

6 Husserl on relativism

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Introduction

The Moravian-born, German-speaking founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) had a life-long engagement with relativism, from his *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901) to his late *Crisis* writings (1934–1937) (see Soffer 1991; Carr 1987; Mohanty 1997). Furthermore, he maintained a singularly consistent critique of relativism from the beginnings of his career, when he targeted *psychologism* as a relativistic threat to the objectivity of logic and of scientific knowledge more generally, right through to the end of his career. Thus, in late essays such as “Phenomenology and Anthropology” (1931, Husserl 1927–1931), he portrayed modern subjectivism as moving in the directions of a relativistic “anthropologism” (Dilthey, Heidegger), as opposed to a true science of subjectivity, which he, of course, claimed to have initiated with his transcendental phenomenology. In this sense, then, Husserl was the first person to explicitly expose the relativism inherent in Heidegger’s attempt to found phenomenology on *Dasein*. (Later writers such as Richard Rorty have interpreted Heidegger as a relativist; see also Lafont 2000.)

Husserl tends to identify relativism with skepticism, so he frequently talks about “skeptical relativism” (as in his *First Philosophy* lectures 1923/24, 66). The mature Husserl wanted an entirely new science of transcendental subjectivity, which, according to his claims, would ground all the other sciences, not just the natural sciences, but also the human sciences, including psychology, history, and all other so-called *Geisteswissenschaften* in an absolute way that would banish forever the threat of relativism and skepticism. Thus, he writes in the *Crisis of European Sciences*, philosophy has not yet become truly scientific, i.e., transcendental, and the modern discovery of subjectivity collapsed into psychological subjectivity and hence into “anthropologicistic relativism” (1934–1937, 69). True philosophy, operating with a transcendental vigilance provided by the *epoché*, is necessary to prevent relapse into objectivism, naturalism, anthropologism, and naïveté and to offer a true meaning-clarification of the nature of the world as a *Leistung* (achievement) of transcendental subjectivity. Husserl believed that transcendental phenomenology made it possible to offer, for the first time, a true science of the life-world in which people

always live and which the positive sciences take for granted. While there is an undoubted plurality of life-worlds, there is, from the transcendental point of view, also the possibility of a universal science of the life-world (1934–1937, 123ff.) that uncovers in a new way the global correlation between modes of givenness and modes of subjective apprehension.

In his early years, Husserl, as a mathematician and logician, was a strong defender of the fixed and unchangeable nature of ideal truths and hence an opponent of all forms of relativism and subjectivism. Initially, his main target was the psychologistic approach to logic, which he found in many nineteenth-century logicians (not just in empiricists such as J. S. Mill, but also in German logicians and psychologists such as Christoph von Sigwart, Benno Erdmann, Wilhelm Wundt, and others, see Kusch 1995), but later, especially in his essay “Philosophy as Rigorous Science” (1910–1911) he expanded this critique to all forms of reductive naturalism. He was also concerned that the human sciences, especially the historical sciences, were also accepting a form of relativism in so far as they had a tendency toward *historicism*, the view that historical periods had specific *Weltanschauungen* (world-views) or outlooks that could only be understood or appreciated from within, thus making an objective science of history as such impossible, since validity and truth would be relative to a particular era and its outlook. In this regard, Husserl specifically targeted the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (who himself, however, in a letter to Husserl in June 1911, shortly before he died, rejected the charge of scepticism and relativism; Dilthey 1911; Bambach 1995, 173). In his later years, in part due to his contact with Martin Heidegger in Freiburg, Husserl took the historicity of human existence much more seriously and recognized that peoples belong to different life-worlds and that their cultures have their own *Geschichtlichkeiten* (specific historicities). Nevertheless, while acknowledging the plurality of life-worlds and the fact that a certain cultural *relativity* is inevitably present, he sought a universal science that exposed the fundamental features shared by all life-worlds. In this sense, Husserl distinguished—although not in any explicitly thematic way—between relativity as an empirical fact or truism of culture and relativism (which is a philosophical theory about the nature of truth).

