

IN MEMORY OF THE GREAT PHILOSOPHER EDMUND HUSSERL

Lev Shestov, 1938¹

[excerpt]

Max Scheler, when I last saw him, two weeks before his death, suddenly asked me: “*Warum sind Sie mit so einem Ungestüm gegen Husserl losgegangen?*” Husserl himself, when I visited him in Freiburg, introduced me to a group of visiting American professors of philosophy with the words: “No one has ever attacked me so sharply as he – and that’s why we are such close friends.” What astonishes one in Husserl’s words is the clear expression of the “disinterestedness” which is so rare even in the great philosophers. His first interest was in the truth: and in the search for truth friendship with one’s intellectual opponents is not only possible but essential. This is characteristic of Husserl in the highest degree.

But we are concerned for the moment with a different question: What could have been the cause of my harsh attack? To make intelligible a position as difficult and at the same time remarkable as Husserl’s phenomenology, it seems to me useful to state not only the doctrine itself but also the reasons why I have found it, and still find it, unacceptable. Objections illuminate not only the views of the critic, but also those of the thinker criticized.

I first encountered Husserl’s works thirty years ago, at a time when he had published only the *Logische Untersuchungen*. That book was and is enormously impressive. Among philosophers of the early twentieth century few indeed can rival Husserl in power, boldness, depth, and significance of thought. We did not meet until much later, after I had published two articles on Husserl in the *Revue Philosophique*. I had been invited to Amsterdam to read a paper before a philosophical society. When I got there I was told that Husserl was coming later to read a paper and that he had asked if I could await his arrival so that we might meet. Of course, I gladly postponed my departure for a few days. I was pleasantly surprised by Husserl’s desire to meet an outspoken intellectual opponent: such generosity of spirit is extremely rare.

Our first meeting took place at the philosophical society in the evening just before Husserl was to read his paper. At that time, of course, there was no philosophic discussion. Husserl was busy completing his own paper, which lasted for more than two hours and which, incidentally, he read standing, with extraordinary ease, and with the artistry and vigor of a man of forty rather than seventy. Husserl asked the member of the philosophic society in whose home he and his wife were staying (it is the custom in Amsterdam for philosophers who are invited to read papers to stay with members of the philosophic society rather than in hotels) to invite me for dinner the following day. At dinner, of course, there was no talk of philosophy. But immediately after dinner, as soon

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as we had gone from the dining room into the study, Husserl began to raise philosophic issues, plunging directly *in medias res*. This was characteristic of him. I remember that when, a few days later, both of us had dinner with another member of the society, and after dinner our host, a very wealthy man and a passionate bibliophile, began showing Husserl some of his rare books – first editions of the Critique of Pure Reason and Spinoza's Ethics – Husserl, to the great chagrin of our host, cast only a perfunctory glance at these rare volumes, and in a few moments took me aside and began to talk philosophy.

This same concentration upon the questions which absorbed him was apparent on another occasion, when, at the request of Professor Andler, I began to sound Husserl out concerning his willingness to come to Paris at the invitation of the Sorbonne. He asked me only one question: "Do you think that I will find people in Paris who know German and are willing to reflect upon my problems?" Husserl's complete absorption in philosophy was evident in all of our conversations – first in Amsterdam, and then in Freiburg and Paris. "You were wrong," he began at our first meeting, throwing himself upon me sharply and passionately, "You have turned me into a stone statue, raised me onto a lofty pedestal, and then with hammer blows you have shattered this statue to bits. But am I really so lapidary? You don't seem to have noticed what compelled me to formulate in such a radical way the question of the nature of knowledge, modifying the dominant theories of knowledge which previously had satisfied me as much as any other philosopher. The more deeply I probed into the basic problems of logic, the more I felt that our science, our knowledge, is shaking, tottering. And finally, to my own indescribable horror, I convinced myself that if contemporary philosophy has said the last word about the nature of knowledge, then we have no knowledge. Once, when I was giving a lecture at the university, expounding ideas which I had taken over from our contemporaries, I suddenly felt that I had nothing to say, that I was standing before my students with empty hands and an empty soul. And then I resolved both for myself and for my students to submit the existing theories of knowledge to that severe and unrelenting criticism which has aroused the indignation of so many people. On the other hand, I began to seek the truth precisely where no one had sought it before, since no one had admitted that it might be found there. Such was the origin of my Logical Investigations. But you did not want to see in my struggle, in my impetuous 'either-or', an expression of what it in fact was – namely, the consciousness that, if the doubts which had arisen in me could not be overcome by the efforts of reason, if we are doomed merely to go on smoothing over – more or less thoroughly – the fissures and crevasses which have opened up in all of our epistemological constructions, then one fine day all of our knowledge will crumble and we will find ourselves standing amid the miserable ruins of former greatness."

It was in roughly these words, but with greater force and passion, with that extraordinary *élan* which one felt in all of his remarkable writings and addresses, that Husserl spoke to me of the sources of his bold and original philosophy, a philosophy which relentlessly swept away the fundamental ideas of the best contemporary thinkers. The Logische Untersuchungen and his other works were a "slaughter", not of the "innocent", of course, (the innocent do not philosophize), but of the old men. At the same time they were a grandiose and magnificent attempt to find a support for our knowledge, a support which even the "gates of Hell" could not vanquish. Husserl spoke with sincerity, enthusiasm, and inspiration; I think even non-philosophers would immediately sense that the questions he raised were not theoretical ones – any proffered solution to which, being equally indifferent, would be equally acceptable – but questions,

as he himself put it, of life and death. Husserl, like Shakespeare's Hamlet, raised the terrible and fateful question, "to be or not to be". He saw with Hamlet (or with Shakespeare) that the time was out of joint. His words had a truly shattering impact. My first personal meetings with him, like my reading of his first words twenty years earlier, was truly memorable. One does not forget such human greatness.

