differentiates the personalistic attitude from the natural, and indeed maintains that the natural attitude is ‘subordinated’ to the personalistic (*Ideas II* § 49). The natural attitude is actually reached through a self-forgetting or abstraction of the self or ego of the personalistic attitude, through an abstraction from the personal which presents the world in some kind of absolutized way, as the world of nature (IX 419).

We live as persons in a *personalistic* world. The personalistic world is the *intersubjective* world shared with others; it is the communal world, the world of values and the space of reasons. The entire, objective, shareable, communable world

is the constituted outcome of shared interlocking persons whom Husserl sometimes calls *monads*. He speaks of an ‘open plurality of other egos’ (*Formal and Transcendental Logic* § 104), and the ‘intersubjective cognitive community’ (FTL § 96). First and foremost our interaction is with others as persons, indeed the first ‘other’, for Husserl, is the personal other (e.g. the mother) not the encounter with physical material objects. Nature is not primary; persons are primary.

The person is precisely the subject as social and relational, according to Husserl, whose acts are judged from the standpoint of reason (IV 257) and reflection (XIV 48).⁴⁶ We encounter each other primarily as persons within the spiritual or cultural world:

That which is given to us, as human subject, one with the human Body (*Menschenleibe*), in immediate experiential apprehension, is the human person (*die menschliche Person*), who has his spiritual individuality, his intellectual and practical abilities and skills (*Fähigkeiten und Fertigkeiten*), his character, his sensibility. This Ego is certainly apprehended as dependent on its Body and thereby on the rest of physical nature, and likewise it is apprehended as dependent on its past. (*Ideas* II § 34, p. 147; Hua IV 139-40)

Husserl writes: ‘The development of a person is determined by the influence of others’ (IV 268). My person is not a different entity from my lived body; they are ‘two sides of the undivided unity of experience’ (Hua XIV 458). Again, I understand myself at different levels. I am a physical body under the physicalistic attitude, an ego under the psychological attitude, an embodied self in the psycho-physical attitude, and a person under the personalistic attitude. First and foremost, for Husserl, the person is

⁴⁶ In a text from 1921 Husserl recognises the Leibnizian source of this concept of the person, quoting from Leibniz, *Nouveaux essais* II 27 § 9 (Hua XIV 48).

a genuinely objective thing, constituted in objective time and belonging to the spatio-temporal world (IX 418). On the other hand, its essence is quite distinct from that of 'real things' (*Ding-Realitäten*, VIII 493). The personal 'I' is the I of abiding capabilities and convictions. It is more than an empty pole of the identity of the acts performed by it. The I, for Husserl, has a character through habitualization, through primal institution, and re-constitution.

The 'Breakthrough' to the Transcendental Attitude

This discovery of the *natural-personalistic attitude* is a considerable advance beyond Kant's transcendental account of the transcendental ego. At least on one reading of Kant, the 'world of appearances' (*die Erscheinungswelt*) is actually the world as described in the natural sciences, that is, the Newtonian world of extended bodies, forces, and so on. Of course, Kant thinks that the *form* of this world comes from interaction with subjectivity and specifically with the a priori forms of sensibility (space and time) as well as the categories of the understanding (causation). Kant himself does not appear to have envisaged the possibility that the natural world could be other than it was conceived by science; in that sense he was a scientific realist. He also did not seem to worry that his position could be construed as a *relativism* based on the specifically human forms of sensibility and understanding (this form of relativism Husserl calls '*anthropologism*' in his *Logical Investigations, Prolegomena*). Treating the logical laws as describing the thinking of human beings as such leads to a kind of 'species relativism' (*der spezifische Relativismus*) or 'anthropologism' (*Anthropologismus*, *Prol.* § 36), a kind of subjectivism which extends to the whole human species.

Anthropologism maintains that truth is relative to the human species and, hence without humans, there would be no truth. Husserl understands Kant's account of knowledge as a kind of anthropologism in this sense. He accuses Kant of misunderstanding the subjective domain as if it were something natural, and hence of construing the a priori as if it were an essential part of the human species (*Prolegomena*, § 38).

Kant's project involved laying down the features of *Erkenntnis überhaupt*. This is what must be the case for *all* rational, cognising beings not just those features that belong specifically to our *human* mode of sensing and conceiving, although that too must be factored in. But Kant also wanted to specify the conditions of *human sensibility* and understanding and to do this he had to perform a kind of 'backwards reflection' (Husserl's *Rückbesinnung*) to identify the kinds of limitations that govern us, without stepping outside these limitations.

