A Letter to John Wild about Husserl

DORION CAIRNS
EDITED BY LESTER EMBREE

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Dorion Cairns and John Wild probably met as Harvard graduate students in 1924 and were certainly in contact many times after the latter joined the Harvard faculty in 1927. They were together in Freiburg in the summer of 1931, while Wild had his first Guggenheim Fellowship and Cairns was in his second period of study with Husserl.1 Wild was on Cairns's thesis committee in 1933. In the spring of 1937, Wild was still at Harvard and Cairns was teaching for a year at The New School for Social Research. Having heard that Wild was teaching phenomenology, Cairns sent his friend a copy of his first lecture. Wild responded on February 22:

Dear Dorion,

Thanks very much for the copy of your first lecture. May I keep it for a while? I am afraid you will not approve my method of presenting Phenomenology, as I am beginning with some historical "background" to show the general idea and necessity of the thing before plunging in. Then I am having a report on "Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft" and the critique of Psychologism in the Logische Unt'en. I am following your advice, however, on the [Méditations cartésiennes], to which I shall devote three meetings, as I now hope, in March. In April, I shall start on Heidegger—where I suppose we part company. But to my mind certain features of Heidegger are essential to purge Phenomenology of the unfortunate solipsism or subjectivism arising from what seems to me to be a too exclusive emphasis on Husserl's part, upon certain detached

A Letter to John Wild about Husserl

developmental modes of knowing (not the only ones), and hence upon the Subject-Object relation. It seems to me that Heidegger’s description of Dasein has gone really further in escaping psychologism than any position I know. Hence I regard it as a necessary supplement to the Logische Unt’en. Of course this is an impossible amount of material, but it may give these dozen students a preliminary survey. Anyhow, I am learning something. Thanking you again for the lecture—will any later ones be available?—and hoping to see you,

Yours,

John Wild.

Cairns replied on March 25 and 30 with a total of eighteen single-spaced pages! Taken together, Wild’s letter and Cairns’s reply form an integral if unusual document. Cairns’s “screed,” as he calls it, may be considered a part of what he referred to when he said “my life has been the attempt to understand and criticize the philosophy of Edmund Husserl”2 and, along with the course at Harvard, may be recognized in the background of Wild’s essay, “Husserl’s Critique of Psychologism: Its Historic Roots and Contemporary Relevance.”3

After Cairns’s death, the original of Wild’s letter and a carbon copy of the lengthy reply were found in a folder among Cairns’s papers. No further correspondence between them exists in their papers. The folder also contained six pages of passages from the second draft of the reply which were omitted from the draft sent and which were keyed to the carbon copy retained. Cairns presumably sent the third and last draft to his friend.

In preparing this document for publication, I have restored the omitted passages, placing them between brackets either in the body of the text or in the notes. Some passages originally in the body have been moved to the notes. Where Cairns quoted from Husserl in the original or in translations apparently made on the occasion, I have substituted passages from his later translations; in one case I have added a paragraph from his unpublished translation, “Philosophy as a Strict Science.” I have silently replaced abbreviations, e.g. “trr” for “transcendental,” with whole words, Englished some German expressions, corrected some trivial errors in orthography, punctuation, and wording natural to a private communication, introduced gaps between the main parts of the exposition, and added bibliographical notes.

I thank Mrs. John Wild, the philosopher’s widow, and Dr. Richard Zaner, Cairns’s literary heir, for permission to publish these letters, and I thank them and also Dr. Frederick Kersten for their advice and assistance.

Lester Embree

3Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl, ed. Marvin Farber, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940.