

# 1 Defending the Objective Gaze as a Self-transcending Capacity of Human Subjects

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## Phenomenology as a Transcendental Science of Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity

What marks out classical phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty) from other contemporary philosophical approaches, as well as from the methodology of the natural sciences, is its post-Kantian commitment to recognize and retain the ineliminable contribution of subjectivity to the constitution of objective knowledge of all forms. Phenomenology insists on the primacy of the first-person perspective and the critique of any narrow objectivism that ends up being what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls '*la vue de nulle part*' (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 82), or what Thomas Nagel elsewhere calls the 'view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986). The human capacity to take a stance that transcends our situated, localized, subjective perspective is precisely what makes objective science possible. On the other hand, this very capacity risks occluding the underlying contribution of subjectivity that makes knowledge possible in the first instance and within which human beings necessarily dwell. Nagel summarizes the issue well:

An objective standpoint is created by leaving a more subjective, individual, or even just human perspective behind; but there are things about the world and life and ourselves that cannot be adequately understood from a maximally objective standpoint, however much it may extend our understanding beyond the point from which we started. A great deal is essentially connected to a particular point of view, or type of point of view, and the attempt to give a complete account of the world in objective terms detached from these perspectives inevitably leads to false reductions or to outright denial that certain patently real phenomena exist at all.

(Nagel 1986: 7)

What is left behind, as phenomenology rightly insists, is the irreducible, subjective manner of our experiencing itself, our subjective and

intersubjective experiences in the ‘lifeworld’ (*Lebenswelt*), which is not the same as the world as studied by the natural sciences.

There have been many critiques within the classical phenomenological tradition – perhaps most prominently in Jean-Paul Sartre’s discussion of ‘the look’ (*le regard*) in his *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1995) – of various forms of objectification that arise from the subject-object structure of human intentional comportment and go on to deny or suppress the subjective component. Indeed, on some accounts, every form of objectification has been readily characterized as inherently dominating, distorting, and even as repressive. Kierkegaard’s ‘truth is subjectivity’ is the banner for such anti-objectivist approaches. However, classical phenomenology, especially in the works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, has a much more nuanced approach to the capacity of first-person subjectivity to transcend itself through intentionality into gaining a ‘detached, non-participant spectator’ stance, which Husserl sees as essential to the ‘theoretical attitude’ (*die theoretische Einstellung*, Husserl 1954: 301, 308, 310, 331) that was, he claims in his 1935 *Vienna Lecture*, inaugurated by the ancient Greeks (Husserl 1954: 326). The subject inescapably occupies a first-person perspective but is also capable of taking a reflective stance of its own conscious life and hence is capable of occupying another stance which gives it self-consciousness of its own experiences and can qualify them with respect to others’ experiences and indeed come to constitute an overall objective stance.

Phenomenology, in its mature Husserlian formulation, moreover, not only insists on subjectivity as ineliminable but goes much further in defending a *transcendental* science of *subjectivity*. It is even – as Husserl puts – an *absolute* science of transcendental subjectivity. As Husserl writes in the *Cartesian Meditations* § 13:

A science whose peculiar nature is unprecedented comes into our field of vision: a science of concrete transcendental subjectivity, as given in actual and possible transcendental experience, a science that forms the contrast to sciences in the sense of, positive, ‘Objective’ sciences. Also among the Objective sciences there is indeed a science of subjectivity; but it is precisely the science of Objective subjectivity, the subjectivity of men and other animals, a subjectivity that is part of the world. Now, however, we are envisaging a science that is, so to speak, absolutely subjective, whose thematic object exists whether or not the world exists . . . at the beginning, this science can posit nothing but the ego and what is included in the ego himself, with a horizon of undetermined determinability.

(Husserl 1950: 68–69, 1967: 30)

Here Husserl characterizes transcendental phenomenology as a science that is ‘absolutely subjective’, and he contrasts this absolute (i.e. fully

grounded) science with all *positive* sciences of subjectivity. Positive sciences of subjectivity, for Husserl, mean chiefly the then-emerging science of empirical psychology, and, presumably, all other human sciences, including the then nascent sciences of sociology and anthropology, but also economics, law, and political science. These ‘positive’ sciences of subjectivity all treat the human being *objectively* as a ready-made item in nature (as Husserl puts it). One can think of evolutionary studies that trace the origins of humanity from their hominid ancestors, focusing on such objective features as the evolution of a bipedal, upright stance. For Husserl, such positive sciences, while incredibly powerful, have an inevitable tendency to *naturalize* human existence, understanding it as an animality with specified forms of behaviour that can be studied in more or less the same manner as the observation of animals. For human beings to look at themselves ‘objectively’ as animals among other animals in a material, biological, and zoological world is straightforwardly to *objectify* the human, and it is also to obscure the nature and origin of this objectifying gaze itself. Even as empirical psychology practices a kind of detachment, it still approaches the human subject in a naturalistic way. While Husserl thinks all such objectification has a legitimate place in the procedures and methodology of the positive sciences, he also thinks this methodological approach is deficient and one-sided and needs to be contextualized and clarified by a *transcendental science of subjectivity*. Husserl argues forcefully there is an urgent need to make the natural and human sciences more aware of the dependence on the subjective dimension. There is a need to recover *objectivity-correlated-to-subjectivity*. After all, *who is the one* looking at human behaviour from the objective standpoint? How is this objective standpoint conceivable? It has to come to self-knowledge of itself as a standpoint and hence as an achievement of subjectivity.

