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### **The Crisis of the Human Sciences: Infinite Iteration and the Task of Tradition**

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#### **Introduction**

In this paper, I am concerned with the contemporary crisis in and of the humanities.<sup>1</sup> I take this crisis to be both internal and external: it is certainly one of identity, confidence, and aims; yet it is also one of broader understanding and support, and of struggling against the objectivating tendencies such as outcome testing, universal course design, etc. My framing claim is that, the more we can grasp about how the humanities ideally function and what they actually seek to do, the better practitioners and defenders of them we will be. As I hope to underline here, my sense is that any address to this crisis in the humanities needs to be deeply engaged with the concepts of historicity, application, infinity, and normativity. That is, I take the *structure* of historicity to have entailments for the practice of humanist education, including standards of excellence or

ethical entailments that make the clarified practice of the humanities a normative *task* for us.

Along these lines, I am interested here in developing some parallels to Husserl's late work that might be helpful in further clarifying what the humanities are and can be.

In terms of textual material, I would like to avoid the danger of taking on too much. I will therefore focus largely on Husserl's 1935 Vienna Lecture, as it encapsulates his stance on the significance of philosophy, and contains several fruitful points of departure.<sup>2</sup> I mean this departure literally, however: as helpful as I think Husserl's approach is, he ultimately does not develop the ethical aspects strongly enough, and overemphasizes philosophy to the detriment of other humanities disciplines when speaking about ways to address the crisis that he perceives.

Several of phenomenology's heirs have taken on this issue, whether in direct response to Husserl's formulation, or in terms of more broad discourses. Thus, for instance, Derrida's earliest works on Husserl institute critiques that later become pointed questions concerning the role of the university and the possibility of a tradition as such. Here, however, I will be assessing Husserl's ideas in light of Gadamer's concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* and his handful of essays on Husserl.

### **The Vienna Lecture**

Let us begin by looking at some pertinent lines of thought from Husserl's Vienna Lecture.

Opening with an analogy, Husserl shows (accurately, I think) how the humanities came to inhabit their limited role in his day: when one diagnoses a physical illness, one takes established, scientific medicinal practices to be more effective than traditional healing methods (*Naturheilkunde*). For the same reason, one takes the humanities to fail in curing the ills of social

life (everything from family issues to national and global conflict). The approach of the humanities is considered weak, ungrounded, and based on mere appearance or hearsay. The true solution, so one thinks, can lie only in scientific rather than spiritual approaches. Natural science is taken to actually explain the situation at hand, because it reduces the spiritual to the causal.

Husserl's rejoinder is that this reduction precisely helps *bring about* the illness. The crisis is a failure to grasp the meaning of natural science as a spiritual activity. To counteract this, one instead has to account for spirit *as* spirit, to understand the true character of the subject-matter of the humanities (that is, the productivity and self-reflection of spirit), and thus their pertinence to issues of social life (and the practice of science). Yet how does Husserl think one can accomplish this? What does it mean to treat spirit as spirit (to give a *Wesenslehre* of it), and in what ways can this treatment be said to be significant to the matters of social life, even to questions of science?

Husserl singles out philosophy, in its ancient Greek beginnings, as central to an understanding of what a science of *Geist* would be. He points to the birth of philosophy as the institution of universal thinking, and thus as the origin of (European) ideal norms. These norms of universality guide our thinking asymptotically toward a pole of objectivity: the historical trajectory of Europe would be an infinite task that seeks ideality, and this ideality would be a pure reflection, a complete scientific grounding of science.

This idea alone ushers in a new kind of historicity: one of infinite proportions, in which the results of philosophy are not exhaustible or changeable, and in which there is a kind of progress

or cumulative effect. This is to be contrasted with a historicity of the finite, in which achievements are merely transitory. The historicity of the infinite, conversely, assures that one need not continually begin philosophy anew, and that self-reflection can increase or compound itself. Yet since there is no actual conceivable completion of philosophy's task, nor *pure* repetition of past accomplishments, one is left with the task of always continuing the task, of engaging in some form of repetition that serves as a "bridging continuity." In this repetition, one may not have to continually begin philosophy anew, but one must at the very least protect against sedimentation. To do this, one must reach some level of self-reflection to begin with, i.e., enter into philosophy. One must conduct the *Cartesian Meditations* at least once.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Husserl takes the engagement with philosophy to secure this basic reflection. To join in it, one must simply enter its realm of ideality and thereby engage in active, willed participation in the idea of Europe. Husserl describes the self-reflection initiated here as "iterative," by which he presumably means that every philosopher has to begin individually and anew not with philosophy as such, but with the venture into the ideal realm. There is thus a normative aspect to this repetition: since iteration can be conducted well or poorly, one can formulate guidelines about how to pursue the infinite task. This normative aspect pertains especially to the social dimension of philosophy.

Philosophy, after all, has to be carried out both as a concrete practice and as an ideal realm that connects humanity as such. Its continuance is not automatic, however: it does not possess biological necessity. One needs teachers in order to be aware of, and enter into, the ideal realm. This is the significance of Greece and of the 'idea' of Europe (and, I would argue, of humanist

education in general): they are established paths and communities of thought. The task of education in the philosophical community, then, is one of passing on the philosophical ‘interest’ by explaining what one seeks and achieves there, and getting non-philosophical future philosophers to understand this.

