

On the Evidence and Description in Husserl's Phenomenology

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The aim of this article is to highlight the nature of the fundamental moments of phenomenological research, such as evidence and description, and the ambivalence of their relationship to each other. On the one hand, both evidence and description are related to Husserl's attempt to 'return to the things themselves'. Evidence is understood by the founder of phenomenology as a relation to an object in which the meaning of that object is given to us immediately in the object itself. Description, on the other hand, avoids what is characteristic of any interpretation-oriented methodology: the 'substitution' of an explanatory reconstruction for the object under study. A certain discrepancy between phenomenological evidence and phenomenological description becomes apparent when we take into account the reception of the text in which the experience of the evidence is described. What is usually overlooked is that an experience whose content is the text being read is not an experience whose content is the phenomenon described in the text. This confusion leads to a turning away from 'the things themselves' and a restriction of phenomenology to the realm of texts. The way to avoid this deformation is through a phenomenological reduction, which must be carried out not only by the phenomenologist-researcher but also by the reader of the texts that provide a description of phenomenological experience.

Keywords: Husserl, phenomenological reduction, evidence, description, writing

INTRODUCTION: 'TO THE THINGS THEMSELVES!'

As it is known, in the second volume of the 'Logical Investigations' Edmund Husserl has asserted programmatically: 'we must go back to the "things themselves"' (Husserl 2001: 168). And in the 'Philosophy as Rigorous Science' he wrote the following: 'In the epoch of vigorous reaction against Scholasticism the war cry was: Away with empty word analyses! We must question things themselves. Back to experience, to seeing, which alone can give to our words sense and rational justification' (Husserl 1965: 96). Certainly, 'things themselves' that Husserl has in mind are not the things postulated by naive realism, or objects explored by empirical sciences. They are the 'phenomena'. Husserl himself nowhere defines the phenomenon, but an excellent definition can be found in Husserl's assistant Heidegger. In 'Being and Time' Heidegger observes that the term 'phenomenon' is derived from the Greek noun *phainomenon*, which is a derivative *phainō* (= to bring into the light of day, to make bright) of the medial

form of the verb *phainesthai* (= 'to show oneself'). The original root of the word comes from the syllable *pha-*, whose semantics, like that of *phos*, relates to light, brightness, i.e. to that which makes things manifest, visible in themselves. It follows, then, that the etymology of the word 'phenomenon' refers to something that shows itself through itself (Heidegger 1996: 25). Hence, it is clear that Husserl's call 'to the "things themselves"!' is nothing else as the appeal to return to the *immediate* experience in which the meaning of phenomenon reveals *in the phenomenon itself*, i.e. *immediately* and *not* *some way mediated*.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

We could not forget, however, that Husserlian phenomenology was conceived as a *descriptive* discipline. The idea of descriptivity is consistent with the idea of the 'turn back to the "things themselves"'. A description of any object would seem to present those 'things' without anything being added to it or taken away from it. By stressing the descriptive character of phenomenology, Husserl seeks to distance himself first and foremost from those methods that are oriented towards the *explanation* of the thing under investigation. He is well aware that any explanation of a thing reveals its meaning not by *presenting* the thing itself, but by constructing of discourse that *re-presents* it by performing the function of a kind of *ekphrasis*. One can say that any explanation is a kind of substitution of the explanatory object for its theoretical model by the 'empty word analyses'. The phenomenologist, by contrast, has insight in the meaning of the 'thing' in the 'thing' itself, and not in a substitute constructed from concepts invented by the researcher.

HOW THE PHENOMENOLOGIST DOES WORK

If so, then we can imagine the process of phenomenologising as follows:

At first, the phenomenologist performs the immediate experience of the 'things themselves (*Sache selbst*)'. In this experience the phenomenon appears as itself in the living stream of phenomenologising consciousness, i.e. in the 'isolated mental life (*einsames Seelenleben*)' (Husserl 2001: 183) of the phenomenologist. It is the step of self-presentation of phenomena. Then follows the process of description, which exteriorises the primordial immediate phenomenological experience. The outcome of this exteriorisation is the text of phenomenological description.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that the text of that description is not the *final product* of the phenomenological research, but only a *helping tool*. This is what Husserl means when in his 'Logical Investigations' he argues that science exists objectively only in the form of scientific literature, i.e. that only in a written work does it take on a form that allows knowledge to transcend not only individuals, but also entire generations and nations. After emerging in the acts of knowledge of individuals and acquiring the objectivity of a 'written work', it later returns to the acts of knowledge of individuals and becomes a subjective experience (Husserl 2001: 16–17).