For Husserl, the natural and objective sciences, therefore, need a transcendental justification. Or, Husserl puts it, subjectivity (for which Husserl often uses the Cartesian shorthand of the ‘ego’ or the ‘*cogito*’) is not a mere piece or ‘tag-end of the world’ (*Endchen der Welt*), as he puts it in his *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl 1950: 63, 1967: 24). Subjectivity is, Husserl says, rather ‘for’ the world rather than just ‘in’ it. Husserl speaks of human beings as ‘in the world’ and ‘for the world’. Constituting consciousness is both ‘in itself’ and ‘for itself’. Indeed, ‘the paradox of subjectivity’ – explored in the *Amsterdam Lectures* (Husserl 1997), in the *Crisis* (Husserl 1970), and elsewhere – is that human beings are both *for* the world and *in* the world. For Husserl, human being is both ‘a subject for the world’ and ‘an object in the world’ (Husserl 1970: 178).<sup>1</sup> Subjectivity is, Husserl insists, more than what is manifested naturally in the world; it is also the *transcendental* source of all ‘meaning and being’ (*Sinn und Sein*) for Husserl. That means that the subject is not just an object or a substance but a meaning-source, a vital centre which not only

distributes all sense but also confers ‘being’ on its intentional objects in varying ways. Husserl lays out the problem clearly in the *Crisis* § 53:

Universal intersubjectivity, into which all objectivity, everything that exists at all, is resolved, can obviously be nothing other than human-kind; and the latter is undeniably a component part of the world. 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?

(Husserl 1970: 179)

Husserl maintains, then, that phenomenology is a transcendental science that must trace every objective entity and event, that is, every sense-formation, back to the transcendental ego (at least according to the ‘Cartesian way’), that is, to transcendental subjectivity, or, more generally, to *transcendental intersubjectivity*. Everything is constituted by the transcendental ego. Husserl writes in *Cartesian Meditations*:

In the absolute and original ego of the reduction the world is constituted, as a world that is constituted as transcendently intersubjective in every transcendental Ego.

(Husserl 1950: 239, 1967: 64, § 29 (*addition*))

For Husserl, then, transcendental subjectivity, working within the network of transcendental intersubjectivity (and the interconnection between these two calls for a further clarification of intentional constitution), is a *source* of our consciousness of the objective world and its contents, so transcendental subjectivity cannot be simply another extant part of the world.

### **Transcendental Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity (The ‘We-Community’)**

Husserl proclaims in his *Crisis of the Human Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* § 50 (Husserl 1970) that transcendental subjectivity can only be thought within an overall context of intersubjectivity. This passage may very well be the inspiration for Merleau-Ponty’s claim that ‘The Cogito must find me in a situation, and it is on this condition alone that transcendental subjectivity will, as Husserl says, be an intersubjectivity’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012: lxxvi). Husserl writes:

[S]ubjectivity is what it is – an ego functioning constitutively – only within intersubjectivity. From the ‘ego’ perspective this means that

there are new themes, those of the synthesis applying specifically to ego and other-ego (each taken purely as ego): the I-you-synthesis and, also, the more complicated we-synthesis [*Wir-Synthesis*].

(Husserl 1954: 175, 1970: 172)

The mature Husserl, struggled many times to elucidate the relationship between transcendental subjectivity and intersubjectivity, often – as in the *Cartesian Meditations* – resorting to the Leibnizian conception of a ‘monadology’, transcendental subjects belong to a sphere of transcendental intersubjectivity (see Schutz 2010; Zahavi 2001, 2005). For instance, Husserl writes in the *Crisis* § 69:

But each soul also stands in community [*Vergemeinschaftung*] with others which are intentionally interrelated, that is, in a purely intentional, internally and essentially closed nexus [*Zusammenhang*], that of intersubjectivity.

(Husserl 1954: 241, 1970: 238)

The individual subject, the *solus ipse*, the self on its own, is at best a thought construction and an abstraction – what is concrete is transcendental intersubjectivity. In his 1928 *Amsterdam Lectures*, Husserl is insistent that everything has to be traced back to transcendental intersubjectivity as the sole ‘absolute ground of being’ (*Seinsboden*):

Transcendental intersubjectivity is the absolute and only self-sufficient ontological foundation [*der absolute, der allein eigenständige Seinsboden*]. Out of it are created the meaning and validity of everything objective, the totality [All, cosmos] of objectively real existent entities, but also every ideal world as well. An objectively existent thing is from first to last an existent thing [*Seiendes*] only in a peculiar, relative and incomplete sense. It is an existent thing, so to speak, only on the basis of a cover-up of its transcendental constitution that goes unnoticed in the natural attitude [*aus einer in der natürlichen Einstellung unmerklichen Verdeckung der transzendentalen Konstitution*].

(Husserl 1968: 344, 1997: 249)

It is not my intention here to delve further into the tricky problematic of the relation between subjectivity and intersubjectivity in Husserl’s *oeuvre*. This would require an entirely different line of investigation. Here I am introducing transcendental subjectivity as an intersubjectivity to get a sense of the manner in which the first-person perspective is never just a single point of view but is already integrated into an infinite network of other points of view, the open-ended ‘nexus’ (*Zusammenhang*) of intersubjectivity and what Husserl calls the ‘we-community’ (*Wir-Gemeinschaft*, Husserl 1954: 416).

## Embodiment and Embeddedness as Necessary for Transcendental Subjectivity

Unfortunately, the problem of nature of subjectivity only gets deeper. There is much disagreement about the status of Husserl's transcendental ego, and this disagreement already began with his earlier 'realist' students, such as Edith Stein and Roman Ingarden, as well as by Martin Heidegger, who quite deliberately abandoned the language of transcendental subjectivity in favour of his dynamic account of concrete human existence or *Dasein*. On the other hand, post-Husserlian transcendental phenomenology, whether in Heidegger or indeed in Merleau-Ponty, retains a commitment to a transcendental approach, involving a critique of naturalistic objectivism and seeks to re-formulate the transcendental ego, either as Heidegger's *Dasein* or as Merleau-Ponty's 'body-subject' (*corps sujet*). Husserl himself always insists that the transcendental ego is also embodied in the world. Going some way to meet the positions of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, transcendental subjectivity, in Husserl's conception (especially as articulated in *Ideas II*, Husserl 1989), is not just plural and intersubjective, it is also essentially 'embodied', 'incarnated', or 'enfleshed' in the natural, social, and historical world. The subject is embodied and 'enworlded' or 'mundanized' (*mundanisiert*).

