

Studies on Phenomenological Mind

Being and Appearance

The Aporia of Husserlian Phenomenology

Gilles Lévêque

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Being and Appearance

The Aporia of Husserlian Phenomenology

By

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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INTRODUCTION

Phenomenology is characterized first and foremost by its rejection of purely speculative theories and hollow constructs, which defines its project as resolutely anti-metaphysical. To this end, it requires a return to the thing itself: “To consider the thing itself (*Ding selbst*) requires [...] that, far from adhering to the vague ways of speaking and philosophical prejudices of tradition, we draw directly on the clarity of the datum itself.”¹ But this is not to assert the rights of empiricism against rationalism. At the very least, and this is where the specificity of phenomenology properly lies, this return to things themselves is above all a reduction of what is given to that as which it comes to be given, i.e. the reduction of all transcendent reality to the rank of a mere phenomenon: reality “is not in itself something absolute that binds itself secondarily to something else; it is, in the absolute sense, strictly nothing, it has no ‘absolute essence’; its title of essence is that of something that in principle is *only* intentional, *only* conscious, *only* consciously representable, *only* appearing.”² This reduction of being to appearing is both what gives the datum its legitimizing value, and, as we shall see, what enables a true datum of the eidetic a priori.

However, such a return to things themselves is perplexing. For it leads to things becoming mere noematic correlates of consciousness, so that phenomenology can only be described as transcendental *idealism*.³ Better still, it consists in turning away from what is given to retain only its meaning, and turning back to the acts that, a priori, constitute it as given. Of course, “things themselves” are not empirical realities. But if recourse to the original datum as the ultimate source of all knowledge is to make sense, *something* has to give itself, and thus be discovered, in order to provide the yardstick against which to measure knowledge. But does not reducing being to appearing mean locking oneself into an immanence that nothing can disturb, since everything that might go beyond the given is reduced to

nothing? What value can be attributed to an intuition that in fact *constitutes* its object in its given-being? In Husserl's case, phenomenology is clearly in command of ontology. Can we then hope that phenomenology can give us access to being itself? Is it not condemned from the outset to present us with nothing more than an illusion of reality? This, at least, is the objection that naive realism immediately addresses to phenomenology: it is supposed to give us access to things themselves, but it seems to resolutely turn its back on them. This raises the legitimate question of whether phenomenology is capable of effectively wresting philosophy from metaphysics.

The aim of the present work is to examine these difficulties, by looking at what it is that is really given, on the one hand, and its data, on the other. More precisely, the aim is to see to what conception of the given leads the reduction of being to appearing: in this case, is there still a real given, and in what form? What, then, is given? And how does it relate to the datum? So, the purpose is to carry out a strictly *phenomenological* analysis of Husserlian phenomenology, and more precisely of his conception of the way in which the transcendent thing comes to give itself as such.

In order to answer these questions, I will first address the specific nature of the transcendent thing, with the aim of determining what specifically delivers it as such, even though insofar as, according to Husserl, it does not really exist independently of the experiences that present it, it cannot really exceed them. The aim, then, is to explore phenomenologically the way in which transcendence is constituted in the immanence of consciousness. It will appear that the specific datum of the transcendent thing as such is *absence* (Chapter 1).

But for the transcendent thing to be given *itself* in lived experience, "in the flesh," and not through the intermediary of some representative in consciousness, it will be revealed that this thing is absent only *in its being*, an absence whose phenomenological figure is *meaning*. But in so doing, the transcendence of the thing is always in danger of falling back into the immanence of consciousness, so that Husserl was forced to support this transcendence with a more radical transcendence, that of the other. An examination of the way in which Husserl presents the transcendence of the other, and its role in the constitution of the transcendence of the world, will enable me to ensure the accuracy of my analysis (Chapter 2).

Taking temporality into account will serve to clarify how the absence of the being of the transcendent thing is constituted. I will begin by focusing on retention, insofar as it receives the most attention in Husserl's analyses of temporality. It will appear that it can only be understood as the specific presence of *passage*, by virtue of which the given reality constantly reveals itself to be only presence, and nothing substantial (Chapter 3). By taking protension into account, I will be able to specify that the presence of the transcendent thing is in fact always that of a filled absence, but by this very

movement always reestablished: the transcendent thing can only be given in all its fullness in an inaccessible future. This will enable me to clarify the dialectical relationship between that which appears and its appearances⁴ (Chapter 4).

I will then be able to highlight the fact that, for Husserl, being is inevitably defined in opposition to presence, and in this case as that which occurs in it—obviously without being anything that really occurs in presence. In other words, being always is that which only has the *illusion* of being truly transcendent to the experiences that deliver it, without actually being so. But this illusion is necessary if we are to avoid dissolving the being of the transcendent thing in lived experience, and transcendence in immanence. It follows that illusion is the phenomenological status of the being of the transcendent thing. Herein lies the aporia of Husserlian phenomenology, namely in the definition of being by both presence and absence (Chapter 5).