The critique of psychologism as leading to relativism (1900)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Husserl correctly predicted that naturalism and relativism would be two of the greatest philosophical movements of the twentieth century. He regarded both as threats to the true nature of philosophy as rigorous science. In fact, Husserl’s insight that all psychologistic interpretations of logic would inevitably lead to relativism (and thence inevitably to skepticism) was already the driving force behind the first volume of his *Logical Investigations*, the *Prolegomena to Pure Logic*, published in 1900.¹ In this *Prolegomena*, Husserl also recognized several kinds of relativism, including what he called “species relativism” or “anthropologism,” according

to which what is logically valid is relative to what the human mind is capable of understanding or what laws govern the human mind in its actual operation. For Husserl, this species relativism was particularly to be found among neo-Kantians. He also diagnosed the tendency to reduce the natural sciences to the laws of human psychology as found in various psychological thinkers (e.g., Mill) as equally dangerous.

In order to overcome relativism and skepticism, the *Prolegomena* mounted a strong defense of the conception of truth as ideal and universal and “true for all.” Husserl claimed to be inspired by Bolzano and Lotze to recognize that “truths in themselves” or “propositions in themselves” are essentially objective states of affairs. In this regard, Husserl specifically rejected the relativist claim (later endorsed by Heidegger) that the truth of scientific laws is relative to the era in which they are discovered, i.e., that Newton’s laws, strictly speaking, were not true before Newton formulated them. Heidegger states in *Being and Time* § 44:

Newton’s laws, the principle of contradiction, any truth whatever—these are true only as long as *Dasein* is. Before there was any *Dasein*, there was no truth; nor will there be any after *Dasein* is no more.

(1927, 269)

Husserl argues, on the contrary, that the reality, e.g., of gravity, specified in Newton’s Laws, holds irrespective of whether these laws were formulated or not, or whether they ever were contemplated by human minds, although laws of course may be formulated in different ways with different degrees of precision.

The *Prolegomena to Pure Logic* aimed to secure the true meaning of logic as a pure, *a priori*, science of ideal, objective meanings and of the necessary formal laws regulating them, entirely distinct from all contingent psychological acts, contents, and procedures. The *Prolegomena* discussed at length various *psychologistic* interpretations of logic, propounded by John Stuart Mill and others (Husserl’s list includes Bain, Wundt, Sigwart, Erdmann, and Lipps; 1900/1901 I, 83), which Husserl viewed as leading to a skeptical relativism that threatened the very possibility of objective knowledge. Turning instead to an older tradition of logic that he traces to Leibniz, Kant, Bolzano, and Lotze, Husserl defends a vision of logic as a pure *Wissenschaftslehre* (theory of science)—in fact, the “science of science,”—in the course of which he carefully elaborates the different senses in which this pure logic can be transformed into a normative science or developed into a practical discipline or technology (*Kunstlehre*).

Husserl himself regarded his *Logical Investigations* as a “breakthrough work (*ein Werk des Durchbruchs*) not an end but rather a beginning” (1900/1901 I, 3). It certainly contained many of the arguments he would rehearse again through his career. As Husserl put it, the *Investigations* originally grew out of his desire to achieve “a philosophical clarification of

pure mathematics” (1900/1901 I, 1). In the *Prolegomena*, Husserl explicitly abandoned his own earlier approach to logic and mathematics expressed in his first book, *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (1891), which had been judged psychologistic by its chief critic Gottlob Frege (1848–1925). In his review of Husserl’s *Philosophy of Arithmetic* Frege had sharply criticized it, and Husserl came to agree with Frege’s criticism, although he had already diagnosed himself the problems with his own earlier approach. In his correspondence with Frege, he agrees that both are in search of ideality (see Mohanty 1982; Hill and Haddock 2000). In his *Philosophy of Arithmetic*, Husserl had given an account of the genesis of arithmetic concepts using Brentanian descriptive psychology. Indeed, he claimed to have been particularly drawn to Brentano’s project for a reform of Aristotelian logic in Brentano’s 1884–1885 lecture-course, *Die elementare Logik und die in ihr nötigen Reformen* (Elementary Logic and its Necessary Reform) which Husserl attended in Vienna. As Husserl recalled in his 1919 memorial essay for Brentano: “Brentano’s pre-eminent and admirable strength was in logical theory” (1919, 345). Husserl seemed especially interested in, and critical of, Brentano’s novel structure of judgments and his construal of judgment as assertion or denial of an object. Indeed, Husserl—no doubt exaggerating somewhat—later presented his own *Logical Investigations* as an attempt to do justice to the extraordinary genius of Brentano by overcoming the latter’s psychologistic grounding of logic. In the *Philosophy of Arithmetic*, Husserl proposed “psychological analyses” in the Brentanian sense. Husserl relies heavily on Brentano’s distinction between physical and psychical relations to argue that the way we group items together in order to count them requires grasping higher-level “psychical” or “meta-physical” relations between the items, as opposed to the more usual “primary” or “content” relations. By the time of the *Prolegomena*, Husserl was intent to distance himself from any psychological grounding of arithmetic or logic and to defend the objectivity and ideality of logical and mathematical truths and laws and the objects they governed over. Clearly, now Husserl thought that a purely *psychological* grounding of logic in human thought processes inevitably ended in relativism.