Husserl uses a range of words for this 'embodiment' (*Leiblichkeit*), including: corporealization (*Verleiblichung*), incorporation (*Verkörperung*), and becoming human (*Vermenschlichung*). Husserl's student Gerda Walther (1923) contributed the word *Einbettung* – 'embedding' – to first describe human being-in-the world, which Heidegger later characterized as *In-der-Welt-sein*. For Husserl, and this deepens the problem, the objective world is a product of an active, intentional, embodied agent acting within a historical open plurality of other subjects who already belongs to a world and is world-forming. All classical phenomenologists, then, stemming from Husserl, are clear that human beings are not just *in* the world in some material, spatial, and temporal manner but are also 'world-forming' or 'world-making' in a real sense (Heidegger uses the term *weltbildend*). To be a human being is to be in a world, which is in some respects the extension of one's intentional existence. As Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*, 'being-in-the-world' is an existiale of *Dasein* (Heidegger 1962). Human beings are not just naturalistically in the world, occupying it, they are also world-making or world-forming. The 'world' is not just an a priori context for human intentional existence and flourishing; the 'world' as such is an extension of human existence, more or less as the spider's web is spun from the spider's own body.

One of the great challenges of phenomenology, then, is to think of the human being not just as an individual, embodied in a ready-made world, but as a transcendental subjectivity caught up in the activity of making

the world in which it is embodied and embedded. The subject has always to be seen from more than one perspective.

### The Natural and the Transcendental Attitudes

Attempting to think of the world both as an objective milieu and as belonging to the constituting character of human existence calls for a *double* viewpoint. One has to oscillate, in Husserl's terminology, between the natural and the transcendental attitudes. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty deftly summarizes Husserlian phenomenology in his late essay 'The Philosopher and His Shadow' (reprinted in *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty 1964), where he talks about the tensions between the natural and the transcendental attitudes. As humans we live in this tension. The transcendental and the natural attitudes 'see-saw' back and forth (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 164). One cannot simply move to the transcendental attitude and adopt it as a permanent attitude. All life pursues its normal course in the natural attitude (in what Heidegger calls 'everydayness', *Alltäglichkeit*). In fact, the everyday world as we normally experience it, and which appears to be given just exactly as it is, is exactly the 'product' or 'achievement' (*Leistung*) of a very specific attitude, an attitude blind to itself, that Husserl names 'the natural attitude' (*die natürliche Einstellung*), introduced in print in *Ideas I* (Husserl 2014: 48).

According to Husserl – as he articulated in 'Kant and the Idea of Transcendental Philosophy', his Lecture to the Kant Society in Frankfurt in 1924 (Husserl 1974) – for millennia people lived unquestioning with a deep conviction and orientation towards the world which Husserl was the first to identify and name as the 'natural attitude':

The natural attitude is the form in which the total life of humanity is realized in running its natural, practical course. It was the only form from millennium to millennium, until out of science and philosophy there developed unique motivations for a revolution.

(Husserl 1974: 20)

Husserl elaborates:

If we begin with human life and its natural conscious course, then it is a communalized life of human persons who immerse themselves in an endless world, i.e., viewing it, sometimes in isolation and sometimes together with one another, imagining it variously, forming judgments about it, evaluating it, actively shaping it to suit our purposes. This world is for these persons, is for us humans, continually and quite obviously there as a common world surrounding us all; obviously there it is the directly tangible and visible world in entirely immediate and freely expandable experience. It embraces not merely

things and living beings, among them animals and humans, but also communities, communal institutions, works of art, cultural establishments of every kind.

(Husserl 1974: 19)

The natural attitude is styled by Husserl as a ‘basic belief’ (*Urglaube*), a fundamental, unquestioning faith or blind trust in the givenness of the world as it is. It is pervaded by a naïve and direct realism. To this extent, Husserl acknowledges that realism is the first orientation of the human mind. The world is ‘really there’.

But once we identify that what we take to be pure unmediated givenness of the world is in fact the world *as it is correlated with a very specific attitude or stance*, which Husserl baptizes ‘the natural attitude’ (*die natürliche Einstellung*), then we lose our naïvete about the natural attitude. Our eyes lose their ‘blinders’ (*Scheuklappen*), and we see the world from the standpoint of transcendental life. We are already in some respect outside that attitude – we are taking a transcendental stance towards the natural attitude once we identify it and name it as such. The systematic bracketing of the natural attitude is the first step towards transcendental phenomenology.

There is no doubt that Husserl did not think one could do phenomenology properly unless one adopted the transcendental stance of the pure ego. In *Cartesian Meditations* § 15, he distinguishes between natural and transcendental reflection (Husserl 1960: 33; see Hopkins 1989). Transcendental reflection operates under the *epochē* and hence adopts the non-participating spectator stance:

In transcendental-phenomenological reflection we deliver ourselves from this footing, by universal *epochē* with respect to the being or nonbeing of the world. The experience as thus modified, the transcendental experience, consists then, we can say, in our looking at and describing the particular transcendently reduced cogito, but without participating, as reflective subjects, in the natural existence-positing that the originally straightforward perception (or other cogito) contains or that the Ego, as immersing himself straightforwardly in the world, actually executed.

(Husserl 1960: 34)

Phenomenology requires transcendental reflection. For this reason, Husserl could never have accepted the idea of a ‘naturalized phenomenology’ (see Petitot et al. 1999; Zahavi 2009; Moran 2014). Phenomenological description carried out within the natural attitude is entirely legitimate, but it is not fundamental because it does not question its own stance and its legitimacy.



Husserl is endlessly fascinated with how we break through such a comprehensive, all-encompassing attitude as the natural attitude and suspend its inbuilt credence or acceptance (*Urglaube*). The point is that there is a kind of viewpoint encapsulated in the natural attitude: it is an attitude that is not aware of itself as an attitude. In that sense, it is a kind of ‘non-view’ view – not precisely the view from nowhere but the idea that our experience simply ‘tells it like it is’ – and that there is no mismatch between subjective experience. For this reason, Tom Nagel, too, thinks of subjective experience as so direct that it is unaware of itself, and it therefore thinks it is a ‘view from nowhere’.

