Alexander Schnell’s Project for a Constructive Phenomenology

Alexander Schnell

_Hinaus: Entwürfe zu einer phänomenologischen Metaphysik und Anthropologie._

What is phenomenology? Since Husserl this has never ceased to be a live question for the phenomenological tradition. In providing an answer (as Husserl and so many others have done), the philosopher defines and thus marks out the limits of phenomenology. And yet almost from the beginning phenomenological research has ventured beyond those limits previously drawn for it. If one still wishes to remain within phenomenology, this requires the marking out of new limits and the formulation of a new answer to the question.

In this book Alexander Schnell does precisely that: he gives a bold new answer that goes far beyond Husserl’s explicit conception of what phenomenology is. According to Schnell, an exclusively descriptive phenomenology is not enough: phenomenology must also be constructive. Schnell argues that this methodological revision is necessary for two reasons. First, certain phenomena (even in Husserl’s own work) are inaccessible to descriptive analysis, and can be accessed only through phenomenological construction. Second and more importantly, descriptive phenomenology is incapable of providing the ultimate grounding or justification of knowledge demanded by Husserl himself; a constructive phenomenology can provide this ultimate grounding.

Schnell does not intend to provide a full account of constructive phenomenology in this book. Instead he sketches the landscape and lays the groundwork for a more systematic treatment—in part by drawing on constructive elements in Husserl and Heidegger as well as the work of contemporary phenomenologists. (The word Entwürfe in the title—in one of its senses—refers to the work’s preparatory character.) Schnell thus outlines an ambitious project for constructive phenomenology that promises (1) to provide an ultimate justification for knowledge and (2) to ground a phenomenological metaphysics and anthropology, each of which is centered on the “image” (Bild). Insofar as Schnell fills in the details of this outline, his analysis is careful, provocative, and filled with insight. Because of the preparatory character of the work, however,
many of the claims are not developed enough to judge whether the project will ultimately be successful. In particular, the claim that phenomenological construction can provide an ultimate grounding for knowledge requires fuller treatment.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Schnell’s book is the depth of his knowledge of the phenomenological tradition (in both German and French) as well as German Idealism. (Though German by birth, Schnell was educated in France and is currently a professor at the Sorbonne. He has published prolifically in French, but this is his first book in German.) Schnell finds “constructive elements” in close readings of Husserl and Heidegger, which in turn provide material—as well as an indirect justification—for his own approach. On the other hand, more recent phenomenological research both confirms the need to go beyond a purely descriptive methodology and offers resources for Schnell’s own systematic project—particularly with respect to anthropology. What makes Schnell’s work stand out among contemporary phenomenologists, however, is his close engagement with German Idealism and his appreciation for the essential points of continuity between phenomenology and German Idealism. Following Husserl himself, Schnell understands phenomenology as a form of “transcendental idealism,” and he draws extensively from Fichte’s Bildlehre in developing his own phenomenology based on the image.

In this review I cannot do justice to the richness of Schnell’s analysis and the full range of topics that he addresses. Instead I will begin with a brief overview of the book’s contents, and then focus on some of the main elements of Schnell’s systematic project. I will then conclude with some critical observations and questions.

After a short forward, the book is divided into two parts, each of which has four chapters. These chapters appear to have been written independently from one another. As a result, each chapter stands more or less on its own, and readers can choose to read a particular chapter that interests them without needing to read the previous material. The disadvantage, however, is that the book sometimes lacks integration, and Schnell will occasionally treat a theme without indicating that he has a fuller discussion of the same issue in another chapter.¹

¹ For example, Schnell notes in part 2 that for reasons of space he does not provide any examples of a concretely executed phenomenological construction, and he refers the reader to examples in one of his other books (100n11). There is no mention of the fact that the long