Instead, Husserl retrieved “pure logic,” a conception found in Leibniz and Kant, but expressed most clearly in *Theory of Science* (Bolzano 1837) of the neglected Austrian logician Bernard Bolzano (1781–1848), and his followers (especially Frege’s teacher Rudolf Hermann Lotze, 1817–1881). This tradition treated logic as a purely formal “science of science,” and recognized that judgments, statements, expressions, or “propositions” articulated in language, if true, mirrored ideal states of affairs. Thus, the state of affairs expressed in the so-called Pythagorean Theorem—the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides—stands as an independently valid truth, whether or not anyone actually thinks it or expresses it in language, or whether it is in fact ever discovered by any cognizing subject. Such propositional states of affairs—perhaps misleadingly called “thought contents”—possess an “ideality” that allows them to

be instantiated in different thought processes of the same individual (2001, I, 167) or in diverse individuals' thoughts at different times.

Chapter Seven of the *Prolegomena*, entitled "Psychologism as a Sceptical Relativism," offers a comprehensive refutation of psychologism. Husserl begins by saying that the worst objection that can be made against any theory is that it does not conform to the requirements of what a theory as such should be:

The worst objection that can be made to a theory, and particularly to a theory of logic, is that it goes against the self-evident conditions for the possibility of a theory in general.

(2001, I, 75)

Husserl goes on to distinguish two kinds of conditions of possibility—objective and subjective. Subjective conditions are not here the limitations of any particular psychological subject but the conditions determining what counts as knowledge as such, whereas objective conditions pertain to the manner in which propositions relate to one another in terms of ground and consequence.

Prolegomena section 34 lays out "The Concept of Relativism and Its Specific Forms." Husserl distinguishes two kinds of relativism: what he calls "individual" relativism, and "species" or "specific" relativism, one particular version of which he calls "anthropologism." Anthropologism is the claim that "all truth has its source in our common human constitution" (2001, I, 80). Husserl distinguishes between skepticism and relativism. He sees skepticism as a more general metaphysical theory about the possibility of knowledge as such, and, since in the *Logical Investigations* he is not interested in such metaphysical theories (§ 33), he is more interested in skeptical challenges to the possibility of scientific knowledge, and this leads him to see skepticism as inevitably leading to relativism.

Husserl initially introduces "subjectivism" or "relativism" in terms of Protagoras' claim that "man is the measure of all things" (2001 I § 34). Husserl then interprets relativism in more or less the manner of Protagoras:

"The individual man is the measure of all truth." For each man that is true what seems to *him* true, one thing to one man, and the opposite to another, if that is how he sees it. We can therefore opt for the formula "All truth (and knowledge) is relative—relative to the contingently judging subject."

(2001 I, 77)

In this regard, all truth is relative to the contingent cognizing subject.

However, there is another kind of relativism that makes truth relative—not to the contingent subject but to the particular animal species—and in the case of humans this kind of species-relativism Husserl calls "anthropologism."

Husserl sees Kant's followers (Sigwart, Erdmann) as guilty of anthropologism in that for them the limits of knowledge are the limits of the human condition. Husserl is particularly critical of Sigwart, whom he claims argued that for a proposition to be true it must have been thought by someone.

Husserl takes the general view that relativism is self-refuting and amounting to *Widersinn* (countersense). To assert that relativism is true is to be committed to one absolute truth; hence, to *assert* relativism is *eo ipso* to refute it. Husserl acknowledges that the supporter of relativism will not be dissuaded by this argument because the relativist asserts that he is merely expressing his own standpoint (2001 I, 78). Husserl, however, thinks there is an inner contradiction in relativism in that it presupposes an objective standard of truth. All theories that make claims about reality assume the standpoint of an objective reality. Husserl accuses the neo-Kantians of "species relativism" or "anthropologism."