### The Breakout From the Natural Attitude to the Theoretical Attitude

In the *Crisis of the European Sciences* (Husserl 1970) Husserl has a historical story about the emergence of the theoretical attitude from the natural attitude. He believes that an original ‘breakthrough’ of (*Durchbruch*, Husserl 1954: 319), ‘break-out’ (*Aufbruch*, Husserl 1954: 318) from, or ‘break-into’ (*Einbruch*, Husserl 1954: 267, 318), of the natural attitude took place in ancient Greek philosophy, led by a ‘few Greek eccentrics’ (*eine Paare griechischen Sonderlingen*, Husserl 1970: 289), as he puts it in his *Vienna Lecture*, whose sceptical questioning led to the profound distinction between reality and appearance, between the world as such and the phenomenon of the world as it appears. The ordinary realm becomes a realm of *doxa*, a world of appearance, semblance.

Now, it is irrelevant for our purposes here whether this ‘Greek’ breakthrough was the only one accomplished in the ancient world. One could argue for a similar breakthrough in ancient Indian philosophy, for instance, which also developed a mature scepticism. In point of fact, Husserl himself thinks only the Greeks actually achieved a breakthrough that broke through the panoply of the religious worldview and established a new form of universality. Be that as it may, for our purposes the key point is that, for Husserl, the disruption of the natural attitude by ancient Greek thinkers (he means specifically the Pre-Socratics and Sceptics) inaugurated a new way of thinking about the world, that led to the development of *theoria* as a kind of ‘wonder’ or ‘astonishment’ (*thaumazein*) at the world. This wonder is the source of Greek philosophy, and, of the theoretical attitude. One stands back from one’s beliefs and asks – is this really how it is? This is the birth of what Husserl calls ‘the theoretical attitude’; sometimes, as in *Ideas I* – he sees it as part of the natural attitude (see Husserl 2014: 9). Eventually, the theoretical attitude gave birth to modern Western (and now global) science, beginning with Euclid’s pure geometry (as opposed to practical applications of geometrical knowledge in land-surveying as employed by ancient Egyptians)

as a kind of universal, ideal truth, valid for all times. Husserl writes in his *Vienna Lecture* that the theoretical attitude brings about a new way of understanding that goes beyond worldviews:

In other words, man becomes a nonparticipating spectator, surveyor of the world; he becomes a philosopher; or rather, from this point on his life becomes receptive to motivations which are possible only in this attitude, motivations for new sorts of goals for thought and methods through which, finally, philosophy comes to be and he becomes a philosopher.

(Husserl 1970: 285)

In this lecture Husserl distinguishes the two forms of *theoria* but nevertheless sees them as interrelated. The one arises from the other. He writes:

We must clarify the transformation from original *theoria*, the fully disinterested seeing of the world (following from the *epochē* of all practical interests, world-knowledge through pure, universal seeing) to the *theoria* of genuine science, the two being mediated through the contrast of *doxa* and *episteme*. Incipient theoretical interest, as *thaumazein*, is obviously a variant of curiosity [*Neugier*], which has its original place in natural life as an intrusion into the course of ‘serious living’ either as a result of originally developed life interests or as a playful looking-about [*Umschau*] when one’s quite immediate vital needs are satisfied or when working hours are over. Curiosity (here understood not as a habitual ‘vice’) is also a variant, an interest which has separated itself off from life-interests, has let them fall.

(Husserl 1954: 332, 1970: 285)<sup>2</sup>

With the discovery of *theoria*, detached looking, a new form of theoretical life is inaugurated. No longer is the world simply accepted as it is, but people begin to live their lives oriented towards a new goal of the ‘truth-in-itself’. The general idea of truth-in-itself becomes the universal norm (Husserl 1970: 287). Put in a Kantian manner, humans learn to live under theoretical norms that they formulate for themselves and which they recognize as binding on them (Moran 2002). No longer is life lived blindly. One is now in a theoretical, reflective culture. One has, to paraphrase Wilfrid Sellars, entered the space of reasons.

Fast forwarding several millennia, the theoretical approaches of modern scientists such as Galileo and Descartes not just endorsed this ontological distinction between appearance and reality but deemed appearance to belong to the ‘subjective-relative’ domain (so-called secondary properties), whereas ‘true’ reality (i.e. the primary properties which were determined to be fixed) was apprehended by the modern mathematical method. Thus, for Galileo, the book of nature is written in numbers; and

for Descartes, apparent properties of physical objects (the famous example of the block of wax in Meditation Two) such as colour and solidity do not belong to the object as such whereas extension does. Husserl discusses in some detail in the *Crisis*, the structural nature of what he calls ‘Galilean science’ (Husserl 1970: 23) as transforming the nature of the scientific method. According to Husserl, ‘through Galileo’s mathematization of nature, nature itself is idealized under the guidance of the new mathematics; nature itself becomes – to express it in a modern way – a mathematical manifold’ (Husserl 1970: 23). The modern scientific outlook differs from the Greek philosophical attitude because it now understands what is real in terms of an a priori grid or framework (Heidegger’s *Gestell*) that forces nature to conform to its ideal laws. For Husserl, this scientific objectivism has powerful results but it inevitably will run up against the fact that its own status as an attitude has not been validated. A transcendental turn is needed stimulated by a universal *epochē*. Theoretical life on its own is a variation on the natural attitude, but the transcendental attitude is a radical return to the subject which seeks to validate and ground all attitudes.

