The Future Past and Present—and Not Yet Perfect—of Phenomenology

RONALD BRUZINA

University of Kentucky

Studying philosophy could be looked upon as a neat exemplification of the dynamic structure of temporality as analyzed by Husserl and existentially reinterpreted by Heidegger: we take up reliving the past in order in the present to begin our own future as thinkers. And, as is asserted existentially of this temporal dynamic, it is crucially important just how the present understands its past, for that will indeed set the ground for how philosophic thinking can continue.

So for several decades now our past in phenomenology has been more or less set in its character both by movements of the dedicated interpretation of past masters and by movements of radicalized departure beyond it. On the one hand the study of phenomenology has centered on Edmund Husserl as represented by the scholarship of the Husserliana and Phaenomenologica series, while on the other the Gesamtausgabe of Heidegger’s work forms one core of the impetus of transition beyond Husserl’s quintessential modern period subject—“transcendentalism”—and to Martin Heidegger one could tie in the new hermeneutic endeavors, although these also have sources for it other than his work. Beyond these multiply-based radical movements beyond phenomenology as positive transcendental philosophy, one could cite the counter-presentialism\(^1\) of the massive continuing output of Jacques Derrida, while further yet there is Michel Foucault or Jacques Lacan as systematic contraveners of the metaphysics of the all-determining subject. Yet despite this multiplicity, these seemingly opposing tendencies share broad elements of common acceptance with Husserlian phenomenology, beyond general assent to some kind of “epoché,”
the generalizable need for a radical suspension of the acceptance implicitly or explicitly given to hitherto dominant characterizations of principles, beliefs, or procedures that constitute the areas of philosophic inquiry. Thus, for example, the field of the play of experientially rich meaning—the analogue of Husserl’s field of phenomena—is implicitly affirmed widely as both ground and investigandum, irreducible and antecedent to whatever determining or causative powers or processes are posited by various kinds of naturalism (e.g., empiricist, natural scientific, sociological, neuro-psychological). Or one could point out that, while subjectivity as an individual substantive agency may be considered dissolved, the powers and processes that once were deemed “subjective” have been in many ways largely reassigned; they now are the effects or functions of some kind of “field”-structure, patent or latent, be it language or the “symbolic,” or social or historical processes, or even a primordial and ever-active originate play that is only nameable by the simultaneous erasure of names.

It is not the character and assertions of any of these various either pro- or post-phenomenological positions that I want to discuss as a basis for taking up the question of the future of phenomenology, but rather the character and achievements of the phenomenology they would believe themselves either to be continuing or to have superseded.

1. Phenomenology—Public persona and operative dynamic

It is recognized that not everything that Husserl’s phenomenology was achieving during his lifetime is well known. What was well known while he lived, and has been also since then, is the phenomenology he explained in the writings that he prepared for publication and published before he died (at least in part, in the case of the last in the following list): Logical Investigations (1900–1901), Ideas I (1913), Formal and Transcendental Logic (1929), Cartesian Meditations (in the French translation only, 1931), and The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology (1936–1962). It is also recognized and has to be remembered that not one of these was meant as a statement of culmination and completion. They were each an introduction to the investigative program that was in actuality carried out not in these books, but in Husserl’s vast manuscript studies; and the measure of inclusion of material from those studies in these books always gave only preliminary determinacy to what those studies in their ensemble were achieving. But the reason for this preliminary status in Husserl’s published writings has to be delineated carefully. It is not merely the result of the contingent fact that in each case Husserl just had not yet gotten to certain other themes and issues in his studies; the reason lies instead in the very principles of phenomenological inquiry as such.

The first thing to point out is that, in addition to the easily named procedures of “epoché” and “reduction,” it is equally true (and indeed as intrinsic to