

THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF



ISSEI

International Society for the Study of European Ideas

in cooperation with the University of Cyprus



“Science of the Life-world”? A Reflection on Phenomenology

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Introduction

A “science of the life-world” – this is a frequently occurring call in Husserl’s phenomenology, not only in the *Crisis*¹ but also in the *Ideas*² and several other writings. But taken too literally, this call can easily be misunderstood, whether in the literal sense of a special “science” with the life-world as its object, or as a philosophical “theory of the life-world,” i.e. a philosophical investigation of what represents the life-world. But this understanding misses the original phenomenological aim – an aim that is, especially in the *Crisis*, entangled with Husserl’s motivation to make visible the hidden presuppositions in everyday life and scientific praxis.

From this misunderstanding, the suspicion may arise that, with this call, Husserl aspired to something impossible.

In my contribution, I will sketch these possible misreadings of a “science of the life-world” and show how phenomenology masters this challenge in its own way. First, I will sketch the meaning and motivation of Husserl’s call for a “science of the life world.” Then I will show that some essential characteristics of the life-world are not adequately dealt with by these misreadings of the project. If it is possible to grasp the life-world at all, it is best achieved in literature by self-reflection and representation, and that this is a tool that literature shares with phenomenology.³

The “life-world” in phenomenology

We find the most famous occurrence of the term “life-world” in Husserl’s *Crisis*. There he argues that science has lost its *Lebensbedeutsamkeit*, i.e. its meaning for life.⁴ Although science continues to further knowledge and technological progress, it has lost its sense for the deeper relation between human beings and the process of converting phenomena into potential research topics. Science has forgotten its dependence on the human sphere; it exchanges the sensible world with an abstract sphere of models and calculation. So the focus must turn to the human sphere again in order to regain, on the one hand, a sense of responsibility, and on the other hand, a grasp of that essential characteristic of the human being that is most relevant for science, namely, the epistemological capacity.

The human sphere is characterized by space and time as well as by sensibility. But what actually makes it the human “life-world” (and not only “world” as a sum of entities) is the systematic frame of meanings, constituted by the human mind. Husserl famously describes this frame in terms of “soil” and “horizon.” The life-world is the “totality” of everything we

can refer to, including ourselves and our attitudes towards ourselves,⁵ and it is the sphere of that attitude that Husserl calls the “natural” one.

The motivation of a “science of the life-world” can be paraphrased with the Husserlian motto of turning self-evident premises into something understandable (*verständlich*).⁶ What is not yet understood, but which can be made understandable, must be something that is usually hidden, something we usually do not think about and that seems “self-evident” in the literal sense. There are certain things, opinions and valuations which seem absolutely clear to us. They are “self-evident,” meaning instantly understandable. They even establish a certain authority as a result of our habitual use of them. Although we may, in some exceptional cases, discover that this authority lacks foundation and can be destroyed, usually we are entangled in them, in accordance with their own dynamic. Even after having been examined critically, they may re-establish themselves, whether justified or not.

Now this is connected to the call for a foundation of science that takes into consideration those presuppositions that make science a well-working business, but which obscure the important questions, like the need for a responsible handling of scientific results, the evaluation of scientific research with regard to human life, and the question concerning the source of all scientific insights (as the condition of the possibility of knowledge). Especially in the *Crisis*, Husserl’s project of a phenomenology as *Erkenntniskritik* aims to revise the earlier scientific and philosophical tradition and redeem the foundation of apodictic knowledge.

Misreadings of a “science of the life-world”

But in light of the striking title, “science of the life-world,” the life-world cannot be the object of a scientific discipline in the sense of what Husserl calls a “natural science” (every non-transcendental discipline) for two reasons. First, every scientific discipline constitutes itself by

the limitation of its scope. It chooses a certain aspect of the totality of the world to focus on – for example, sociology focuses on social phenomena, psychology on the human psyche, and physics on natural laws. They describe the totality of the world from their particular perspective. But the totality itself cannot be such a topic. The second reason is that every special discipline is, according to Husserl, constituted on the basis of the natural attitude. So, in contrast to Husserl's motivation of avoiding every unreflected presupposition, they work on the ground of the epistemological prejudice that the world is given in the way it appears. They do not question the notion of world, even though this question is necessary for a profound understanding of our relation to it and therefore of the life-world itself. "Life-world" has indeed become a catchword in various disciplines. Education researchers, sociologists, and historians speak of "the life-world of children," "the life-world of the ancestors" and so on. But their use of this expression raises many questions that are not essential to Husserl, for example: Do I have my own life-world, and does somebody else have another? Do animals, too, have life-worlds? What about differences in age and sex? In their understanding, life-world is not the topic itself but rather a designation of certain aspects of the local topics of singular disciplines, focused on a narrow interest.