Anthropologism maintains is not relative to the individual but to the human species. As Husserl puts it, such a dependence can only be thought of as causal, and thus the human constitution would be *causa sui* in respect of its laws of truth. But if the human species were destroyed, and there were no longer a human constitution—would that mean that truth as such would disappear? Husserl thinks this is absurd (2001 I, 81). Husserl, on the contrary, is a "logical absolutist." For him, "every judgment is bound by the pure laws of logic without regard to time and circumstances, or to individuals and species" (2001 I, 93).

In the *Prolegomena* Husserl takes a strongly realist view of scientific truths ("realist" in the sense that truths are true independently of their being known). Newton's Law of Gravity, if true, was true even before Newton discovered it. To claim otherwise (as Sigwart did) would be self-contradictory for Husserl (2001 I, 85). That said, empirical scientific formulations, such as Newton's Law, for Husserl, do not have the universality and ideality of *a priori* laws. They are empirical approximations, capable of refinement, or indeed reformulation in more exact ways. Psychological laws, similarly, like the empirical laws of the natural sciences, are not the same as the *überempirischen und absolut exakten Gesetze* (meta-empirical and absolutely exact laws) of logic (§21, 2001 I, 48). Husserl also distinguishes between conceivability (or imaginability by humans) and truth itself. According to Husserl's realism, certain truths may never be discoverable by the human mind, but they are true nonetheless. Furthermore, psychological impossibility does not mean logical impossibility. Husserl thinks it may very well be possible for humans to deny the Principle of Non-Contradiction, but that does not mean the principle does not hold or is not independently valid.

Naturalism as a kind of relativism

In later writings, right down to "The Origin of Geometry" (1939), Husserl continued to defend the ideality and indeed univocity of genuine logical and mathematical truths. There is only one Pythagorean Theorem, and its validity

is independent of the cultural or scientific norms prevalent at any time in history. Nonetheless, Husserl became more concerned that psychologism was not just a tendency deeply embedded in the psychology, logic, and mathematics of his day, but that it in fact formed part of a larger outlook—naturalism—that suffered from the same inherent self-contradictory and countersensical character. In his “Philosophy as Rigorous Science” essay, Husserl spoke of the “battleground of psychological naturalism” (1910/1911, 278) and later, in 1915, he wrote to Rickert that he was in agreement with the neo-Kantians in the struggle against “the naturalism of our time as our common enemy” (1915, 178).

Especially after 1906–1907, the years in which he discovered the *epochē* and the “reduction,” Husserl expanded his target from psychologism to naturalism. His transcendental turn was in part a rejection of scientific objectivism and naturalism. For Husserl, naturalism involves a countersense. It assumes the validity of logic and mathematics, which it cannot find in nature. Naturalism is linked to what Husserl calls “the discovery of nature” (1910/1911, 252). Nature is posited by natural science as a domain subject to universal laws. However, Husserl maintained in his “Philosophy as Rigorous Science,” “all natural science is naive by virtue of its starting point. The nature into which it wants to inquire is simply there for it” (1910/1911, 257). Husserl believed, furthermore, that a purely natural scientific epistemology was a countersense (1910/1911, 259). But for Husserl, “naturalism” is an inevitable consequence of an absolutization of the belief in the world inherent in what he called “the natural attitude.” Naturalism naively takes as real what in fact is the way things are given under the natural attitude (Moran 2008).

Another form of relativity is introduced by Husserl once he discovers the notion of *natürliche Einstellung* (natural attitude, a notion that is first discussed in print in Husserl 1913 § 27, but that was already present as an idea in his 1906–1907 lectures) and its correlated “transcendental attitude.” Husserl now argues that ontology is relative to the stance one adopts toward the world. Attitudes can be relative. Only the transcendental attitude can claim absoluteness. This becomes developed in Husserl’s mature works, especially in his *Amsterdam Lectures* (of 1928; Husserl 1927–1931) and in the *Crisis of European Sciences*.

Historicism as relativism in “Philosophy as Rigorous Science” (1910/1911)

In his journal article “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science” (1910–1911), Husserl was concerned that relativism had crept not just into pure *a priori* sciences such as logic and mathematics but also into the *human* sciences. In this case, the particular tendency that he regarded as dangerous Husserl labelled “historicism.” Husserl traces this tendency to post-Hegelian philosophy, which claimed that philosophies were true for their own time and had

abandoned the overarching framework of absolute knowledge that Hegel had maintained. Husserl writes:

Hegelian philosophy had after-effects due to its doctrine of the relative legitimacy of each philosophy for its time—a doctrine whose sense, of course, differed completely in a system that pretended to absolute validity from the historicistic sense in which the doctrine was adopted by the generations that had lost the belief not only in Hegelian philosophy but in any absolute philosophy whatsoever.

