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Edited by Daniele De Santis, Burt C. Hopkins and
Claudio Majolino

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THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Emiliano Trizio

The nature of knowledge is a theme that has been approached in a variety of ways throughout the phenomenological tradition. However, only within Husserl's work does such theme lead to the development of a *systematic theory of knowledge grounded in phenomenology*. Heidegger, in particular, developed extensive considerations concerning the concept of knowledge and its relation to truth, but in view of moving beyond the theory of knowledge itself as well as beyond all formulations of the so-called "problem of knowledge".¹ Heidegger's interpretations of Kant further develop this attempt to privilege the question of being as the ultimate horizon of philosophy at the expense of the theory of knowledge.² That the theory of knowledge, instead, appears from early on as the horizon of Husserl's thought, can be understood in light of his intention to revive the ideal of philosophy as a discipline encompassing the different sciences as its branches and culminating in metaphysics.³ Husserl came very early to believe that only a theory of knowledge lacking any metaphysical presuppositions could provide a suitable basis for philosophy thus conceived,⁴ and that the *impasse* of the traditional philosophical efforts of modernity were ultimately due to the failure to develop such pure theory of knowledge. Ultimately, this kind of quest led to the development of transcendental phenomenology.

The conceptual path connecting metaphysics to the most fundamental questions concerning the possibility of knowledge, and from the latter to transcendental phenomenology, can be best illuminated by foregrounding Husserl's notion of theory of science (*Wissenschaftstheorie*). If the positive sciences are to be able to contribute to the kind of universal cognition of being that metaphysics tries to achieve, they need to be rescued from their theoretical insufficiency. The theory of science is called to overcome these limitations by developing a systematic critique of scientific rationality; in other words, by elucidating the uncritical presuppositions of the positive sciences. After the so-called transcendental turn, Husserl came to his mature conception of the different disciplines that such theory of science would comprise. In the first place, we encounter two families of "objective" a priori disciplines: formal ontology (also called *mathesis universalis*) and the group of material or regional ontologies. Formal ontology is the formal theory of science, and it can be supplemented by the formal theory of multiplicities and by the a priori theory of probability required by empirical knowledge.⁵ It investigates what pertains a priori to the essence of science regardless of the specific domain of investigation, and, correlatively, what pertains to any possible object in general. Regional ontologies instead investigate the material a priori that characterizes the different domains of

the various empirical sciences.⁶ According to Husserl, the origin of both can be traced back to the work of Plato and his school.⁷ The different material ontologies, too, can be called *logic* or *Wissenschaftstheorien*,⁸ because they provide a critique of the reason at work in the corresponding empirical disciplines. In short, so far, the theory of science appears articulated in a formal and in a material part, which both deal with the objective contents of science. However, the theory of science, and, along with it, the critique of reason, are far from being exhausted by these “object-directed” a priori disciplines. What is necessary is an *authentic and radical critique of reason*, where reason is conceived as a structural function of the subject accomplishing any scientific endeavor.⁹ In this way, we reach the ultimate and most fundamental questions pertaining to the very possibility of knowledge. We find a preliminary characterization of this type of investigation in the following historical remark:

We meet in antiquity, in Parmenides and, above all, in an effective negative form in the Sophistic, the first seeds of the authentic problematic of the critique of reason, into which, to start with, we have to gain some insight, a problematic that is not directed to truth and being, not to theory and science in the sense of a theoretical system, but to rational consciousness itself. The sophistic skepticism in regards to truth and to being as correlates of truth has its parallel in a skepticism in regards to knowing, that is in regards to the possibility of a knowledge directed towards being in the sense of an objectivity that transcends consciousness.¹⁰

Under Husserl’s reading, the problematic of an authentic critique of reason (not of a theory of the a priori components of scientific theory, which are the objects of formal and material ontology) was already prefigured in the ancient world by the contrast between Parmenides’ thesis of the identity between thinking and being, i.e., that there is a correlation between rational thought and what is ultimately real, and Gorgias’ skepticism. Gorgias’ skepticism concerns not only the correlation between truth and being, i.e., not only the possibility for a true judgment to express what is real, but also, and more fundamentally, the very correlation between consciousness and being, i.e., the possibility for consciousness to grasp a transcendent being at all. According to this type of skepticism, no matter what different components can be distinguished within consciousness, no matter the character of evidence that may belong to them, what is found within consciousness remains inherently immanent to the subject and unable to warrant access to an objective, i.e., transcendent domain. In this way, we come to the formulation of the problem of transcendent knowledge, the problem that has motivated the development of the theory of knowledge itself.