For Husserl, then, the 'written work' is some kind of a tool to help the reader of description to experience in his own 'knowledge-acts' the same evidence that the author of the descriptive text has experienced. If the reader interprets the text of the description correctly, he or she is experiencing the same evidence as the author of the description. In other words, the adequate interpretation in this case is the re-internalisation of described evidence. But how does that work in practice? Let us do an experiment.

EDMUND HUSSERL'S TABLE

In the text of Husserl's lectures presented in the Winter Semester 1920/21 one can read as follows: 'When we view the table, we view it from some particular side, and this side is thereby what is genuinely seen. Yet the table has still other sides. It has a non-visible back side, it has a non-visible interior; and these are actually indexes for a variety of sides, a variety of complexes of possible visibility. That is a very curious situation peculiar to the very essence of the matter at hand. For proper to the very sense of every perception is perception's perceived object as its objective sense, that is, this thing, the table that is seen. But this thing is not [merely] the side genuinely seen in this moment; rather (according to the very sense of perception) the thing is precisely the full-thing that has still other sides, sides that are not brought to genuine perception in this perception, but that would be brought to genuine perception in other perceptions. Generally speaking, perception is original consciousness. We have, however, a curious schism in external perception: Original consciousness is only possible in the form of an actually and genuinely original conscious-having of sides and a co-conscious-having of other sides that are precisely not originally there. I say co-conscious, since the non-visible sides are certainly also there somehow for consciousness, "co-meant" as co-present. But they do not appear as such, genuinely. They are not there like reproductive aspects are, as intuitions that exhibit them: we can nevertheless produce such intuitive presentifications any time we like' (Husserl 2001a: 40).

Let us suppose that I, as a starting phenomenologist, have read this text. At first glance, Husserl's description of his own experience seems perfectly clear to me, and I recognise in my own experience without any bondage the same as Husserl did. Really, when I look at my table, so I can easily notice that I 'view it from some particular side', I am also aware that 'the table has still other sides' – 'a non-visible back side', 'a non-visible interior', etc. I can repeat all those components of the Husserlian experience in my own consciousness without difficulty. And yet, one component of this description seems to be problematic for me. I must confess that I do not understand what Husserl has in mind when he says: 'that is a *very-curious* situation (*das ist sehr merkwürdige Wesenslage*)'. Why he speaks of a '*curious* schism in external perception (*merkwürdige Zwiespalt in der äußeren Wahrnehmung*)'? What kind of '*curiosity* (*Merkwürdigkeit*)' he finds in such an ordinary experience as the observation of writing table?

I understand that the word '*curious*' means that the thing is '*astonishing*', '*surprising*', '*striking*', '*amazing*', '*surprised*', '*remarkable*', '*wonder*', etc. I believe that Husserl must have experienced a specific emotional upheaval when he contemplated his own table in a phenomenological way, but I myself after reading of his description do not experience anything like it. Of course, one might suggest that the *pathetic* component of experience, which denotes the word '*curious*' ('*merkwürdig*'), is irrelevant to phenomenology as a '*rigorous science*', i.e. as a discipline focused on *logic* rather than on *pathetic*. May be.¹ But if so, it is fair to say that the content of the Husserlian description of phenomenological evidence, quoted above, seems so banal that it is impossible to find the slightest philosophical value in it. In my opinion, without the '*pathetic*' moment the content of consciousness remains as some kind of dry '*information*' which belongs rather to the realm of '*empty word analyses*' and not to the realm

¹ The relevance of the pathetic dimension of the experience of evidence in phenomenology also follows from the fact that the motive that prompted Husserl to invite philosophy to return 'to the things themselves' was not so much the lack of the logical validity of scientific knowledge, but rather the existential crisis, which Husserl experienced as both a condition of Western culture and a personal tragedy of the philosopher (Heffernan 2022).

of the live experience of evidence. Therefore, I must admit that Husserl's text of description does not work as 'a set of external arrangements (*eine Summe äußerer Veranstaltungen*)', which must enable the transfer of his experience in my own 'isolated mental life'. If so, I must also confess that by reading the Husserlian text I cannot interpret correctly its meaning. What is the matter?

TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF WRITING

It seems that the source of this problem lies in the very nature of the written word. W. J. Ong had once observed that the invention of writing transformed human consciousness more than any other invention (Ong 2012: 77). According to Ong, writing initiated 'the separation of the word from the living present' (Ong 2012: 81). M. McLuhan describes this separation as 'the split between conscious and unconscious' (McLuhan, McLuhan 1992: 16). But if writing splits the mind in conscious and unconscious parts, it is not surprising that the pathetic part of mind (in particular, the experience of astonishment) became repressed or eliminated. In other words, writing eliminates from the language that what McLuhan has characterised as 'the magical power to form and transform existence' (McLuhan, McLuhan 1992: 69). Writing separates the word from his living sources of meaning. The meaning is transferred to the purely cognitive level. The effect of such transferring is that our consciousness enters the state, which has in mind Gilbert Keith Chesterton, when he has asserted that 'modernity has given ultimate authority to the world view of a slightly sleepy businessman right after lunch' (Berger 1979: 202). The philosophical counterpart of such worldviews is nothing else than the 'empty word analyses' that Husserl tried to oppose with the phenomenological project that he initiated. However, it seems that the attitude of the 'slightly sleepy businessman right after lunch' has won the fight. Husserl's very call to return to the things themselves has become the subject of 'analyses of empty words' over time. In a relatively short period of time, 'phenomenological research' has taken the form of an industry for the production of secondary, tertiary, etc. 'phenomenological' texts.

'DOMINANCE OF THE SECONDARY AND THE PARASITIC'

The result is that we find ourselves in a situation which G. Steiner has labelled as 'dominance of the secondary and the parasitic' (Steiner 2013: 7). Steiner regrets that contemporary culture is dominated by the production of secondary, tertiary, etc. texts, where new texts do not interpret reality or its immediate experience, but rather previously produced texts, which in turn are often interpretations of even earlier texts, etc. (Steiner 2013: 39–40). In this way, culture becomes completely divorced from the original experience of reality and becomes an uncontrollably expanding system of parasitic discourses. Continuing this line of thought, in his famous book 'Gutenberg Galaxy' McLuhan quoted the witty remark of William Ivins, Jr. which notices that '[i]n a funny way words and their necessary linear syntactical order forbid us to describe objects and compel us to use very poor and inadequate lists of theoretical ingredients in the manner exemplified more concretely by the ordinary cook book recipes' (McLuhan 1962: 71–72).

We would probably not be wrong to say that the vast number of texts produced by Husserl-scholars are like the interpretations (or even meta-interpretations) of a cook book. Many of the authors of these texts seem to lose sight of the fact that 'a phenomenon appears before our eyes when it is disclosed in the space of our life world' (Kačerauskas, Mickūnas 2020: 138)

and not in the self-referential realm of texts. This is probably because we are used to thinking that the only form of the interpretation of meaning is the production of texts and meta-texts. But according to Husserl's basic idea, phenomenological inquiry requires a different form of interpretation.

GEORGE STEINER'S SUGGESTION

The form of interpretation that G. Steiner finds in the work of musicians and actors might help us. He points out that musicians and dramatic actors interpret composers' or playwrights' works not by creating a verbal meta-text that 'explains' them, but simply by performing them. Steiner calls this performance 'understanding in action' and 'immediacy of translation' (Steiner 2013: 8–9). He stresses that what we are dealing with here is an analysis and critique par excellence of musical or dramatic works. The performance of a work is nothing less than the realisation of the potentials of meaning that it contains. No reviewer of music or drama can realise these potentials in the same way as a musician or a dramatic actor can. No text written by musicologists, music historians or music critics reveals the meaning of a composer's work to the same extent as a musician performing the work. The same can be said of the interpretation of a text written by a dramatist.

Of course, Steiner has in mind the interpretation of the works of literature and of music. But are not his insights *mutatis mutandis* to be applied in the field of the phenomenological investigations?

PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION AS PRECONDITION FOR THE 'UNDERSTANDING IN ACTION'

In my opinion, the precondition for an interpretation as such 'understanding in action', or 'the immediacy of translation' should be considered to be what Husserl calls a 'phenomenological reduction'. As is well known, the notion of 'phenomenological reduction' was forced into application in Husserl's lectures on 'The Idea of Phenomenology' from 1907. 'Only through a reduction,' Husserl emphasises here, 'which we shall call the *phenomenological reduction*, do I acquire an absolute givenness that no longer offers anything transcendent' (Husserl 1999: 34).