(1910/1911, 252)

This gave rise to what Husserl called *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* (worldview-philosophy).² According to Husserl, Dilthey, with his account of the different kinds of worldview, was dangerously close to the view that each era could only be understood from within its prevailing worldview. This seemed to rule out the possibility of historical understanding *across* eras or epochs. If historicism is true, then the historians of the twentieth century could never fully understand the mind-set of the ancient Greeks. For Husserl, to concede such a claim would be the death of history as a strict science.

Historicism, for Husserl, does not explicitly *naturalize* spirit in the manner that contemporary scientific psychology does, but it does fall prey to relativism (1910/1911, 278) and for reasons closely analogous to the ones Husserl deploys against psychologism. Husserl writes: “The worldview-philosophy of modernity is ... a child of historicistic skepticism” (1910/1911, 283). Husserl agrees with Dilthey that it is a great task to study the morphology and typology of spiritual forms. In this regard, he refers to Dilthey’s study of the *Typology of Worldviews* (Dilthey 1919; Husserl 1910/1911, 280). However, Husserl explicitly invokes the “relativity of the historical form of life,” quoting Dilthey, as one form of life succeeds another, there is no claim to the absolute validity of one form of life. Of course, it is a factual truth that cultural forms are bound to their era and its prevalent outlook. But the tendency of this approach is to deny to any particular era an absolute validity. Husserl asks whether the assumption of a lack of absolute validity follows from the plurality of cultural forms:

Certainly, a worldview and a worldview philosophy are cultural formations that come into being and disappear in the stream of the development of mankind, whereby their spiritual content is determinately motivated under the given historical circumstances. Yet the same holds also of the rigorous sciences. Do they for that reason lack objective validity?

(Husserl 1910/1911, 280)

In a footnote, Husserl acknowledges that Dilthey himself did actually reject historicist skepticism. Nevertheless, he fails to see how Dilthey can consistently maintain his position given his position on worldviews.

Social unities of all kinds bear similarities to the world of organisms: everything is in development; there are no fixed species. We understand the life of spirit only by immersing ourselves in its motivations. Husserl accepts the factual truth of what Dilthey is asserting, but he questions its “legitimacy.” Worldviews come and go—so also do sciences (mathematical theories may rise and fall)—but this does not undermine its objective legitimacy. According to worldview philosophy, the vast array of formations of historical consciousness rules out the claim of any one of them having absolute validity. Husserl acknowledges the possibility of an extreme relativism that would hold that different scientific theories will be valid at different times:

A very extreme historicist might well affirm this, pointing here to the change in scientific views, how what is regarded today as proven theory will tomorrow be seen to be void, how some speak of certain laws, whereas others call them mere hypotheses, and still others call them vague notions.

(1910/1911, 280)

Historicism carried through consistently, however, will end up in “extreme skeptical subjectivism”:

The ideas “truth,” “theory” and “science” would then, like all ideas, lose their absolute validity.

(1910/1911, 280)

Husserl is concerned that historicism would undermine the very idea of objective validity, a concept required by the ideal of science itself. On the historicist view, for an idea to have validity would simply mean it was a factual production of a particular time in the life of spirit. Husserl’s solution is to distinguish between science *as cultural achievement* and science *as the system of valid theory*. Decisions about validity and normativity are not matters for the empirical sciences to decide. A distinction must be made between what obtains factually and what is valid. No human science can argue for or against validity claims that are never factual claims at all. The inference to historical relativism and skepticism (that no historical era has produced an era-transcending truth) is not just invalid, it is, for Husserl, a countersense, like $2 \times 2 = 5$ (1910/1911, 282). Furthermore, the historical untenability of a particular claim has nothing to do with its validity or invalidity. Just as a mathematician would never draw an inference about validity in mathematics from the history of mathematics, neither should the cultural scientist or historian. Husserl, however, concedes that he is not dismissing history:

If I therefore regard historicism as an epistemological aberration that, owing to its countersensical consequences, must be just as brusquely rejected as naturalism, then I would nevertheless like to emphasize

expressly that I fully acknowledge the tremendous value of history in the broadest sense for the philosopher.