No matter how much more precisely these differences may be grasped, they are by all means differences within subjectivity. But how can immanent lived experiences or immanent characters of lived experiences, and let them be called also character of “rationality” – in modern terms, “feelings of evidence, of necessity of thought” etc. – legitimately signify something beyond the immanent sphere?¹¹

This formulation of the problem of transcendent knowledge already presupposes the ground of consciousness as absolutely given and amenable to an immanent description, whereby its *Erlebnisse*, along with their components can become objects of knowledge.¹² In other words, the very question about the possibility of *transcendent* knowledge (a term that has been intended as extra-subjective, “*außersubjektive*”¹³ in a way that transcendent phenomenology denounces as misleading) presupposes the possibility of *immanent* knowledge.

Fundamental in this context is the distinction between “the anthropological and the radical formulation of the problem of transcendence”.¹⁴ The anthropological or psychologicistic formulation consists in asking how a human being (or, equivalently, I as a human being) can obtain knowledge of what is transcendent with respect to consciousness, while the radical formulation consists in asking: “how is it possible that in the knowing consciousness something transcending it becomes knowable?”¹⁵ The radical formulation demands that the problem of transcendent knowledge (or, equivalently, the problem of transcendence) be referred to consciousness as purified by any apperception in virtue of which it is apprehended as a part of nature, as annexed to humans or animals. The anthropological formulation, which is in its own right legitimate and must be scientifically pursued according to its own methods, fails to address the fundamental problem of transcendence, because it presupposes the existence of at least part of what is transcendent. A simple way to realize why this approach does not respond to genuinely philosophical concerns is to think about how any other radical skeptics would object to it: “How can I, in the first place, come to know that I am a human being, which in turn implies the existence of my body as well as of the spatiotemporal nature of which my body is a component?”

According to Husserl, this radical formulation has never been completely understood before the breakthrough of transcendental phenomenology. It is clear, though, that the reason for this is not that all previous philosophers have been unable to go beyond the anthropological or naturalistic formulation, but that they have failed to do so in a complete or radical way. This was the case of Descartes, who indeed questioned the transcendence of nature and of the subject as human being endowed with a body, but not the transcendence of the “empirical-personal subject”, of the “*mens sive animus*” which is the consciousness of the “empirical Ego”. As Husserl says in the *Cartesian Meditations*, he identified the pure Ego of the *cogitationes* with a part of the human being, a part that, in contrast to the body, does not fall under methodic doubt.¹⁶ Descartes’ subject, therefore, while not a human being, is still a “surviving part” of a human being, and thus a part of the transcendent world. The correct ground of the problem of transcendence was missed also by classical empiricism. Whereas Locke’s theory of knowledge relapsed into a full-blown naturalism,¹⁷ Hume’s fictionalism, which indeed questioned the being of nature in a radical way, was still based on psychological transcendences such as the “fundamental psychological faculties characterized by psychological laws as that of the association of ideas and habit”.¹⁸ Finally, even Kant’s formulation of the problem of knowledge is affected by the limitations resulting from the fact that “He constantly operates with transcendent presuppositions that stem from the natural conception of the world (*‘natürlichen Weltauffassung’*)”.¹⁹ Kant’s transcendent presuppositions are, to be sure, subtler and less evidently related to the dogmatic “naturalistic” standpoint of most formulations of the problem of knowledge, but they are no less harmful.

they are transcendencies that, under the title affecting thing in itself, are derived from the natural thesis of the extra-subjective world, in part from the material external world that is naturally given, in part, under the title transcendental faculties and functional laws, from the natural reality of the subject, as a subject of faculties that manifests itself in the actual behavior of consciousness, of a human person.²⁰

As is clear from this quotation, Husserl believes that the very notion of thing in itself is derived from the natural positing of an extra-subjective, i.e., transcendent world. Kant, of course, does not equate the thing in itself to what is taken as real by common sense, but his notion of the thing in itself is a philosophical construction grown out of the things of common sense, once the problem of the correspondence between representation and object is raised. Likewise, Kant’s

use of transcendental faculties and functional laws derives from the natural apprehension of the human subject.