Transcendental phenomenology, then, no matter the major disagreements concerning methodology between Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, maintains that human subjectivity has a peculiar character, which means it is never (as Husserl somewhat disparagingly calls it in his *Cartesian Meditations*) a mere fragment or ‘butt-end of the world’ (*Endchen der Welt*, Husserl 1950: 63). Indeed, Husserl’s critique of Descartes is that he collapsed back into realism about the pure ego once he had discovered it. Descartes made the decisive breakthrough to transcendental subjectivity, but then immediately mistook it for a *res cogitans*, a thinking substance, and collapsed back into naïve metaphysics instead of exploring the domain of transcendental subjectivity. In contrast, Husserl claims to maintain the transcendental breakthrough by remaining in the transcendental attitude. Transcendental subjectivity is a new, infinite realm to be explored. It is a realm of motivations, intentional implications, and horizons that will undergird the positive sciences. Husserl always stressed the breakthrough to the transcendental attitude and the dangers of relapse which could take the form of a ‘transcendental psychologism’, a mistreating of the very essence of subjectivity, which Husserl discusses in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* § 99 (Husserl 1969: 250ff.).

One of the great discoveries of Husserlian phenomenology is that the world as revealed by the natural attitude is not the world *as such* – the world as it is in itself – but precisely the world as intentionally correlated with the natural attitude. Furthermore the notion of the ‘world-in-itself’ is itself an idealist ‘substruction’ (Husserl 1970: 127). As Husserl asks in his 1924 Kant Society address:

But how is the ‘being-in-itself of the world’ to be understood now, if it is for us nothing other, and can be nothing other, than a sense

taking shape subjectively or intersubjectively in our own cognitive achievement – naturally including the character ‘true being’, which is conceivable only of senses?

(Husserl 1974: 23)

Before considering the relation between the theoretical and the transcendental attitudes, let us take a moment to consider the nature of attitudes in general.

### The Nature of Attitudes in Husserl

‘Attitude’ (*Einstellung*) is one of Husserl’s operative rather than thematic concepts (to invoke Eugen Fink’s distinction, Fink 1981). In the *Vienna Lecture* Husserl defines an attitude as a style of life: ‘a habitually fixed style of willing life comprising directions of the will or interests that are prescribed by this style, comprising the ultimate ends, the cultural accomplishments whose total style is thereby determined’ (Husserl 1954: 326, 1970: 280). As Sebastian Luft has shown, Husserl borrows the term *attitude* (*Einstellung*) from nineteenth-century psychology, where it is used to mean ‘mind-set’, to refer very broadly to the overall ‘view’, ‘outlook’, or ‘stance’ of consciousness towards the world (Luft 1998). The Neo-Kantians (including Heinrich Rickert) made use of a related concept which they referred to as *standpoint* (*Standpunkt*, Staiti 2014: 83–107). The Neo-Kantians already had the notion of a ‘standpoint’ from which objects can be viewed, and they understood objectivity as an achievement of subjectivity. A standpoint is not subjective but was an ideal construction oriented to a theoretical goal, in other words, a teleological construction (Staiti 2014: 88). Moreover, the Neo-Kantians did not have Husserl’s notion of attitudinal change (*Einstellungänderung* or *Einstellungwechsel*, Staiti 2014: 84). Clearly, Husserl thought of phenomenology as itself only possible through a radical shift in attitude brought about by a ‘universal *epochē*’ (Husserl 1954: 395).

Husserl distinguishes many different attitudes – including the natural attitude, the transcendental attitude, the mathematical attitude, the psychological attitude, and the aesthetic attitude. Every object is constituted through a particular subjective accomplishment that requires a specific standpoint. Thus, art approaches objects from one perspective and science from another. In general, the Neo-Kantians considered science to be a *value-free* standpoint, whereas ethics necessarily involves attention to value. Attitudes are adopted for particular purposes and are essentially teleological, although the natural attitude has a certain a priori hold on humans and cannot be said to be freely adopted, unlike the theoretical attitude and the scientific attitude built on it. According to Husserl, it is an essential attribute of conscious subjectivity that it can freely adopt different attitudes or approaches towards the world – as indicated earlier,

the theoretical attitude, the psychological attitude, the mathematical attitude, the aesthetic attitude, the scientific attitude, and so on. An attitude, for Husserl, is an all-encompassing stance towards objects whereas a ‘worldview’ (*Weltanschauung*, *Weltvorstellung*) has a more existential connotation and suggests a way of living in relation to the world.

There is, for Husserl, an indefinite number of attitudes that can be freely adopted. All motivation, willing, knowing, and acting take place within an overall attitude that is guided by specific interests. There is also a certain layering or stratification of attitudes, e.g. the scientific ‘theoretical’ attitude is actually a version of the natural attitude in that science has an attitude of realism and belief towards the objects it studies (Husserl 2014: 9). Primarily and most of the time, for Husserl, as he articulates in *Ideas I* §§27–31 (Husserl 2014: 48–55), humans are in the *natural attitude* (*die natürliche Einstellung*), which is characterized by having directedness towards the world in a ‘general positing’ (*Generalthesis*) and with an overall belief in the reality of things and of the world, what Husserl calls ‘belief-in-being’ (*Seinsglaube*). In *Ideas II* §§ 34 and 49 (Husserl 1989), Husserl introduces the ‘personalistic attitude’ (*die personalistische Einstellung*) according to which we interpret human beings as persons subject or amenable to reasons is actually more basic than the natural attitude. We are primarily in a personal surrounding world (*personale Umwelt*, Husserl 1989: 148). Husserl describes the personalistic attitude as follows:

[The personalistic attitude is] . . . 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.

(Husserl 1989: 192)

The personalistic attitude is even more concrete than the ‘natural attitude’ or it is the natural attitude if one considers it to apply to the world of culture and spirit:

This surrounding world is comprised not of mere things but of use-Objects (clothes, utensils, guns, tools), works of art, literary products, instruments for religious and judicial activities (seals, official ornaments, coronation insignia, ecclesiastical symbols, etc.). And it is comprised not only of individual persons, but the persons are instead members of communities, members of personal unities of a higher order, which, as totalities, have their own lives, preserve themselves by lasting through time despite the joining or leaving of individuals, have their qualities as communities, their moral and juridical regulations.