(1910/1911, 283)

Husserl defends not just the value of history but the possibility that discoveries in wisdom can be gleaned from the critical interrogation of worldviews (Moran 2011). But wisdom is an ideal, a value, a goal lying in the infinite, which has to be apprehended in a different way from any factual experience. Husserl concludes:

The “idea” of worldview is accordingly for each age a different one, as should be quite clear from the foregoing analysis of its concept. By contrast, the “idea” of science is a supratemporal one, and here that means that it is not limited by any relation to the spirit of an age.

(1910/1911, 287)

The elderly Dilthey (who died on 1 October 1911) was put out that he was the focus of Husserl’s attacks and wrote to Husserl denying the charge of relativism (Dilthey 1994, 44–47). Years later, in his 1925 lectures, Husserl made amends, acknowledging Dilthey’s important contribution to descriptive psychology (Husserl 1910/1911; 1925).

The relativity of life-worlds and the absolute transcendental science

Once Husserl introduces the notion of the *Lebenswelt* (life-world), around 1919, he recognizes the plurality of worlds and the fact that truths and norms are often relative to worlds. Husserl’s *Crisis* continues to be relevant because it challenges philosophers and scientists to think about the nature of the present age with its dominant scientific and technological world view, that has led, as Husserl believed, to universalization but at the same time to a kind of flattening out of reason that has left many core human values unsupported and threatened. In his analyses of the current state and hegemony of the scientific-technological attitude, Husserl predicted the rise of naturalism, relativism, and irrationalism in the face of the dominant instrumental reason. Somewhat in the spirit of Nietzsche, Spengler and others, Husserl also was attentive to the general mood of *weariness* sweeping through Western culture in this crucial period of the 1930s. As he saw it, “Europe’s greatest danger is weariness” (1934–1937, 299). There is a danger of “despair,” of loss of sense of values, leading to estrangement, cultural collapse and, ultimately, to “barbarism.” This collapse is occasioned by skeptical relativism. Husserl defends the redeeming universality of philosophy: “from the ashes of great weariness, will rise up the phoenix of a new life-inwardness (*Lebensinnerlichkeit*) and spiritualization as the pledge of a great and distant future for man, for the spirit alone is immortal” (1934–1937, 299). For Husserl, transcendental phenomenology is the science that grasps the intrinsic meaning and inner

rationality of the *accomplishment of spiritual life* in all its forms. As Husserl proclaims in the “Vienna Lecture”:

The spirit, and indeed only the spirit, exists in itself and for itself, is self-sufficient (*eigenständig*); and in its self-sufficiency, and only in this way, it can be treated truly rationally, truly and from the ground up scientifically.
(1934–1937, 297)

These optimistic reflections by no means disguise Husserl’s acute awareness of the difficulties and complexities facing the contemporary philosophy who seeks to be a “functionary” in the service of humankind.

Husserl is challenging the cultural dominance of *scientism* (with its commitment to what he calls “objectivism”) and *naturalism*, which he sees as having also led to the acceptance of varieties of cultural relativism and ultimately to skepticism. As a result, European intellectual culture in its highest achievement (i.e., the sciences) is threatened by a profound and growing *irrationalism*. Husserl’s proposed solution involves first and foremost *Klärung* (clarification) of what exactly has happened through a transcendental reflection on the meaning of the modern scientific achievement (and its implications for the development of modern philosophy).

In the *Crisis*, Husserl argues forcefully that the undoubted fact of the relativity of living in a life-world, which changes with different cultures and historical trajectories (“historicities”), does not lead to relativism. In fact, Husserl always praises the Greek skeptics for recognizing the relativity of all experience, but their mistake was to conclude to relativism about truth. Husserl acknowledges that pre-scientific experience has its own relativities. He writes, “What is actually first is the ‘merely subjective-relative’ intuition of prescientific world-life” (1934–1937, 125). But this “subjective-relative” experience must not be dismissed in the name of a naïve scientific objectivity (as indeed happened in the development of modern science since Galileo). Rather, “the life-world is a realm of original self-evidences” (1934–1937, 127).