These examples are meant to highlight that the pure formulation of the problem of transcendent knowledge becomes possible only if the natural attitude, i.e., the attitude based on the thesis of the existence of spatiotemporal reality, is made thematic and suspended. The key to understanding the possibility of overcoming the natural attitude is found in reflection. By reflecting on our conscious life, we realize that all objects, from the things of immediate perception to the highest theoretical products of scientific thought, are unities corresponding to a multiplicity of acts of consciousness intending them. By reflecting on our conscious life, we bring to light these interlocked systems of intentional *Erlebnisse* along with their various components that constitute transcendent objects. Conversely, we realize that any object confirms its self-identity in a multiplicity of manifestations that can be brought to a reflective scrutiny. Moreover, we realize that such multiplicity of manifestations (of ways of appearing) is specific to each determined region of being.

Now, it becomes clear that the authentic notion of *reason* refers to these constituting multiplicities of consciousnesses. The fundamental theory or critique of reason consists in a systematic investigation of the essence of these multiplicities of consciousnesses. The main difference between Husserl's critique of reason and Husserl's consequent radical formulation of the problem of knowledge, on the one hand, and the classical formulations just mentioned, on the other, lies in the new form of appeal to reflection on which the former rests. Indeed, since knowledge consists always in an *Erlebnis*,²¹ the problem of the possibility of knowledge makes sense only when correctly referred to the relation between *Erlebnisse* and their objects.²² Reflection, to be sure, is not a novelty in the history of modern philosophy, but the inability of completely overcoming the anthropological or naturalistic formulation of the problem of knowledge was a consequence of the inability to purify the reflective analysis from all transcendencies, whether causal-external or internal (under the guise of psychic faculties and corresponding laws). Furthermore, shortly after writing the *Logical Investigations*, as is well known, Husserl came to realize that even the purely descriptive study of the essence of the acts of knowledge practiced there, even purely descriptive psychology, was unable to secure the authentic ground of the theory of knowledge, even though no explicit claims about transcendent realities were in play. So long as these analyses concerned the essence of psychological *Erlebnisse*, their object was still, in principle, a part of the world, whose (material) a priori form was in question. Only the transcendental reduction (the suspension of the natural attitude) and, consequently, the transformation of psychological reflection into phenomenological reflection could open up the field of an investigation into the essence of consciousness conceived, not as a part of the world, but as the absolute ground of manifestation of the world including human and animal subjects. Such an advance was made possible, as, again, is well known, by the realization that the object of reflection includes not only the noetic side of consciousness but also the noematic side, the side of the intended objects as intended. The world becomes included in the field of phenomenology as phenomenon, and the transcendental subject appears as the subject that not only *has before it*, so to speak, all transcendencies, but also, in a specific sense, *includes them* as synthetic units of sense. At this point, the analysis of knowledge carried out by psychological reflection acquires the character of a legitimate but partial and derivative field of investigation.²³

It is now possible to give a list of definitions clarifying the relation between transcendental phenomenology and the theory of knowledge. The rational consciousness, conceived as the structured totality of the constituting acts of consciousness, which has been in question up to now, was doxic or theoretical consciousness, the one that is at work in the specifically cognitive accomplishments. Along with doxic rational consciousness, one must first consider axiological

consciousness as constitutive of values and practical consciousness as constitutive of the objects of will. Even these three spheres of rational consciousness (that according to Husserl make an inseparable unit²⁴) do not coincide with consciousness in general.²⁵ Consciousness in general also includes, to be sure, “unreason” or irrationality, and also the sphere of neutral consciousness such as the sphere of phantasy with its correlated quasi-worlds.²⁶ Accordingly, transcendental phenomenology, or the eidetic science of transcendental consciousness requiring the pure, or transcendental, or phenomenological apperception²⁷ will first investigate the most general structures of consciousness, those that are common to all the aforementioned species of consciousness. For instance, a general account of the essence of any intentional act and of its inseparable components will fall in the general part of phenomenology. Such general part is required for the development of phenomenology of reason with its three different components.

