The Last Cartesian Meditation


From the beginning philosophy has been an affair of the word. Putting insight into language and working out reasons in speech have always been of the very act of rational thinking. And even though this is frequently done in the stillness of solitary reflection, nevertheless that it be done in words at all has always meant that it be in principle accessible to someone else, needing only the appropriate practical conditions to make the accessibility actual. So it is that from the beginning what philosophers have thought, and therefore said in words, others have heard and discussed—and sometimes discussed with that thinker; so that thinking itself and its wording have long been taken to be also a matter of dialogue.

Phenomenology as a movement of thought has itself from its beginnings been taken to be an affair of wording, a matter of articulating insights and explicating structures and grounds. And equally as long, phenomenology was meant to be in principle a matter of joint wording, the joint acquisition, communication, and communal confirmation of insights, the joint analysis and explication of structures and grounds. So it was also, to a degree, in fact, that Husserl, from the Logical Investigations on, had lively contact and discussions with his intellectual contemporaries, with his students and colleagues. Yet while this contact and discussion did take place in fact, it took place, in great part, after the fact, or before the fact. For most of his career he worked out his main ideas by himself. It was an original path he was cutting through what he took to be unknown and unexplored territory; and the responses of others were for him more a matter of revealing to him what was not understood rather than of introducing him to what was genuinely understood but which came from another's perception. Actual joint perception, actual articulated interplay in the grasping of an essential point or in the explication of a hitherto unrecognized element was rare—until that final period of his life
when, paradoxically, he found that the community of those to whom he wished to speak largely turned away from him, and he lived in virtual banishment within his own country. For then, finally, someone became an intimate part of his phenomenological enterprise; and we have yet to recognize what that meant for the phenomenology that marked so many of us in our philosophical development, the phenomenology of Husserl's last years, the phenomenology of the Crisis texts.

This is the situation presented by the present two-volume collection of texts: in the first volume, Fink's "Sixth Cartesian Meditation"—the significance of which is scarcely suggested by either that formal title or by its heavy codesignation, "The Idea of a Transcendental Theory of Method"—and in the second volume, the revision drafts which Fink prepared for Husserl's own first five "Cartesian Meditations," together with the only completed portions of a once planned, entirely new systematic presentation of Husserl's phenomenology. These texts, particularly the first, stand as a unique instance of two things. They are, first of all, a beautiful case of the actual interplay in the thinking of two philosophical minds—not in an imagined setting, as found in those brilliant creations of Plato's, but the actual thing, and recorded in one document. Second, they are a signal instance of the actual interplay in the thinking of Edmund Husserl and someone else deep within the phenomenology that claimed him as its own, in the full maturity of that enterprise in its most retrospective and self-critical stage. Yet there is more to these documents than the fact of interplay and the texts that embody that fact, the texts that Fink wrote and that Husserl read and reread, and then annotated. That is only the visible trace of the reality. There is as well the substance of the living dialogue that wound its way through ten years of collaboration, and there is its setting, the accidents of history and of personalities that bound Husserl's fate with Heidegger's ascendency, and then with the rise of Hitler. We have Dorion Cairns' Conversations with Husserl and Fink, and we have two collections of Fink's own essays; but we do not have an understanding of what these texts actually represent in the regime of Husserl's final phenomenology. What is known of Fink's place is generally that represented in Herbert Spiegelberg's The Phenomenological Movement. A few central facts of Fink's work with Husserl during the 1930s are, of course, well known; but the independent course he took after the war has become an index of the qualification that, it is presumed, has to be put on that earlier work with Husserl.

It is a complex question that cannot be addressed here; but these now published texts form the central documents for a basis on which to begin to sort out the matter. They are, in effect, a systematic, if summary, representation of the principle elements comprising the pool of thinking that formed between Husserl and Fink in those far off years—even if more than these