(Husserl 1989: 191)

As Husserl explains it in his 1925 *Phenomenological Psychology* (Husserl 1977) lectures:

I direct my interest purely toward the personal, that means, purely toward how persons behave as persons and behave toward one another, how they define themselves and others, how they form friendships, marriages, unions, etc. . . . If I do this, nature as nature is never my theme in all that, neither the physical nor the psychophysical.  
(Husserl 1977: 168)

Generally speaking, as Staiti points out (Staiti 2014: 98), Husserl discusses attitudes in terms of certain contrasting pairs, e.g. natural versus phenomenological attitude, naturalistic versus personalistic, practical versus theoretical, evaluative versus disengaged, and so on. In his *Vienna Lecture* Husserl contrasts the theoretical attitude discovered by ancient Greek philosophers with the mythic-religious attitude which is a *practical* attitude towards the world.

Husserl also speaks of an ‘attitude-switch’ (*Einstellungwechsel*) or ‘attitude alteration’ (*Einstellungänderung*). It seems to belong essentially to the nature of intentional consciousness to be able to adopt a stance towards things and also to be able to modify or alter that stance. It is an essential feature of consciousness that alterations or changes in attitude can be brought about freely. It is possible to undergo a complete reorientation of attitude, and the phenomenological *epochē* is a special form of this change of attitude that is necessary in order to enter the phenomenological attitude. Husserl speaks of the ‘natural-scientific attitude’ and the ‘naturalistic attitude’ (in *Ideas* II) and acknowledges that there are also ‘evaluative and practical attitudes’. The natural attitude can evolve into the narrower ‘naturalistic attitude’, which is all too prevalent in contemporary natural and social sciences, as Husserl predicted. Husserl offers several different descriptions of the scientific objectivist attitude. He does not use Merleau-Ponty’s phrase, *the view from nowhere* (*la vue de nulle part*). In particular Husserl takes issue with a misleading version of the ‘detached observer’ position that is exemplified in twentieth-century empirical psychology (which is still embedded in the natural attitude). The natural attitude is reified or rigidified into the naturalistic attitude. The naturalistic attitude treats the activity of cognizing subjectivity as neutral – as a mirror and not as an active intervention that is responsible for the constitution of the object. A change of attitude is necessary for phenomenology – it brings a new perspective, which is both subjective but also ‘objective’ in that it is aware of its constituting function as an attitude.

### **Husserl on the Breakthrough to Objective Science With the ‘Theoretical Attitude’**

As we have already seen, Husserl in his mature years placed a great deal of emphasis on the emergence or ‘breakthrough’ (*Durchbruch*) – or

‘break-into’ (*Einbruch*) – into the ‘theoretical attitude’ (*die theoretische Einstellung*), which is responsible for modern science. The theoretical attitude is a ‘breakthrough’ from living in the mythical natural attitude. It was, for Husserl, a historical breakthrough of ancient Greeks (as he says in his 1935 *Vienna Lecture*):

We must clarify the transformation from original *theoria*, the fully disinterested seeing of the world [*Weltschau*] (following from the *epochē* of all practical interests, world-knowledge through pure, universal seeing [*Welterkenntnis aus blosser universaler Schau*]) to the *theoria* of genuine science, the two being mediated through the contrast of *doxa* and *episteme*.

(Husserl 1954: 332, 1970: 285)

However, according to Husserl’s diagnosis, the modern natural (and following them the human) sciences, since the time of Galileo, have developed a methodological form of objectivity that is one-sided because it deliberately excludes the input of cognizing subjectivity. Scientific knowledge has focused on the *object* of knowledge and has deliberately denied or overcome the *subject* of knowledge.

The biggest issue, and one which has largely been ignored by commentators, is the confusion in Husserl between the detached *theoretical* stance practiced in the sciences (which is still part of or arises from the natural attitude and the very special kind of detached stance of the transcendental onlooker on the other side of the *epochē*). There are, it seems to me, two forms of detachment present in Husserl’s discussions, and they need to be disambiguated. There is, first of all, a ‘natural attitude’ which can also support a theoretical attitude, and there is the disciplined post-reduction detachment of the transcendental spectator. In the remainder of this paper, I want to clarify the difference between these two forms of detachment. Let us consider what Husserl has to say about the ‘disinterested spectator’ or ‘onlooker’ (*der uninteressierte Zuschauer*), or, what he also called the ‘non-participating’ spectator (*unbeteiligter Zuschauer*).

### The Disinterested Spectator (*der uninteressierte Zuschauer*) or ‘Non-participating’ Spectator (*unbeteiligter Zuschauer*)

The mature Husserl uses a number of formulations, including: ‘disinterested spectator’ (*uninteressierter Zuschauer*, Husserl 1970: §69), ‘non-participating spectator’ (*unbeteiligter Zuschauer*, Husserl 1954: 331; Husserl 1968: 314), ‘pure theoretical spectator’ (*Rein theoretische Zuschauer*, Husserl 1954: 346), ‘sheer transcendental spectator’ (*bloss transzendentaler Zuschauer*, Hua IX 341), and ‘uninterested onlooker’ (*uninteressierten Erschauer*, Husserl 1991: 103). In his 1919 *Natur und*

*Geist* lectures, Husserl says about the kind of exclusion required for the transcendental attitude:

No knowledge, which we gain as phenomenologists, can depend on some knowledge or other from the excluded sphere. (The absolute independence has been secured of pure consciousness, according to its essential formations, from whatever scientific judgments of the dogmatic sciences of possible externality. The alteration of our attitude did not obliterate the external, the so-called objective in the usual sense, briefly put, the world as such is transformed into world-phenomenon, the worldly sciences into sciences of phenomena. We ourselves, i.e. each ego reduced as phenomenologically researching ego, are changed firstly, so to speak, into pure viewing [*augenhafte*] subjects.