The problem is with the viewpoint of Kant's *Critique* itself. From what standpoint is it written? As Paul Ricoeur would put it: 'where is Kant, when he is describing the limits of human sensibility and understanding speaking from?'. Kant thereby did make the breakthrough to the transcendental way of doing philosophy. That is to say, he sought the conditions for the possibility of objective knowledge and recognised that those conditions included an ineliminable reference to *subjectivity*. The world is as it is *for us*. Objectivity is necessarily correlated with subjectivity which is not just empirical embedded subjectivity in the world but *transcendental subjectivity*.

Husserl takes the Kantian breakthrough to transcendental philosophy a step further with his recognition that the world of natural experience is correlated to the *natural*

attitude. This natural-personalistic attitude, although it is the default mode of experiencing for all human subjects, is not the only attitude. In fact, even to identify it as an *attitude* (*Einstellung*) – a way of placing oneself into the world--is already in some sense to have overcome the natural attitude, to have bypassed or transcended it. This of course is simply the application of a Hegelian insight that to draw a limit is already to somehow be beyond that limit (but Husserl of course did not acknowledge Hegel in this regard). To reflect on life in the natural attitude is to have already entered or constituted the transcendental attitude which, according to Husserl, leaves everything human behind.

Reconciling the Natural and Transcendental Approaches

There are great difficulties involved in reconciling the natural and the transcendental attitudes as two possible modes of awareness of humans. Husserl characterised the transcendental attitude as the attitude of the detached ‘non-participating’ spectator (*unbeteiligter Zuschauer*, Hua XXXIV 9), or ‘disinterested’ spectator (*uninteressierter Zuschauer*, XXXIV 11).

We now need to go further than Husserl in specifying the continuities between the engaged, embodied agent and its disengaged transcendental counterpart. When the meditating ego translates (via the phenomenological reduction) from the natural to the transcendental attitude, there is, as Husserl recognises, a continuity, namely, the acts of reflection are still being performed by the same ego. Husserl speaks of a ‘splitting of the ego’ (*Ichspaltung*) and the ego living a dual life – both as natural subject *in* the world and as transcendental ego *for* the world. How this paradox is to be resolved is one of the great themes of Husserl’s last work, *Crisis* (see especially §§53 and 54).

There Husserl asks:

How can a component part of the world, its human subjectivity, constitute the whole world, namely, constitute it as its intentional formation, one which has always already become what it is and continues to develop, formed by the universal interconnection of intentionally accomplishing subjectivity, while the latter, the subjects accomplishing in cooperation, are themselves only a partial formation within the total accomplishment? (*Crisis* § 53, p. 179; VI 183)

Indeed, Husserl acknowledges, even to say that I who reflects is 'I' involves a certain equivocation (*Crisis* § 54(b), p. 184; VI 188). Yet, there is both identity and difference in this I. The reflecting ego is in a different attitude and different temporal dimension from the ego reflected on, yet there is a consciousness of the unity or 'coincidence' (*Deckung*) of the two.

There is a danger in regarding the ego in a Cartesian way as an unassailable and static foundation for all experience. It quickly becomes Kant's purely formal requirement that the 'I think' can accompany all experience. The Kantian conception of the 'I' is primarily as the performer of syntheses. Experience in order to be experienced has to be present or appear to some 'I'. It must be capable of coming to self-awareness of experience but beyond that it has no content. This is the very opposite of the Husserlian conception. Indeed, he speaks of a 'critical reinterpretation and correction of the Cartesian concept of the ego' (*Crisis* VI 188). For this reason, the critique of Husserl's transcendental ego as an unresolved legacy of Cartesianism in his philosophy—a critique, most certainly, by Heidegger and possibly also by Merleau-Ponty—is misplaced. The pure I—the I of transcendental apperception—is, for

Husserl, not a ‘dead pole of identity’ (Hua IX 208), it is a living self, a stream that is constantly ‘appearing for itself’ (*als Für-sich-selbst-erscheinens*, VIII 189). It is sometimes described, in Hegelian language, as simply ‘for itself’ (*für sich*). In his Postface (*Nachwort*) to *Ideas I* written in 1930 he acknowledged that ‘what specifically characterised the ego’ had not yet been broached in *Ideas I* (Hua V 159). Husserl’s transcendental self also has a history; indeed there is a history of the breakthrough to the transcendental attitude itself. In other words, the discovery of or ‘breakthrough to’ the transcendental attitude is an event in the world itself (carried out in ancient Greece and later decisively by Descartes).

