Husserl by Numbers


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Despite the catchy slogans and mainstream commonplaces proffered about “phenomenology” today, Husserl’s phenomenology is neither catchy nor mainstream. As technical in jargon as it is intricate in methodology, oscillating from the extremes of micro-descriptive analysis to bombastic transcendental self-apologies, together with its old fashioned rationalistic rhetoric and the fragmentary landscape of the phenomenological “promised land” charted by the thirty-eight volumes of the *Husserliana* (not to mention the countless *Dokumente* and the numerous *Materialen*), Husserl’s phenomenology is hard to handle, tough to adopt and even tougher to develop.

Husserl’s phenomenology is thus as easy to trivialize as it is difficult to assess, let alone summarize. As the late groundbreaking mathematician and self-styled phenomenologist Gian-Carlo Rota noted in 1992, since Husserl “wrapped his thoughts in a heavy-handed, redundant, solipsistic German academic style (. . .) as consumers of philosophy we should like to have a brochure, a prospectus, before we decide whether or not to buy.”1 Setting aside Rota’s provocative and certainly relevant in some contexts talk of “consumers of philosophy,” it is safe to say that the need for a book on the *philosophy* of Husserl is as great in 2012 as it was when Rota put forward the somewhat impertinent idea of an introductory “brochure.”

In the meantime, numerous introductions to Husserl have been published. Yet some twenty years later, the “beginner” in phenomenology expecting to find an introduction to his thought that goes beyond “what Edmund Husserl really said in his writings,” in order to learn compelling reasons to begin philosophizing with Husserl’s phenomenology, is likely to have that expectation disappointed. To put the matter slightly differently: why should Husserl’s

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philosophical beginning become ours? Why should we continue, in one way or another, what Husserl had begun? And—above all—what has Husserl really begun: a science? a method? a philosophical trend? or simply a murky self-proliferating jargon? Burt Hopkins’ recently published *The Philosophy of Husserl* (henceforth *PH*) promises to fulfill the need behind Rota’s call for a brochure and thus to provide such reasons. In what follows I shall examine whether and, if so, the extent to which it keeps its promise.

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Regarding the task of presenting “reasons” to deal with Husserl’s phenomenology at a time when “consumers of philosophy” are confronted by any number of inflated introductory offers, the author of yet another such work has to choose a strategy carefully. At first sight, three approaches appear to be the most likely options: the practical, the historical, or the theoretical. From a practical point of view, for instance, one can praise Husserl’s phenomenology because of its many possible applications (in cognitive science, sociology, epistemology, logic, ethics, aesthetics, and the like); from a historical point of view, the importance of Husserl’s thought can be stressed by highlighting his factual role as the founding father of one of the major philosophical movements of the twentieth century (along with neo-Kantianism, neo-positivism, analytic philosophy, structuralism, etc.)—namely, phenomenology. Finally, from a theoretical point of view, the value of Husserl’s thought may be shown to depend on its power to recast and reshape traditional philosophical problems and renew the activity of philosophy itself—forging, precisely, new beginnings and introducing conceptual innovations demanding further exploration.

In its attempt to fulfill the dual task behind the need for an “introductory brochure” to Husserl’s phenomenology together with a compelling account of its philosophical claim—*PH* follows this third path. The author affirms explicitly:

The goal of this book is to introduce the beginner to Husserl’s phenomenological research by situating its salient discoveries in relation to traditional philosophy. In particular, the relevance of philosophy to the problems that gave rise to the ancient Greek beginning of Western philosophical tradition and to this tradition’s development in the European beginning of philosophy’s modern transformation into universal science will be discussed. (1)

Such a theoretical strategy, while pointedly excluding any attempt to measure the value of Husserl’s philosophy in view of its purported “usefulness,” never-