This statement of Husserl's shows that phenomenological reduction is a precondition for being able to enter the domain of phenomena and, consequently, to produce a text of *phenomenological* description. But if this is so, then we have to admit that not only the producing of a phenomenological description, but also its interpretative reading presupposes a phenomenological reduction. The reader of a phenomenological description will not be able to interpret that description adequately unless he moves from the 'natural attitude' to the 'phenomenological attitude' by means of phenomenological reduction. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that the phenomenological reduction has to be a radical transformation of our whole being. It is no coincidence that almost 30 years later Husserl describes this change as 'a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion, which then, however, over and above this, bears within itself the significance of the greatest existential transformation which is assigned as a task to mankind as such' (Husserl 1970: 137).

One can say that for Husserl phenomenologist by practicing of the phenomenological reduction enters into the peculiar state of consciousness that is *opposed* to the attitude 'of a slightly sleepy businessman right after lunch'. It is no accident that Husserl compares this

attitude with 'religious conversion'. Phenomenological reduction seems to be much more like some kind of existential turn, awakening from the sleepiness of the Chestertonian 'businessman right after lunch'.

THE TROUBLES WITH DESCRIPTION OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION ITSELF

Nevertheless, it is well known how difficult for Husserl was to *describe* the performing of phenomenological reduction. Husserl tries to describe this performance in the style of 'rigorous science', i.e. in absolutely unambiguous terms. And yet in fact he uses a lot of metaphors for describing of that performance. In various Husserlian texts, the phenomenological reduction is entitled as 'abstention' (*Enthaltung*), 'dislocation' from, or 'unplugging' or 'exclusion' (*Ausschaltung*) of the positing of the world and our normal unquestioning faith in the reality of what we experience. Often Husserl speaks about 'parenthesising' (*Einklammerung*), 'putting out of action' (*außer Aktion zu setzen*) and 'putting out of play' (*außer Spiel zu setzen*) all judgements which posit a world in any way as actual.² Yet, among those metaphors one stands out, namely, the metaphor of 'descending to the Mothers', which Husserl has borrowed from Goethe's 'Faust'. In his lectures of 1920/21, Husserl stresses that our ability to see phenomenologically must help us, 'to express it in the myth of Goethe, find the way to the Mothers of knowledge, to discover their realm of pure consciousness, in which all being originates constitutively and out of which all knowledge as knowledge of what is must draw its ultimate intelligible explanation' (Hart 1992: 3).

THE 'MOTHERS'

It is well known that the image of 'Mothers' appears in the second part of Goethe's tragedy, where Faust relates to Mephistopheles that he is in search for the exemplars of the classical beauty – Helena and Paris. Mephistopheles discloses unwillingly that they can be found exclusively in some mysterious realm, where dwell enigmatic creatures named 'the Mothers'. Hearing the name Faust is overcome with horror and fascination. Further, Mephistopheles warns Faust that the journey to the eternal emptiness and uncanny depths of this realm involves dreadful solitude and desolation. And finally, he answers the Faust's question, 'which is the way? (*Wohin der Weg?*)': 'No way! A path untrodden / Which none may tread; a way to the forbidden, / The unmoved, the inexorable' (Goethe 1998: 51). In this tricky situation, only Mephistopheles' magic key helps Faust to travel to the Mothers.

Probably, the image of the 'Mothers' occurs in Husserl's vocabulary for the first time when he was teaching in Göttingen.³ Later, this image occurs in many sites of Husserliana. In the third book of the *Ideas*, for example, Husserl points out that all previous generations of philosophers were forced to admit that the knowledge provided by everyday experience or by the special sciences is never sufficiently grounded, because the concepts expressing that knowledge are not sufficiently clear. The main aim of phenomenology is therefore to fill this gap by means of an eidetic investigation of the constitution of phenomenological experience. This investigation is nothing less than an attempt to penetrate to the origins of all knowledge,

² A kind of analogy of phenomenological reduction can be seen in the situation that we recently experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. For more on this see: Sodeika, Vidauskytė 2022.