(Husserl 1991: 103)<sup>3</sup>

Husserl is very clear that this is a very peculiar mode of consciousness – the ego splits from itself and views its own subjective achievements. Furthermore, according to Husserl, human beings become ‘receptive to new forms of motivations only recognizable in this attitude’ (Husserl 1954: 331, 1970: 285):

In other words, the human being becomes a nonparticipating spectator [*zum unbeteiligten Zuschauer*], surveyor of the world [*Überschauer der Welt*]; he becomes a philosopher; or rather, from this point on his life becomes receptive to motivations which are possible only in this attitude, motivations for new sorts of goals for thought and methods through which, finally, philosophy comes to be and he becomes a philosopher.

(Husserl 1954: 331, 1970: 285)

In his later works, from the 1920s on (the term does not appear in *Ideas I*), Husserl frequently speaks about the attitude of the ‘detached’, or ‘non-participating’ spectator or onlooker (*unbeteiligter Zuschauer*, Husserl 2002: 9), or, again, ‘disinterested’ spectator (*uninteressierter Zuschauer*, Husserl 2002: 11; and see especially *Cartesian Meditations* § 15, *Crisis* § 45, § 69). Perhaps the exemplary discussion of this concept is found in the *Vienna Lecture*. The disinterested spectator stance only becomes possible when the transcendental *epochē* has been performed to be free of practical engagements and interests and is in a position to understand the natural attitude precisely as an *attitude* or stance. The disinterested spectator, in its transcendental version, according to Husserl, has broken free of the bewitchment or entrancement of the natural attitude which is permeated by what Husserl calls an unexamined or naïve belief in the actual existence and reality of the world precisely in the manner in which



it is given in straightforward natural experience. The uninterested or disinterested spectator or observer no longer is captivated by the fundamental belief in the world or the general thesis of the natural attitude. As Husserl writes in his 1919 *Natur und Geist* lectures:

For me as a phenomenologist things with all their value predicates, beauties, purposefulness, scientific utilities, and so on, are not actualities but purely phenomena.

(Husserl 1991: 104)<sup>4</sup>

The disinterested spectator (i.e. the transcendental phenomenology) is focused on seeing the world as a constituted accomplishment, the harmonious unfolding of a stream of subjective appearances. In other words, the transcendental phenomenologist is supposed to be able to see the world as the outcome of the process of *constitution* by the transcendental ego. Husserl always underscores how difficult it is to achieve this *epochē* of everything worldly. He writes in the *Crisis* § 52:

Our *epochē* (the one determining our present investigation) denied us all natural worldlife and its worldly interests. It gave us a position above these. Any interest in the being, actuality, or nonbeing of the world, i.e., any interest theoretically oriented toward knowledge of the world, and even any interest which is practical in the usual sense, with its dependence on the presuppositions of its situational truths, is forbidden; this applies not only to the pursuit, for ourselves, of our own interests (we who are philosophizing) but also to any participation in the interests of our fellow men – for in this case we would still be interested indirectly in existing actuality. No objective truth, whether in the prescientific or the scientific sense, i.e., no claim about objective being, ever enters our sphere of scientific discipline, whether as a premise or as a conclusion.

(Husserl 1970: 175)

He is clear here that the transcendental stance of the disinterested spectator is entirely different from the theoretical attitude as such.

### Husserl on the *Inhuman Gaze*: The Stance of the Transcendental Disengaged Spectator

But problems remain – especially about the unity and diversity of the ego that is performing these different stances. Husserl's student Eugen Fink, in particular, questioned the ontological status of this transcendental spectator in his *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*. He compares Husserl's theoretical attitude of the non-participating spectator to that of the figures in Plato's Allegory of the Cave who have managed to escape from

the cave and see the sunlight and then return to the cave and see it for what it really is. According to Husserl, this ‘universal *epochē*’ is supposed to bring about a thorough-going objectivity – including release from the grip of the natural attitude, and hence from everything human and worldly. This is the truly ‘non-human’ or ‘inhuman’ aspect of the *epochē*. Husserl speaks about this *epochē* already in *Ideas I* as a kind of ‘inhuman’ stance – a suspension of everything human:

However, if I carry out the phenomenological *ἐποχή*, if the ‘ego, the human being,’ along with the entire world as it is naturally supposed, is suspended, then the unadulterated experience of the act with its own essence still remains.

(Husserl 2014: 154)

It is clear the reduction brackets the lifeworld and all human actions. As Husserl writes in his *Amsterdam Lectures* (April 1928):

The faith we have in our experiencing, which is at work in whatever specific consciousness one is now having and is precisely there in an unthematized and concealed way, naturally belongs, along with all its further modes of position-taking, to the phenomenological content of that moment of mental process. But such belief is, as such, only disclosed and not *participated in* by me as phenomenologist; as a moment of mental experience, it becomes thematic for me through the fact that I take up the phenomenological focus, which means that I move out of the naive and natural practice of taking this or that position, to one of holding back from it and I become, as mere spectator, an observing ego. . . . This describes in substance the necessary and consciously practiced method of access to the realm of pure phenomena of consciousness, namely that peculiar change of focus which is called the phenomenological reduction. By means of it our gaze was directed toward a principal aspect of pure phenomena of consciousness, which is the noematic (and about which traditional psychology did not know what to say). Through the phenomenological reduction intentional objectivities as such were first laid open. They were laid open as an essential component of all intentional processes and as an infinitely fruitful theme for phenomenological description.

(Husserl 1997: 223)

Husserl often describes this purification of everything human – this is an advocacy of a special kind of *inhuman gaze*.

But I [must] immediately add that the universality of the phenomenological *epochē* as practiced by the phenomenologist from the very beginning, the universality in which he or she becomes the mere

impartial observer of the totality of his conscious life-process, brings about not only a thematic purification of the individual processes of consciousness and thereby discloses its noematic components; it further directs its power on the ego of consciousness, which it frees of everything concretely human, everything animally real . . . Rather, it has now itself become the intended real thing *as intended only*; it has become a noematic phenomenon.