As for the relation between transcendental phenomenology and the theory of knowledge:

The legitimate problems of the theory of knowledge, this is the sense of all these considerations, can be posed only on the terrain of phenomenology. All radical problems of the theory of knowledge are phenomenological, and all other problems, that can further be ranked under this title, among which the problems of the correct “interpretation” of factual nature and of the results of natural sciences, presuppose the pure problems of the theory of knowledge, i.e., the phenomenological – unless they are not absurd problems, in which case, however, the important task is to dissolve these absurdities and to guide absurd thinking to the way of clarity.²⁸

This means that the part of the theory of knowledge that concerns the fundamental and general problems of the “correlation between pure, knowing reason and reality”²⁹ is absorbed by transcendental phenomenology; more specifically, by the phenomenology of reason.³⁰ The more applied problems that stem from the interpretation of the factual sciences, which, as Husserl says, are also considered as belonging to the theory of knowledge, will be addressed on the basis of the eidetic insights provided by the phenomenology of reason. It is also important to notice that the theory of knowledge of transcendence is only a part of the general theory of knowledge that will extend to all objects in general, including the immanent ones.³¹ Consequently, Husserl extends the use of the term “transcendental” beyond the thematic of the constitution of transcendence to include all authentic problems concerning the possibility of knowledge.³² Finally, in light of these conclusions, it appears that transcendental phenomenology can be considered as a *Wissenschaftstheorie*, and precisely as that *Wissenschaftstheorie* that consists in a study of the functions of consciousness at work in all scientific accomplishments, including phenomenology itself.³³ In this way we reach the most fundamental level of problems pertaining to knowledge, one that is necessary also for elucidating the totality of the a priori cognitions belonging to the formal and material disciplines making up the “objective” part of the theory of science.

Notes

- 1 See Heidegger 1962, especially §§ 13, 31–33, 44–45.
- 2 See Heidegger 1967, 1997.
- 3 Hua-Mat III, 223–255.
- 4 Hua-Mat III, 84.
- 5 Hua XVIII, 256.
- 6 *Ideas I*, §9.
- 7 Hua XXV, 126 and 32.
- 8 Hua XXV, 133.

- 9 As Husserl will say in the *Cartesian Meditations*, reason is not “an accidental *de facto* ability, not a title for possible accidental matters of fact, but rather a title for an *all-embracing essentially necessary structural form belonging to all transcendental subjectivity*” (Hua I, 92/1960, 57).
- 10 Hua XXV, 135.
- 11 Hua XXV, 136.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Hua XXV, 137.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Hua I, §10.
- 17 Hua XXV, 139.
- 18 Hua XXV, 140.
- 19 Hua XXV, 140.
- 20 Hua XXV, 141.
- 21 “In all of its manifestations, knowledge is a mental experience: knowledge belongs to a knowing subject. The known objects stand over against it” (Hua II, 20/1999, 17).
- 22 “All meaningful problems of the theory of knowledge in general and in particular all problems of the possibility of a transcendent knowledge, which reaches beyond the proper essence and being of consciousness have their source in reflection” (Hua XXV, 150).
- 23 Hua XXV, §§16–20.
- 24 Hua XXV, 197.
- 25 Hua XXV, 147.
- 26 Hua XXV, 148.
- 27 Terms that Husserl considers as synonyms; see Hua XXV, 160.
- 28 Hua XXV, 189.
- 29 Hua XXV, 190.
- 30 Husserl stresses the unity of all phenomenological investigations by remarking that that even the phenomenology of reason cannot be treated in isolation with respect to the phenomenology of unreason; see Hua XXV, 197–198.
- 31 Hua XXV, 191.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Hua XXV, 205.

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