I replied candidly – "You are right, of course. I have attacked your ideas with all the energy I could command. But this was only because I felt the enormous and incomparable power of your thought, and sensed what you have now told me about the motivations of your bold and original ideas. I have no doubt that in France – where you were almost entirely unknown before my articles appeared – people now realize that a neighboring country has produced a major philosopher who has opened up horizons hitherto obscured by the thick haze of traditional commonplaces. The sharpness of my attack emphasizes, rather than deprecates, the enormous significance of what you have done for philosophy. To struggle with you one must marshal all of his spiritual energies; every intense effort presupposes passion and the sharpness of passion. I was faced by a fearful dilemma: either to accept your whole position and its as-yet unformulated philosophical implications – or to rebel against you. And if in the next world I am accused of betraying philosophy because of my struggle against self-evidence. I shall point to you, and you will burn in my place. You have pursued and persecuted me so persistently and inexorably with your intuitive self-evidence, that I could find no other way out. Either I had to submit to you in everything, or else steel myself for the desperate step of revolt, not only against you but against everything that has always been considered the unquestioned foundation of philosophy and of thought. I had to revolt against self-evident truth. You were profoundly right when you said that the time was out of joint. Every attempt to examine the least fissure in the foundation of human knowledge throws the time out of joint. But must knowledge be preserved at whatever cost? Must the time be put back in joint? Or rather, should we not give it a further push – and shatter it to bits?"

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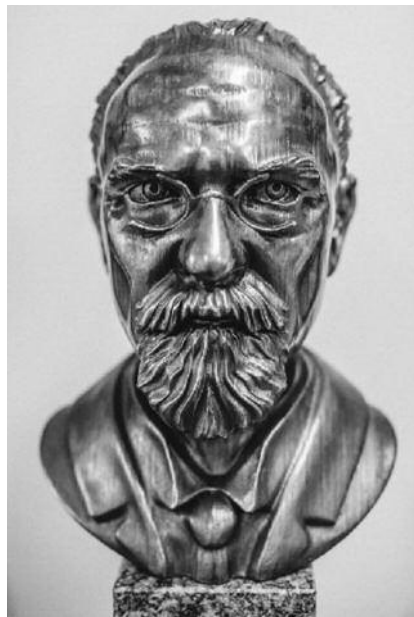
The philosopher is not in the least concerned with John's or Peter's judgment that $2 \times 2 = 4$. There are thousands of individual judgments about a given object, but there is only one truth. If a natural scientist draws conclusions from the laws of gravity, the lever, etc. concerning the functioning of a machine he, of course, experiences certain subjective acts. But corresponding to the subjective relations of thought there is an objective unity of meaning (i.e., one adequate to the evidently given objective reality), which is what it is, irrespective of whether anyone does or does not actualize it in thought. This same idea is even more clearly expressed in the first volume of the *Logische Untersuchungen*: "If all gravitating bodies should disappear, the law of gravity would not be destroyed; it would simply remain without any possibility of actual application. For it says nothing about the existence of gravitating masses, but only of what is inherent in gravitating masses as such." In these resolute words one feels the central nerve of phenomenology. This idea pervades all of Husserl's thinking. To dispel any doubt as to his intention, he offers the following example: The meaning of the statement " π is a transcendental number", what we understand by it when we read it, or mean by it when we say it, is not an individual, recurrent feature of our thinking experience. In each specific case this feature will be individually different, whereas the meaning [*Sinn*] of the statement must always be *identical*... As opposed to the unlimited multiplicity of individual experiences, that which is expressed in them is everywhere identical: it is *the same* in the strictest

sense of the term. The reference of the statement [*Satzbedeutung*] is not multiplied with the multiplicity of persons or acts; the judgment in the ideal, logical sense is one... This is not a mere hypothesis, to be justified by its explanatory fruitfulness. We take it as a directly graspable truth, and we rely in this upon self-evidence, the ultimate authority in all questions of knowledge.” (2:99 f.)

These are the words which Husserl hurled in the face of contemporary philosophy, a philosophy which was diffidently hiding its relativistic tendencies beneath the fuzzy theories of neo-Kantianism. Truth is one for men, for angels, and for gods. Truth rests upon self-evidence; before it mortals and immortals alike are powerless. Hence philosophy begins with what Husserl calls the “phenomenological reduction”. In order to break through to the sources, the principles, the roots of all that is, we must tear ourselves away from the real, from changing, transient phenomena and make an “*epoché*”, bracket the phenomena, so to speak. Outside the brackets there will be pure, ideal being, the truth which philosophy seeks, guaranteed against doubt by self-evidence itself. Husserl unhesitatingly declares:

Self-evidence is not some index of consciousness which, appended to consciousness, speaks to us like a mystical voice from a better world, saying “here is the truth” – as though we, free-thinking men and women, would be ready to obey such a voice without requiring of it any proof of the validity of its assertions.

No contemporary philosopher has ventured to speak with such audacity and power of the autonomy and independence of truth. Husserl will not accept the compromises which lead a majority of thinkers astray. Either self-evidence is the ultimate court of appeal, at the bar of which the human spirit receives its full and definitive satisfaction, or else our knowledge is illusory and false, and sooner or later a realm of chaos and madness will appear on earth, and those who are not too lazy to stretch out their hands will begin to usurp the sovereign rights of reason, its scepter and crown.



Edmund Husserl (Miloš Karásek)