The final chapter (Chapter 6) is devoted to confirming these analyses by taking into account Husserl's last philosophy, with particular reference to the difficulties of self-constitution that the philosopher encountered in the latter part of his life. This will enable me to delve deeper into the aporia of Husserlian phenomenology, and to understand its ultimate reasons.

NOTES

1. *Ideas II*, § 15 a, Hua IV, 34.
2. *Ideas I*, § 50, Hua III, 106.
3. Cf. e.g. *Cartesian Meditations*, § 41.
4. The term “appearance” covers a very broad spectrum in English. For want of a better term, I have translated *Erscheinung* as “appearance,” meaning the manifestation of a thing to consciousness, and I have reserved the term “illusion” to designate a pure semblance, i.e. a presence without an object, without anything that happens to the presence (*Schein, Anschein*).

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CHAPTER 1

TRANSCENDENCE AND ABSENCE

ABSTRACT

What about the donation of the transcendent thing? This is delivered by means of the givenness of an ungiven, the presence of an absence (given as such). For the same content is both a lived experience (the appearance) and a mere adumbration of something that transcends the lived experience (what appears). This is supported by the analysis of the Husserlian theory of confirmation. By virtue of this specific mode of donation, only the being of the transcendent thing is not given. The transcendent thing is thus present itself, but without its being. This is why bracketing the being of the transcendent thing does not take anything away from the donation of the transcendent thing, which legitimizes the phenomenological reduction.

Keywords: Perception; immanence; thing; appearing; phenomenon; datum

The essential problem that led Husserl to establish the definitive positions that characterize mature phenomenology, as they were first set out publicly in 1913 with *Ideas I*, a problem that recurs like a leitmotif in the writings of the period from 1907 to 1911¹ and in *The Idea of Phenomenology* (1907), is that of transcendence: “how can experience go beyond itself, so to speak?”² And more precisely: “How can knowledge go beyond itself, how can it reach a being that is not within the scope of knowledge?”³ It turns out, however, that the whole difficulty lies in the fact that the transcendent in the sense of that which is not really (*reel*) immanent is confused with the transcendent in the sense of that which is not given itself, in person.⁴ By dissociating these two

meanings of the term “transcendent,” and thanks to the phenomenological reduction that will make it possible to identify data that are not, however, real moments of experience, Husserl succeeds in expressing in properly phenomenological terms “the *pure fundamental question*: how can the pure cognitive phenomenon reach something that is not immanent to it, how can the absolute givenness-in-person (*Selbstgegebenheit*) of knowledge reach something that is not a givenness-in-person, and how is this *reaching* to be understood?”⁵

It is therefore a question of discovering, from the evidence of the givenness in person of what is really immanent to consciousness, another type of givenness-in-person, proper to what is not really immanent to consciousness. This means that, first of all, the transcendent presents itself, after reduction, as the non-given with respect to the absolute givenness of lived experience, knowing that, at the outset, “the only givenness (*Gegebenheit*) that is truly comprehensible, unproblematic, absolutely evident, is that of the moment really contained in the act of knowing.”⁶

The difficulty of the Husserlian enterprise becomes clear: “the non-obvious, the problematic and perhaps even the mysterious, resides in the transcendent reference, that is, in the intention, the belief, possibly in the complex demonstration of something that is *not given* (eines nicht Gegebenen).”⁷ Consequently, in reducing the transcendent thing to its phenomenon, i.e. to what is truly given of it, Husserl must be careful not to reduce it to a mere real content of consciousness, otherwise it would lose its transcendence. In other words, in relation to the given of what is really immanent, the transcendent must retain the character of not being given in person, since it is by this character alone that it is distinguished from what is really immanent.⁸ Of course, it is a question of identifying the mode of givenness that in fact belongs to the transcendent, but the specificity of this mode of givenness, in virtue of which it is indeed that of the *transcendent as such*, lies in the fact that it must be the givenness of *what is not given*, vis-à-vis at the very least the givenness proper to what is really immanent to consciousness.

Therefore, if we do not want to evade the difficulties that Husserlian phenomenology has encountered by simply speaking of the mode of givenness of transcendent objects as another mode of givenness alongside that of lived experiences, we must take into account “the difference between the quasi-data (*Quasi-Gegebenheiten*) of the transcendent object and the absolute givenness of the phenomenon itself,”⁹ a difference that lies in the fact that “the being of the objectivity to which it [sc. knowledge] relates to, insofar as it is transcendent, is not given to me,”¹⁰ we must consequently take into account the paradox of the datum of that which is not given, which is, in phenomenological terms, the specific datum of the transcendent as such.