Husserl puts this task in terms of *Bildung*. One reason that this can succeed is that philosophy is not bound by national borders. A super-nationality of huge proportions arises here: a spiritual Europe, indeed a global project of humanity. By engaging in philosophy, one participates in a grand process, not a narrow disciplinary project. In its scope and elevation, philosophy has a “twofold spiritual effect.”<sup>4</sup> First, its pursuit of ideality is a theoretical-critical activity: it inquires into the reality behind traditional material and beliefs. Secondly, this theoretical stance, however distant, also changes everyday human existence, urging one to live by objective truths; this then affects transitory truths as well (character, laws, values). Husserl ultimately presents philosophy as broader and more foundational than all other sciences, human and natural. The philosophical science of *Geist* thus bears as a certain priority and “archontic” function. But Husserl does not speak of this science in broad terms: only transcendental phenomenology, as the study of the subject’s spiritual accomplishments, is the solution to the crisis (this is spelled out more in the *Crisis of the European Sciences*).<sup>5</sup>

### **Responding to the Vienna Lecture**

One could engage critically with Husserl on several fronts here. One could ask whether philosophy is really so easily divided into specific historical-factual pursuits on the one hand, and a universal, ideal task on the other. One could also inquire as to the aptness of describing philosophy as pure *theoria*, as departing entirely from practical concerns. The main response I

wish to focus on in this paper pertains to *Bildung* in the humanities. First off, it might be worth wondering whether we can take over Husserl's diagnosis and treatment of his crisis so easily. Put differently, does that diagnosis map onto the present crisis adequately enough? I would argue that the present crisis of the humanities is indeed still a failure to grasp their historicity, along with their ethical entailments; the crisis is, and has always been, about the constitution and sustenance of a community. Yet regarding Husserl's account of *Bildung*, it bears asking it is really just the initiation into theoretical stances, and not at all about social-historical life.

Husserl certainly attains some accuracy when speaking of the self-reflection of *Geist* as 'iterative.' Every philosopher has to begin individually and anew in joining the infinite task of philosophy. What Husserl does not thematize is how much this self-reflection needs training and cultivation, and how practically oriented it really is. Further, given the non-repeatable and non-methodical material of the infinite task, this training would be such that it can only occur in the *enactment* of reflection itself, not in a prior organon of philosophical foundation. The humanities, I would argue, conduct precisely this reflective enactment.

It is not that Husserl neglects this angle entirely, only that he arrives at it very late, and fails to develop it any further. What is more, as we have already mentioned, he only focuses on philosophy, neglecting other disciplines in the humanities (or at the very least failing to show how philosophy extends to all other disciplines in the humanities). Are not other humanist areas of interest just as important in uncovering historicity, and therefore in grounding science, in delimiting the self and its iterative accomplishments? To be sure, these fields do not attain the

level of universality that philosophy does, but they do thematize an infinite historicity, and introduce us to the texture of an open and communal development.

To conclude this general response to the Vienna Lecture, we should underscore that the normative aspect of repetition toes into an ethical aspect that Husserl does not develop. He seeks to demonstrate that doing philosophy is good by virtue of being critical and transformative, but does not ponder how the humanities might have an ethical impact through the constitution of a community. That is, he treats the community as already existing, and as being readily accessible to any who wish to learn. But a *sensus communis* precisely is not readily available or accessible in this fashion. It itself needs formation or *Bildung*.

### **Gadamer's Response to Husserl**

On the basis of some of Gadamer's insights, one can wonder whether Husserl's depiction of progress and historicity is accurate. Husserl's account places humanity in the 'middle' of a struggle, without any possibility of closure or of hopeful openness. As we have seen, this sets the current task as one of 'joining' the infinite activity of philosophy. It seems that Husserl fails to see the ways in which this joining is itself a problem. To be sure, one cannot simply take over a tradition, but does one always first decide to engage with tradition? Is there not a deeper belonging to the transmission of tradition that has always occurred? Here Husserl would seem to repeat an error made by Kant and Hegel, and which Gadamer corrects by means of the concept of historical effect (*Wirkungsgeschichte*).

Through this concept, Gadamer calls into question any notion of gleaning one's position from a 'limiting concept of perfect interaction.' After all, this interaction would amount to fully

congruent alignment of clear motives and performed action, a banishment of anything foreign from one's historical situation. For Gadamer, any notion of completion involves this danger. Husserl, of course, states that completion of iteration is impossible, but he nevertheless operates with a limiting concept. He might succeed in avoiding an Hegelian aim of absolute knowing, but still falls into the same trap as Hegel with regard to thinking the standpoint of subjectivity as being firm, as having only the issue of an infinite future project to deal with, but still falling within the telos of a decided—and philosophical—task.

Yet with regard to the history of philosophy and its concrete communal instantiation, can we not say that its telos is always unclear and at risk? With Gadamer, one might say that we can never retrieve our origins as cleanly and definitively as Husserl suggests. There would be, in addition to the outer infinity of futural development, an 'inner infinity' of inexhaustible belonging to transmission.

The critique from Gadamer's side, then, is that we need a better sense of the crisis.<sup>6</sup> It is a matter of how to read and do philosophy, and this is itself an issue for the humanities. The latter can only improve this activity through reflection upon it. The 'bridging continuity' that Husserl touches upon seems to entail a humanistic sense of history with *Wirkungsgeschichte* at its core. After all, what is at stake here but a kind of consciousness of historical effect, an awareness of being part of an infinite historicity? Thus, is philosophy not historical in a richer sense than Husserl allows?



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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Diego D'Angelo for many fruitful conversations concerning the material presented here.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Edmund Husserl, "The Vienna Lecture," translated by David Carr, in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 269-299.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, translated by Dorion Cairns (Boston: Kluwer, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Husserl, "Vienna Lecture," 286.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, translated by David Carr (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> On this topic, cf. esp. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Die Aktualität der husserlschen Phänomenologie," in *Gesammelte Werke* vol. 3 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 160-171.