Even in philosophical methodology, to speak of world in a phenomenologically adequate way is problematic. It requires focusing not only on singular aspects in light of their background, but also on the background itself. This includes not only things within the world, but the world as a whole with its relations and features. Examples of the examination of singular aspects are questions like: "What is an action?"; "What is shared intention?" In contrast, "What is world?" does not fit into the same category: It focuses on the whole, not merely on parts of it, and addresses in particular problems of self-reference. Whereas aspects are usually analyzed against an unquestioned background, here the background itself becomes questionable. The problem, however, is that one cannot focus on one thing without losing

sight of something else. In other words, we will never completely avoid unreflected presuppositions – even if they are unreflected for a single moment when they provide the basis for another center of attention. There will always be a blind spot, which is unacceptable to the phenomenological approach.

An alternative option appears in the specification of the world of lived experience as everyday life. The life-world is obviously the sphere of everyday praxis, and therefore the sphere of hidden presuppositions, i.e. self-evidences. But the life-world is not exhausted by descriptions of life-world phenomena. Providing such descriptions according to a theoretical demand is possible, but it depends on a larger context in which the descriptions are embedded. Otherwise, a mere description of the topic is in danger of becoming trivial. The insight that the life-world is the totality of everything we encounter in it, and that every praxis is based on hidden presuppositions, is well known in the practical sphere, and so are the presuppositions themselves. This alone is not adequate for theoretical knowledge.

Examples include the analysis of everydayness in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Alfred Schütz's systematization of life-world phenomena in *Structures of the life-world*. Both analyses only work in light of a broader theoretical approach, that is, in the case of Heidegger, fundamental ontology, and, in the case of Schütz, the ascription of every life-world phenomenon to action and a stock of knowledge (*Wissensvorrat*). And they provide an insightful description of the mechanisms of self-evidence, without resulting in a trivial list of everyday self-evidences, but instead an understanding of what makes them self-evident in the first place. They open many phenomenologically relevant questions like: Which mechanisms lead to the latent acknowledgement of potentially problematic premises and make us ignore even dangerous side-effects of this pragmatic thoughtlessness? (This point is especially important in the critique of technology.) And what does this say about our partially conscious, partially unconscious relation to the world? But their far-reaching theoretical presuppositions

are not acceptable from a strict Husserlian view, even if they are explicated. And the presuppositions are inevitable. As Hans Blumenberg remarks: “Taken by themselves, the descriptions of everydayness are merely interesting, inspiring, but theoretically functionless. Both sides profit from the comparison between life-world and everydayness only in light of the function for that which is to be understood.”⁷

The appellative character of literature and phenomenology

Now which options remain? An approach that essentially deals with the life-world, but in a way that is very different from the scientific, is literature. Like philosophy, literature mediates everything through language, which is at the same time one of the most important media in everyday life. But different from a literally taken “science” or “theory of the life-world,” it grasps the totality and avoids the risk of trivialization. In the case of a felicitous literary work, you can hardly defy the power of literary speech, its suggestive valuations, emotionally-laden descriptions, its urging of the reader to position herself in relation to the work and take a stand in relation to her own conception of the world. Perhaps this reveals an essential difference between literature and science with regard to their aims and demands. The task of philosophy is to formulate problems, develop adequate descriptions in precise terms, and provide discussable theses. The aim in presenting a theoretical claim is to explicate thoughts as clearly as possible and to avoid misunderstanding. Ideally, there is minimal space for interpretation, for the duty to make oneself understood ought to leave no ambivalence or ambiguity. In contrast, literature defines itself as an art and therefore has a kind of fool’s license. It is not obligated to “tell the truth,” and it does not pretend to tell us something we don’t know from our life-world. Instead, literature moves on the same ground as our life-world understanding of things.

Herein lies also the reason for its ability to grasp the life-world in its totality. Its use of everyday language means everything is present that we know from the life-world sphere. As

Heidegger observes, language always already carries with it a fundamental understanding of the world. But whereas science and theory work with an artificially concise terminology, literature uses language in a way we all know and understand from our own experience. The reader is able to understand intuitively. She has the required background knowledge from the life-world and not from theoretical reflection, like in science where every understanding depends on shared presuppositions, i.e. scientific paradigms. Simultaneously, literature offers an eye-opening access to the life-world by bearing a peculiar effect on our worldview, i.e. on the deeply-anchored, widely-unarticulated knowledge of life by interrelating the concrete description of a particular case with the experience of the reader.

Here, knowledge is gained by occupying a kind of meta-level. As readers, we are put into an observer's position, where we are able to look at, from the outside, our own life-world with its self-evidences, prejudices, and inconspicuous attitudes. By shifting our perspective, we are shown what we usually ignore. This means that the special ability of literature lies in demonstrating, making life understandable, and bringing life into view in the first place. Here the difficult topic of the life-world is captured; the phenomena are not explicated, but fixed to an observation from an artificially produced distance. In other words, literature is able to facilitate an understanding of our life that goes beyond the pragmatic view of daily living. It helps us think about things that we might have not thought about before; it even appears to articulate some kind of knowledge or wisdom, and allow us to thematize that which usually remains beyond our theoretical reach.