Husserl’s reading of Lévy-Bruhl’s account of “primitive” worlds

Despite Husserl’s negative attitude toward what he called “anthropologism” and his belief that all forms of empirical psychology and social anthropology were naïve regarding their acceptance of the world, he himself was growing increasingly interested in issues of human culture and history, and what he called “generativity” (Steinbock 1995), i.e., the process of cultural development and change across history, especially with regard to inter-generational transmission. He was also attempting to understand the relation between his transcendental phenomenology and historical studies of human culture, and even, as this letter attests, delving into ethnological literature. Late in his own career, Husserl encountered the discussion of *la mentalité primitive* (primitive mentality) in the writings of the French cultural anthropologist Lucien

Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939), an almost exact contemporary of Husserl's. In 1935, Husserl wrote a letter to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (Husserl 1935), thanking him for books the anthropologist has sent him. The German text of Husserl's letter was originally transcribed and printed in the appendix to Hermann Leo Van Breda's 1941 doctoral thesis (written in Dutch) and, in this version, was available to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Van Breda 1992, 156). Jacques Derrida and many others have commented on this letter. In his letter, Husserl shows that he was well read in Lévy-Bruhl's writings on anthropology of "primitive" or pre-technological, oral cultures.³

Lévy-Bruhl was a prominent French intellectual of the time, a philosopher, sociologist, ethnologist, and theoretical anthropologist, who had a major influence on philosophers such as Ernst Cassirer, psychologists such as Piaget and Jung, as well as anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and E. E. Evans-Pritchard. Lévy-Bruhl was particularly interested in the question of whether there is a universal mentality for all humans and whether this mentality goes through stages of development or evolution.

Lévy-Bruhl is best known for his proposal that pre-literate or "primitive" peoples exhibited their own kind of "prelogical" rationality. He claimed that primitives either lived with contradictions or were indifferent to them. He insisted that primitive mentality is different from modern mentality, but rather than being blind to contradictions, as he had earlier put it, he came to see it as having a certain indifference to "incompatibilities" and a "lack of curiosity" about manifest improbabilities, hence allowing room for the mysterious and the mythical. In *Primitive Mythology* (1935), for instance, Lévy-Bruhl points out that, where primitives do recognize contradictions, they reject them "with the same force" as moderns do, however—and this Lévy-Bruhl regards as distinctive of their mentality—there are contradictions that we recognize to which they are insensitive and consequently indifferent (Lévy-Bruhl 1935, xi). Whereas, for example, the European mind assumes an order of causality, the primitive mind ascribes everything to more or less spiritual powers. Primitive thought is essentially "mystical"—there is a felt *participation* and unity with all things; objects are never merely natural, but there is a life-force running through the universe, neither completely material nor completely spiritual, a unifying power running through diverse things (1927, 3).

Husserl was fascinated with Lévy-Bruhl's accounts of the mentalities of pre-literate peoples in Papua New Guinea and Australia (largely based on reports from travelers and missionaries), which seemed to contrast sharply with modern European scientific rationality. According to Lévy-Bruhl, primitive peoples do not experience the natural world in the same way as modern Europeans. Europeans experience nature as ordered and reject entities incompatible with that order (1935, 41). Primitives, on the other hand, experience nature as including what is supernatural. They experience the world holistically, e.g., if one animal is wounded then the whole species feels its pain. "To be is to participate," as he puts it in the *Notebooks*. If a primitive feels unity with a particular totem, then the primitive thinks naturally that he or she is that

totem. Husserl broadly accepts Lévy-Bruhl's account of the worlds of preliterate people enclosed in finite worldviews. Furthermore, Husserl is willing to acknowledge the plurality and diversity of life-forms, and at the same time he is careful to avoid the relativism involved in the claim that different life-worlds are mutually exclusive and mutually incomprehensible. He walked a fine line: recognizing the factual relativity of everything historical and its relatedness to its life-world, but also recognizing the *a priori* universal conditions underlying and governing the experience of worldhood in general.

Husserl thinks that many cultures remain imprisoned in their inherited world-view without ever questioning it. The ancient Greek theoretical breakthrough, on the other hand, allowed Greek thinkers to discover the relativity of their worldview in relation to other foreign worldviews (Husserl 1922–1937, 188). Gradually, a difference emerges between a people's *Weltvorstellung* (world representation) and what they conceive of as the “world in itself” (1922–1937, 189). This leads philosophy to a radical “demythification of the world” (1922–1937, 189) and a stance-taking against traditional values. Here arises the differentiation between *doxa* and *episteme* (Husserl 1922–1937, 189). With the demythification of experience, we get the rise of “theoretical experience.” Husserl, then, was already writing about the difference between a historical world and the world of a non-historical people, one enclosed in myth. Humans living in mythic outlook have a relation to the *Nahwelt* (near world) (Husserl 1922–1937, 228). Husserl writes in his letter to Lévy-Bruhl:

Naturally, we have long known that every human being has a “world representation” (*Weltvorstellung*), that every nation, that every supra-national (*übernationale*) cultural grouping lives, so to speak, in a distinct world as its own surrounding world (*Umwelt*), and so again every historical time in its “world.”

