Continued fascination among philosophers with the phenomenological movement cannot be explained by reference to some set of theses that the movement established once and for all, because in the philosophies of Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger and the other important figures, one finds not only constant and radical individual development, but also strong conflicts among thinkers. Certainly the movement established a basic orientation and a distinctive style of thinking through which a whole range of traditional philosophical enigmas could be cast in a captivating new light. But even more importantly, it is precisely in the perplexities that arise in phenomenology's own efforts at self-grounding and self-legitimation, and in the conflicts that arise between thinkers over those perplexities, that phenomenology shows most brilliantly its deep commitment to openness in its dialectical thinking and sincerity in its philosophical ambitions.

The purpose of this paper is to consider just one perplexity that is articulated by Husserl in The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology and is named there "the paradox of human subjectivity." The paradox of human subjectivity is a problem that arises in reflecting upon the relationship of subjectivity and objectivity within the context of Husserl's efforts to establish a phenomenological foundation for the sciences. The paradox is interesting not simply as a piece of Husserlian thinking; it is historically important as one stimulus for later developments within the phenomenological movement, and our discussion here would be incomplete without at least some mention of those later developments. But it is also unlikely that any of these developments has exhausted the rich enigma that Husserl raises, and perhaps some of the problem's living intrigue may shine through our present doxographic treatment of it.

In order for one to be stirred by the paradox in its formulation by
Husserl, one must consider the notion of "objectivity" to be a meaningful and valuable idea and not merely an illusory or misguided notion. One must consider worthwhile the attempt to understand what objectivity is and to determine why it has traditionally been considered a special kind of excellence. Secondly, one must have some sympathy, though not necessarily full agreement, with Husserl's enthusiasm for scientific knowledge. For that form of knowledge is always indicated when we refer to the "context" of Husserl's thought. Although his writings pursue a new species of philosophical thinking by means of honest descriptions of ordinary experience, Husserl intended the fruits of such description to be enjoyed by the scientific disciplines. That is the reason why it is possible to trace the history of Husserl's phenomenology to his efforts at a philosophy of arithmetic, the reason why phenomenology's "transcendental logic" was developed for the purpose of supplementing formal logic, and the reason why the final efforts at a synthesis of Husserl's life's work sought to overcome a "crisis of the European sciences." Thirdly, in order to be stirred by the paradox, one must have in mind the basic thought-structures of Husserl's phenomenology. Since a discussion of these structures is clustered around the exposition of Husserl's paradox in the Crisis text (sections 53–55), a review here of the main points in those sections should sufficiently refresh the reader's mind for our purposes. But first, let us identify the problem.

1. The Paradox of Human Subjectivity in Section 53 of the Crisis

Phenomenology opposes, above all, an objectivist understanding of reality that defines truth simply as that which is independent of subjectivity. Such a definition is mistaken, for it is precisely by means of subjectivity that the world has meaning, but without meaning there would be nothing to validate, and hence no truth. Phenomenology opposes objectivism in a positive fashion by offering an alternative account for the way that truth is realized. This account first of all refuses to consider the subjective manners in which objects are given as merely incidental, or secondary qualities of those objects. For it is out of these manners of givenness, and only out of these that subjectivity is able to reach perceptions and judgments about the world and to determine their accuracy.

But if there is basis for Husserl's phenomenology in something entirely obvious, there is also something apparently paradoxical about it. For to consider every truth about the world as an achievement on the part of subjectivity is to render everything objective something subjective. This is paradoxical, for there exist many things in the world besides human