In order to resolve this paradox, we must of course study how transcendence comes to be given as such, but only in the aim of revealing how Husserl treats what could only be manifested as the ungiven. How does Husserl

conceive such a given of the ungiven? How does this datum relate to the datum of lived experience? And how does it preserve the transcendence of what is given? First of all, then, it is a question of studying the transcendence of the thing, and this within external perception, which is its original giving consciousness,¹¹ with regard to the way in which Husserl comes to exclude it from the real moments of lived experience, in order to see what role, if any, the datum of an ungiven can play in it. Naturally, my first task, from this perspective, will be to examine whether Husserl has in fact attributed a role to such a datum, so paradoxical does it seem at first sight, when considered in the light of the most elementary requirements of Husserlian phenomenology.¹²

THE SPECIFIC MODE OF DONATION OF THE TRANSCENDENT THING

It is the attribution of incompatible characteristics respectively to the thing perceived and to perception that makes it possible to affirm that the thing perceived is not a real moment of the lived experiences. Thus, the thing perceived always manifests itself with an identity (if only by its permanence) in a continuous series of necessarily changing perceptions, to such an extent that even an unchanged thing always presents itself differently.¹³ It is therefore always given with a permanence that exceeds the now of perception.¹⁴ The result is that the identity (and permanence) of the thing perceived cannot be found in perceptual experiences as a real moment, and consequently the thing perceived itself cannot be a real moment of these experiences.

It is clear that the relevance of the argument does not lie in the simple attribution of different and even incompatible characteristics to the thing perceived and its perception, otherwise it would simply be a question of a distinction between two types of reality situated at the same level, in the same genre, a distinction that would not then allow us to conclude that there is an opposition between an immanent and a transcendent, except from an external point of view that is not that of Husserl (who starts from pure immanence). In fact, the identity of the thing perceived only makes it possible to exclude it from experiences because it exceeds what is actually given with experiences. The thing perceived, and with it each of its determinations, is nevertheless “given bodily *as identical*”¹⁵; that is, it is truly and properly given as such. More precisely, it could not be given as identical if a multiplicity of changing perceptions did not relate to it as to the same thing, thus forming a unity in a continuous flux.¹⁶

In other words, each perception, taken within the limits of its actuality, certainly presents something different, but of the *same* thing, thus given

each time only “in another way,” it thus presents only one face and is in this way only an *adumbration*.¹⁷ Now, it is undeniable that “a face is only a face of the complete object. It is nothing in itself, it is unthinkable as a being apart (*als Fürsichsein*).”¹⁸ Consequently, by being only an adumbration, by presenting only one face of the thing, perceptual experience in fact gives the thing itself, and not a simple isolated moment, even though the thing exceeds all that is properly given since it appears only under one face. The recognition, within what is properly given, of the incompatible characteristics that belong to the thing perceived and to perception thus only makes it possible to show that external perception is never more than a continuous and constantly changing series of adumbrations, which as such bring us into the presence of the identity of the thing perceived in a way whose singular character we already see.

However, we must realize that the adumbration cannot be sufficiently defined by its unilaterality, by its incompleteness. For if it turned out that the face of the perceived thing that was currently given was only a fragment, there would be nothing to prevent the thing from being given in its entirety, according to the essence of the fragment, provided, for example, that we remove what partially concealed it and what only allowed us to see a fragment of it precisely.¹⁹ In this case, the thing perceived could no longer be distinguished from the experiences. Better still, “an experience is also not, and never is, completely perceived; it does not allow itself to be adequately grasped in its full unity,”²⁰ so it too is marked by a certain incompleteness. In any case, only the present fragment of the flow of lived experience is actually given. It therefore appears once again that the incompleteness of the fragment is incapable of founding the distinction between immanence and transcendence.

In truth, the adumbration forces us to conceive of the thing adumbrated as transcendent not by virtue of its incompleteness alone, but because it shows that perception is always exercised, let us say first of all, from a certain point of view, according to a certain perspective, which explains why the same thing, unchanged and at rest on the hypothesis, is perceived as such, even though it is constantly being perceived anew in a different way.²¹ Moreover, Husserl does not fail to assert that “the face has something subjective about it, it is ‘my perceptive appearance,’ which belongs to me, insofar as I occupy such and such a position in relation to the thing.”²² Thus, the adumbration is never more than a certain *view* of the perceived thing, in which case the thing is indeed there in person, but nevertheless seen from a certain position, under a certain aspect. In other words, the adumbration is only an *appearance* of the thing perceived, and the thing perceived is distinguished from the perception of the thing only as what appears from the appearance: “the phenomenon of the perception of sound,” for example, “and that of obvious and reduced perception, requires, within immanence,