The literary style of making implicit presuppositions visible to the reader by letting her see her own "self-evidences" from an artificial distance, thereby opening a path to self-analysis, shares something in common with Husserl's phenomenology, but in a methodological sense. Husserl provides explanations that fulfill the demands of a theoretical analysis and at the same time calls upon the reader's personal experience and access to evidence. The programmatic

character of his approach can be understood as a guide to apodicticity. By developing the methods of *epoché* and eidetic variation and directing them to a mutual aim, he provides the tools for all further phenomenological research. In this sense, phenomenology is not mainly defined by its results but by its techniques and their careful application. This means at the same time that Husserl's method cannot do without the phenomenologist's field of experience, which is the source of evidence.

Like literature, phenomenology has an appellative character, which calls the reader back to her own pre-theoretical understanding of the life-world. So phenomenology combines the intuitive access to what we already know with the demands of a stringent theoretical method. The peculiarity of this approach is a scientific implementation of a seemingly a-theoretical procedure. It makes the implicit explicit, and puts self-evidences into a theoretical frame where they can be understood, i.e. discussed. But whereas literature, as a result of its special form, avoids trivialization and strong theoretical premises, phenomenology lets us see what we already know, but *after* the change of perspective by the Epoché. The knowledge that emerges from the phenomenological reduction necessarily cannot be trivial, because the natural attitude that is left in the Epoché is a necessary condition for triviality. At the same time, it amounts not merely to a stocktaking of those things we already know, but ultimately a fundamental understanding of their interdependence and totality, and of how we deal with them. By means of the appellative character in literature, the totality of the life-world becomes present. This is also a requirement for the Epoché, where the whole scope of the natural attitude is bracketed.

Conclusion

The demarcation against objective science and the comparison to literature now shows the peculiarity of the phenomenological path. As seen above, the life-world has two essential characteristics, namely, totality and self-evidence. The latter is a feature of the practical

sphere of science as well as everyday-life. Mere description and systematization of the corresponding phenomena will miss totality and risk trivialization. The heuristic challenge consists in explicitly replacing the usual perspective with a second perspective that is higher in accordance with its own supply of presuppositions: One must at least keep in mind *what* has gone out of focus. So there is no theoretical way to focus on the totality “from the outside.” Phenomenology gains instead a performative character by the method of the phenomenological reduction, the bracketing of everything that is based on the “natural” view of the world. Knowledge is mediated by instruction concerning what to do to achieve evidence. The “user” of phenomenology is guided beyond this most familiar mindset.

The method itself represents, then, a completely artificial praxis that accounts to itself for its epistemological basis. So this praxis is fundamentally different from those of science or the life-world, but simultaneously opens the view “from the inside.” This kind of representation is similar to the case of literature where the reader connects her own experience with the object of the text and is able to watch herself from this artificial distance. The phenomenologist who carries out this method is aware of this artificiality and can analyze her own perception of the world – and therefore gets to the basis of the constitution of the life-world (which depends on our perception of the world and how we deal with it). This exceptional perspective provides exactly the kind of self-questioning that is able to subvert the kind of illegitimate self-evidence in science that Husserl attacks in the *Crisis*, whether it arises from the thoughtless following of a set tradition, or the authority of a scientific norm.

Thus, phenomenology itself can be paraphrased as a science of the life-world, but not in the reductive sense that life-world would be its main concern. The problem of the life-world, as Husserl says in § 33 of the *Crisis*, has instead an ancillary role in the foundation of science; and its treatment is deeply rooted in the phenomenological method itself. From this point of view, Husserl’s call for a “science of the life-world” serves to overcome the crisis in science

and our relation to it and appears as a task that, in the end, might let us further explore the boundaries of theory.

¹ Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, Husserliana vol. 6, ed. Walter Biemel (Hague: Nijhoff, 1954), 126-138.

² Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, I: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*, Husserliana vol. 3, ed. Walter Biemel (Hague: Nijhoff, 1950), 62-63 (§ 30).

³ This contribution is a sketch of an argument that will be spelled out in greater detail in my PhD thesis on Husserl's phenomenological program, in which I discuss the notion of "self-evidence" as well as Husserl's understanding of science in respect to philosophy, on the one hand, and life-world on the other.

⁴ Husserl, *Krisis*, 3-5 (§ 2).

⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Die Lebenswelt: Auslegungen der vorgegebenen Welt und ihrer Konstitution*, Husserliana vol. 39, ed. Rochus Sowa (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 67-73.

⁶ For alternative translations of "Selbstverständlichkeit," see Dorian Cairns, *Guide for Translating Husserl* (Hague: Nijhoff, 1973), 102. Unfortunately, the Husserlian play on words that is based on the similarity of *verständlich* (understandable) and *selbstverständlich* is not captured in English.

⁷ Hans Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 63. My translation.