³ That is, nearby at the same time as the idea of the necessity of phenomenological reduction occurs in Husserl's mind. It is interesting to note that already in 1909 the Husserl's students were singing the *Phänomenolienlied* in which we hear that 'the Mothers' are 'sitting quietly and silently around a transparent basin' (Sepp 1988: 240–241).

which Husserl describes with the image of ‘mothers’ borrowed from Goethe (Husserl 1980: 69). In another place, referring to the same episode in Goethe’s ‘Faust’, he (somewhat unexpectedly) highlights the emotional aspect of the phenomenological attitude, insisting that the field of phenomenologist’s work lies ‘in the realms of loneliness, i.e., those of the “Mothers” of all knowledge, wherein the primal sources of life and the essentially necessary evidences, the *rhizōmata panton*, are to be found’ (Hart 1992: 3–4). And in the one of his working manuscripts (1933), he asks rhetorically: ‘Do we not shudder in the presence of these depths? Who has seriously made them a theme in the millennia of the past? Who, in connection with the first reflections of Augustine, has dared to risk his life on the way to the “Mothers”?’ (Hart 1992: 3–4).

The image of ‘mothers’ seems to become important precisely because we can easily recognise in it an emphatic reference to the link between the two moments, which, in my opinion, ultimately determines the specificity of phenomenological experience. These moments are (1) the character of the phenomena as *rhizōmata panton* showing themselves through themselves and (2) the specific pathos, without which we are not dealing with phenomenological evidence, but with a mere ‘empty word analyses’.

CONCLUSIONS

Husserl’s call to ‘return to the things themselves’, which is at the heart of phenomenology, is a call to return to the experience of meaning, which is revealed not through interpretive discourse but through immediate evidentiality. The condition for the possibility of such direct experience is a ‘phenomenological reduction’ – a certain transformation of consciousness, which Husserl describes as a transition to a phenomenological attitude. In the mode of the phenomenological attitude, the evidentially experienced content is fixed in the text of the phenomenological description, the adequate understanding of which is nothing other than the immediate experience of the apparent which has been experienced by the author of the text. The condition for the possibility of such an experience is a phenomenological reduction, which in this case must be made by the reader of the description. Phenomenological reduction is not merely a cognitive procedure of reasoning without reference to the axiom of the existence of the world. Rather, it is an emotionally enriched existential upheaval, which Husserl equates with a religious conversion and relates to the state experienced by the hero of Goethe’s Faust on his journey to his ‘mothers’.

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TOMAS SODEIKA

Apie evidenciją ir deskripciją E. Husserlio fenomenologijoje

Santrauka

Straipsnio tikslas – išryškinti tokių pamatinių fenomenologinio tyrimo momentų kaip evidencija ir deskripcija pobūdį bei tarpusavio santykį. Pirmiausia bandoma atkreipti dėmesį į to santykio ambivalentišką pobūdį. Viena vertus, tiek evidencija, tiek deskripcija susijusios su Edmundo Husserlio pastanga „grįžti prie pačių daiktų“. Evidenciją fenomenologijos kūrėjas supranta kaip tokį santykį su objektu, kai to objekto prasmė yra betarpiškai mums duota pačiame objekte. O štai deskripcija leidžia išvengti to, kas būdinga bet kokiai į *aiškinimą* orientuotai metodologijai – tiriamo dalyko „pavadinimo“ jį aiškinančia rekonstrukcija. Tam tikras prieštaravimas tarp fenomenologinės evidencijos ir fenomenologinės deskripcijos išryškėja tada, kai atsižvelgiame į teksto, kuriame aprašyta evidencijos patirtis, recepciją. Dažniausiai išleidžiama iš akių tai, kad evidencija, kurios turinį sudaro skaitomas tekstas, nėra evidencija, kurios turinys yra tekste aprašytas fenomenas. Tokia painiava lemia, kad nusigrežiama nuo „pačių daiktų“ ir fenomenologija apsiriboja tekstų sritimi. Išvengti tokios deformacijos turi padėti fenomenologinė redukcija, kurią turi atlikti ne tik fenomenologas-tyrėjas, bet ir fenomenologinės patirties deskripciją pateikiančių tekstų skaitytojas.

Raktažodžiai: Edmundas Husserlis, fenomenologinė redukcija, evidencija, deskripcija, raštas