“Dirty Work”: Gurwitsch on the Phenomenological Theory of Science and Constitutive Phenomenology


*But, Socrates, said Simmias, where shall we find a magician who understands these spells now that you are leaving us?*

*Phaedo, 78a*

For Husserlian phenomenology the theory of science is not an afterthought, nor is it merely tangential to the central concerns of the philosophical reflection on the way things present themselves to us. The modern scientific interpretation of nature since the time of Galileo has colored our everyday interpretation of the world to the extent that it has become difficult, if not almost impossible, to separate this interpretive scheme from the content of our concrete lived experience. The mathematization and algebraization of nature have had both a resounding success during the past four centuries and a profound effect both upon the way we think of “knowledge” in the strict sense (*epistemê*), and upon the methods we use to discover and certify such knowledge. As an attempt to render understandable the notion of objectivity, phenomenology must perforce concern itself with the dominant conception of objectivity current for the past four centuries.

The phenomenological theory of science\(^1\) therefore, considered as a critique (in the Kantian sense of setting the limits) of the prevalent notion of objectivity, can serve as a cogent introduction to phenomenology itself

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\(^1\) The precise meaning of “the theory of science” at work here is spelled out by Embree in the Editor’s Preface: “The theory of science is the philosophical discipline in which the fields, relations, methods, categories, presuppositions, and grounds of the sciences are examined.” *Phenomenology and the Theory of Science*, p. ix.
because of the way it approaches this central concern; and it can act as a valuable means of access to an understanding of contemporary culture, inasmuch as this culture has been determined by the "scientific" approach to nature and man. This is the approach which Husserl himself envisaged in the Crisis, and which Gurwitsch has borne further in this volume of essays.

With the publication of Phenomenology and the Theory of Science all of Gurwitsch's substantive published work since 1940 is available in English, leaving untranslated and quite unavailable only some of his papers from the 1930's on language and Gestalt psychology. In addition to the reprinting of seven articles from periodicals and collections, the present selection offers three new pieces: "Reflections on Mathematics and Logic," a particularly clear reflection on the perceptual foundations of these abstract, formalized disciplines which is carried out largely in relation to Husserl's Formal and Transcendental Logic; "An Introduction to Constitutive Phenomenology" which dates from 1937–39 and provides an excellent entrée into the phenomenology of consciousness as Gurwitsch conceives of it; and "Some Fundamental Principles of Constitutive Phenomenology" which focuses upon the roles played by the notions of object, evidence, and reduction in the work of Husserl and Gurwitsch.

PTS is divided into two parts: the first composed of six articles bearing on "The Project of the Phenomenological Theory of Science" itself, and the second submitting four "Contributions to Constitutive Phenomenology." Let us focus upon each of these parts in turn.

The first part proposes to introduce the reader to the truly Husserlian phenomenology of science (Wissenschaft). Gurwitsch opens onto this project in six successive ways, driving six different wedges into, and thereby giving six separate means of access to the project as a whole. In his typically lucid and condensed style he approaches the project from the perspectives of the life-world, Galilean physics, mathematics and logic, Husserl's phenomenological psychology, Schutz's notion of the common-sense world as it bears upon the theory of social science, and lastly from the point of view of the systematic unity of the sciences. Following his own advice, these essays introduce the phenomenology of science by presenting "the motives and problems which brought it to life," tracing its central ideas "back to their point of origin so that the work is re-performed and re-

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2 Hereafter PTS.


4 In the comments which follow we will focus upon the essays which appear in this volume for the first time, and the plan and implications of the book as a whole.