(Husserl 1922–1937, 2–3)

Husserl acknowledges that everyone is embedded first and foremost in a domain of familiarity to which he gives the name *Heimwelt* (homeworld) (see Waldenfels 1998). To anyone in this familiar homeworld, every other culture appears as a *Fremdwelt* (alien world). First and foremost, one takes one's orientation from the homeworld, which manifests itself in terms of “familiarity” and “normality.” Homeworlds, of course, vary greatly, but each has its structure of familiarity and strangeness. A community of blind people will experience blindness as normal. Persons who live on a ship will find its rocking in the waves to be normal and will find the experience of landing on *terra firma* to be abnormal. Interestingly, Husserl, in his letter to Lévy-Bruhl, concedes that “historical relativism proves to be undoubtedly justified (as an anthropological fact), but also that anthropology, like every positive science and its universality (*Universitas*), though the first, is not the final word of knowledge—scientific knowledge” (Husserl 1935, 5). Relativism, then, has “undisputed justification” as a kind of surface fact that emerges from

comparative anthropological studies. However, he is not content to remain with this apparent relativism. The plurality of historical periods and cultures is not a final fact. Husserl wants to uncover the necessary eidetic laws that govern the very nature of social acculturation and even historicity. As he writes to Lévy-Bruhl:

For it is in its horizon of consciousness that all social units and the environing worlds relative to them have constructed sense and validity (*Sinn und Geltung*) and, in changing, continue to build them always anew. (Husserl 1935, 5)

Everything ultimately will be traced back to the *a priori* correlation between intentional intersubjectivity and its horizontal world. This is the “universal *a priori* of history” about which Husserl would write in the famous “The Origin of Geometry” text (Husserl 1936, 371). Husserl concludes his letter with an assertion of the absolute validity of transcendental phenomenology as the final grounding science:

Transcendental phenomenology is the radical and consistent science of subjectivity, which ultimately constitutes the world in itself. In other words, it is the science that reveals the universal taken-for-grantedness “world and we human beings in the world” to be an obscurity (*Unverständlichkeit*), thus an enigma, a problem, and that makes it scientifically intelligible (*verständlich*) in the solely possible way of radical self-examination. (Husserl 1935, 5)

Husserl always allows for “relativities” of all kinds, but, in the end, everything has to be traced back to transcendental subjectivity.

Conclusion

Husserl’s conception of skepticism and relativism as involving a countersense was attacked in his own day (Kusch 1995), and indeed his own phenomenological claim concerning the *a priori* correlation between forms of givenness and apprehending forms of subjectivity was itself criticized as relativist (by Natorp, Rickert, Cornelius and more recently by Meillassoux (2008), who sees Husserl’s correlationism between subjectivity and as not recognizing the possibility of reality in itself outside of all knowability—what Meillassoux calls “the great outdoors”). However, it is indeed part of Husserl’s genius to have seen that psychologism, anthropologism, naturalism, and historicism form a complex of philosophical outlooks and tendencies that are remarkably prevalent and yet totally ungrounded in contemporary thinking. He regarded relativism to the very end as a threat to well-grounded scientific knowledge. But the only kind of grounding that Husserl would accept was *transcendental* grounding—the relation of all forms of “sense and being” (*Sinn und Sein*) to

absolute subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Ironically, as we have seen, Husserl himself did not escape the charge of relativism levelled at him because of his “correlationism” but he maintained a consistent stance throughout his writings that the relativity of all experiences (whether perceptual, social or historical) is not in itself an argument for relativism. Truth and validity by their nature have an absoluteness and independence that are inherent in their very sense.

Notes

- 1 Volume One will be indicated ‘I,’ and Volume Two as ‘II.’
- 2 For an illuminating history of worldview, see Naugle (2002).
- 3 Husserl’s library, as preserved in the Husserl-Archief Leuven, contains several texts by Lévy-Bruhl: *Die geistige Welt der Primitiven* (1927), the German translation by Margarethe Hamburger of *La Mentalité primitive* (1922), as well as a later edition of that French text (1931); *Le Surnaturel et la nature dans la mentalité primitive* (1931) as well as *La Mythologie primitive. Le Monde mythique des Australiens et des Papous* (1935), the book which is the explicit subject of Husserl’s letter, and which also contains the author’s dedication.

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