I cannot go into the issues which distinguish the person from the transcendental ego, or even discuss Husserl’s strange notion of ‘transcendental persons’. For Husserl, the recourse to the transcendental I in the reduction in a certain sense puts aside the ‘natural human’ although I do not believe it ever leaves behind embodied personhood. I do think, however, that Husserl is mistaken to present the transcendental attitude as in a certain sense *non-human* and entirely that of the ‘detached spectator’. It is better to think of Husserl as uncovering all knowing and engaging with the world is taking place from a *standpoint*. As Sebastian Luft puts it:

The generalization that Husserl enacts is not one from standpoint to no standpoint, but from our standpoint to standpoint-as-such.⁴⁷

I am sure that we can say, with Husserl, that the person is the concrete agent in the intersubjective, communal world acting in the personalistic attitude; but we cannot say that the person somehow disappears when we enter into transcendental reflection.

⁴⁷ Sebastian Luft, ‘From Being to Givenness and Back: Some Remarks on the Meaning of Transcendental Idealism in Kant and Husserl’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* vol. 15 no. 3 (2007), pp. 367 – 394, see esp. p. 376.

There is, as we have seen, the continuity of the 'I' and the integration of an I within a 'we' ---within what Husserl calls 'transcendental intersubjectivity'.

Intimations of Self-Reflection in Embodied Sensuousness

For both Husserl and Taylor, personhood is constituted in layers. It has at its highest level the self-reflective rational agent, one whose emotional and feeling life is shot through with rationality and purposiveness. Yet, the self, as Edith Stein puts it, 'sinks its taproot into nature',⁴⁸ selfhood has its origins in the prereflective embodied agency which Dreyfus calls 'coping' and which Merleau-Ponty includes under his broadened conception of embodied *perception*. Self-perception, for Taylor, belongs to embodied activity of a 'living being who thinks'.⁴⁹

In attempting to articulate this dependence of higher rationality on sensibility, Merleau-Ponty in his late work talks about the manner in which self-reflection at the higher conscious level is enabled by and indeed founded in the kind of inherent self-awareness and 'doubling' that is found in our sensory life. In his late essay 'Eye and Mind' (written in 1960)⁵⁰, as well as in his posthumously published *Visible and Invisible* (1964)⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty emphasises the 'intertwining' or 'interlacing' (*l'interlacs*) that occurs when our seeing somehow sees itself seeing, drawing a parallel with the phenomenon of the act of touching which at the same time can touch itself (EM 162; 14). For Merleau-Ponty, there is an 'inherence' (*inhérence*) of seer in

⁴⁸ See Edith Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2000), p. 115.

⁴⁹ C. Taylor, 'Hegel's Philosophy of Mind', in *Human Agency and Language*, op. cit., p. 88.

⁵⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *L'Oeil et l'esprit*, first published in *Art de France*, vol. 1 no. 1 (1961); and in book form, Paris: Gallimard, 1964; reprinted Folio Philosophique, 2006), trans. Carleton Dallery as 'Eye and Mind', in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern, U.P., 1964), pp. 159-190 (Hereafter 'EM' followed by English and French pagination).

⁵¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, texte établi par Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), trans. A. Lingis, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern U.P., 1968).

the seen and vice-versa (EM, 163; 14), an essential ‘undividedness’ (*l’indivision*’, EM, 163; 15) between sensing and sensed (and, accordingly, between thinking and self-reflection). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty maintains that a body that could not touch itself, or see itself, and thereby ‘reflect itself’, would not be human: ‘there would be no humanity’ (EM 163; 15). For Merleau-Ponty, here developing an insight found in Husserl’s *Ideas* II, the reflexivity and reversibility of touching is the basis for and perhaps the true form of our self-conscious humanity. To touch oneself is to be in touch with oneself. Taylor has a similar view about how embodied agency begins in its embedded interpretative interaction with its surroundings. The mistake of previous forms of intellectualism and rationalism was to regard the ‘disengaged’ attitude as a pure mirror of reality, whereas in fact, it is the discovery of phenomenology, that this approach is itself a particular attitude and hence is a partial, conditioned and distinctly human way of engaging with the world.