(Husserl 1997: 223–224)

Husserl thinks that transcendental phenomenology takes a step beyond the human, beyond what Kant calls the ‘empirical ego’ and treats its own life as a ‘phenomenon’ (i.e. as the result of a constituting activity). He writes about the difference between transcendental phenomenology and any kind of psychology:

While the psychologist as psychologist was from first to last included in the topic in apperceptive form as a person in the world, the phenomenologist as phenomenologist, on the other hand, is for himself no longer I, this particular person; rather, as person he or she is *put in parentheses*, is himself/herself a phenomenon. For his transcendental ego, he or she is a phenomenon of egoic being, of egoic life-process [*Ich-Seins und Ich-Lebens*], which in the radical *epochē* remains continuously demonstrable as precisely that ultimately functioning subjectivity whose previously hidden accomplishment is the all-embracing apperception of the world.

(Husserl 1997: 246)

I have been focusing on Husserlian phenomenology. But we can find much the same kind of transcendental detachment in Heidegger’s analyses in *Being and Time*. For Heidegger, the theoretical attitude is not ‘absolute’; the attitude of the mere spectator (often seen as the model of the knowing subject) is not primary. Rather our practical engagement with things in the course of our projects is paramount. Heidegger thinks that the very fact that our being in the world is governed or mediated by ‘mood’ goes against the ‘idea of knowing the “world” absolutely’ (*Idee einer absoluten ‘Welt’-erkenntnis*, Heidegger 1962: 177). As Heidegger points out, even the purest *theoria* has not left all moods behind (Heidegger 1962: 177). Indeed, Heidegger offers an interpretation of *theoria* as a ‘tranquil tarrying alongside’ (*im ruhigen Verweilen*, Heidegger 1962: 177). Heidegger makes the point that pure detached theoretical viewing (as takes place in objective science) is not a view from nowhere but in fact is a very specific stance of its own. Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*, § 69:

In characterizing the change-over from the manipulating and using and so forth which are circumspective in a ‘practical’ way, to

‘theoretical’ exploration, it would be easy to suggest that merely looking at entities is something which emerges when concern holds back from any kind of manipulation. What is decisive in the ‘emergence’ of the theoretical attitude would then lie in the disappearance of praxis. . . . ‘Practical’ dealings have their own ways of tarrying. And just as praxis has its own specific kind of sight (‘theory’), theoretical research is not without a praxis of its own.

(Heidegger 1962: 409)

The critique of the view from nowhere, then, is found both in Husserl and Heidegger, as well as, of course, in Merleau-Ponty.

## Conclusion

In Husserlian phenomenology, a great deal of emphasis is placed on gaining the right mode of access to the phenomenon. Phenomenology proceeds in reflection and indeed in special transcendental reflection under the *epochē*. This higher stance is that of the non-participating spectator, but it is not the invisible spectator of the third-person ‘view from nowhere’. It is a new and higher kind of objectivity, one that is aware of how objectivity arises from subjectivity. Husserl then does defend objectivity and indeed, often quite provocatively, he also defends the ‘inhuman’ gaze brought on by the transcendental *epochē*. Phenomenology, then, is not a modern version of Kierkegaard’s ‘truth is subjectivity’. It does not reduce everything to subjectivity if subjectivity is understood in a worldly or mundane way. Husserl thinks the ‘theoretical attitude’ is itself built on the natural attitude but is determined by a purely theoretical ‘interest’. Husserl maintains the universal *epochē* is detached from all position-taking. It is not critique in the Kantian sense, and most definitely not skeptical doubt in the Cartesian sense. It is a kind of deliberate absence of position-taking that is really achievable and which, for Husserl, brings about a new higher ‘objectivity’. The *inhuman gaze*, then, has its place in the phenomenological method. One must, however, be vigilant not to conflate the objective theoretical attitude (born in Greece and exemplified *par excellence* in the modern natural sciences) with the very special kind of non-participating spectator stance of the transcendental ego reflecting on its own intentional and sense-constituting activities.

## Notes

1. Husserl’s use of the German terms *für sich* (‘for itself’) and *in sich* (‘in itself’) both echoes Hegel and anticipates Jean-Paul Sartre’s account of human existence as ‘for itself’ (*pour-soi*), seeking impossibly to objectify itself as *en-soi*.
2. Incidentally, Husserl’s discussion of wonder and curiosity here is close to that of Heidegger in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962: 216–218). Heidegger treats wonder as a fundamental mood that governs our approach to the world.

- Curiosity is a kind of detached rootlessness that has cut off our original ‘concern’ for ourselves in the world.
3. Keine Erkenntnis, die wir als Phänomenologen gewinnen, kann abhängig sein von irgendeiner Erkenntnis der ausgeschalteten Sphäre. (Die absolute Independenz des reinen Bewusstseins nach seinen Wesensgestaltungen von irgendwelchen wissenschaftlichen Urteilen der dogmatischen Wissenschaften möglicher Äußerlichkeit ist festgestellt worden.) Die Änderung unserer Einstellung ließ das Äußere, das im gewöhnlichen Sinn so genannte Objektive, nicht verschwinden, kurz gesagt verwandelte sich die Welt schlechthin in das Weltphänomen, die Weltwissenschaften in Wissenschaftsphänomene. Wir selbst, d.h. jeder reduziert als das phänomenologisch forschende Ich, verwandeln uns zunächst sozusagen in rein augenhafte Subjekte oder, wie wir auch sagen können, in radikal unbeteiligte Zuschauer der Welt und aller sich uns geistig anbietenden möglichen Welten mit all den einzelnen Dingen, Kulturobjekten, Kunstwerken, Büchern, Menschen, Vereinen, Staaten, Kirchen, Sprachen, Sitten usw. Und aller darauf bezüglichen Wissenschaften, wie selbstverständlich. Husserl, *Natur und Geist*, Mat. Band IV, Husserl 1991: 103.
  4. Für mich als Phänomenologen sind die Dinge mit allen ihren Wertprädikaten, Schönheiten, Zweckhaftigkeiten, wissenschaftlichen Nützlichkeiten usw. keine Wirklichkeiten, sondern reine Phänomene. (Husserl, *Natur und Geist*, Materialien Band IV, Husserl 1991: 104, my translation)

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