

A BIT ABOUT EDMUND HUSSERL ON THE 110TH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS BIRTH

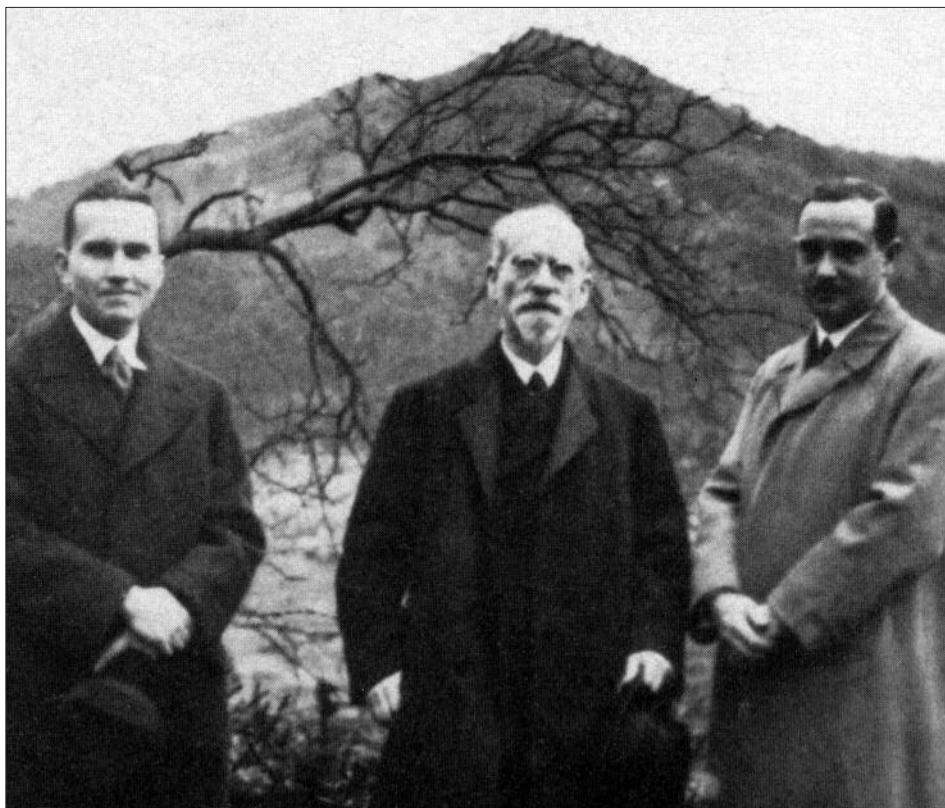
Jan Patočka, 1969*

I would not like to contribute to the rapidly growing number of commemorative plaques, inscriptions and general recollections, which are inundating us, making these memorials ineffective, so that we do not see them, do not notice them. All our artificial attempts to tell human memory what it must do and must not to do are futile if humankind, or some enduring group of human beings, has no need to recall. Prague, for example, with its huge plaques of university professors, travellers, essayists, and philanthropists, whom no one knows anymore, which nevertheless protrude from façades of buildings, seems like Pompeii.

But if we do need to recall, then this has to begin somewhere and continue. And when people were once divided, and the thing that divided them falls away, then people do indeed need to recall. In our country, in quite different circumstances, a European philosopher was born, speaking a language other than Czech. He did not become part of our Czech national community and soon went to foreign lands, first, one nearby, and then one far away. He was a thinker the likes of which one rarely encounters, who leaves traces that can be seen to this day, visible for whole generations. Once, shortly before his death, he returned briefly to his native land. And he felt comfortable here, better than in that foreign country far away. But otherwise he has remained quite unknown here. Yet we [Czechs] like to declare ourselves part of the legacy of everything that the human spirit gives life to and hands down to others. Without dogmatism and bias we seek to make every such thing our own, if it interests us, makes us deeper, and pleases us. And we are pleased when we see a compatriot in him, as anyone is pleased when meeting with a good old acquaintance.

Because Edmund Husserl's views on Prostějov (Proßnitz) and on his fellow Bohemians, chiefly Masaryk, like his letters to Prostějov, are known to the readers of *Štafeta*, more need not be said about them here. I would, however, like to say briefly what we have in him, because that is what humankind has in him. What are philosophers to humankind? Engineers and physicians make our lives comfortable, improving them and our health. Scientists, with their research, make that possible for them. But what are philosophers for? There is a joke going round that a philosopher is someone who thinks even though he doesn't have to. He thinks precisely when he doesn't have to and because he doesn't have to. The philosopher thinks without having any need to do so – except the need to know, to see, to be clear – without any need but the need for truth. To some extent every person has that need. But usually people satisfy it cheaply. They have a need for truth,

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Jan Patočka, Edmund Husserl a Eugen Fink, 1934

but they also need untruth, not to see, to look away; they often need it more than truth. This happens for countless reasons: ease, tradition, because truth hurts, is terrible, even devastating. Also because we assume that we see what we don't see, and in consequence do not know that we do not know. And also because we know things about which we do not know that we know. Often it is also because we confuse truth with concepts like success, advantage, method, and routine, so that even the great acts of the human spirit in some respects blind us, dazzle us.

Here, then, people who are called philosophers come forth and set things straight. They do not teach new knowledge, at least they do not have to, though such knowledge may grow out of their views, and indeed often does. They do, however, teach people to see what they do not notice because it seems to them either too banal or unusual. They force us in general to look in a direction other than what nature and habit incline us to.

At the end of the nineteenth century, people, educated European people, became so terribly accustomed to using the words 'science' and 'scientific' that these words became clichés that could superbly demolish an opponent who was being rebuked for having an unscientific approach, while knowing less and less what science and scientific truth really mean. Husserl was the man who discovered this and showed the difference between the most successful ingenious technology and routine and between science that really knows – and knows that it knows – that it can provide reasons. And he showed that the gold of

truth is in the weeds that no one is concerned with because they look so ordinary and obvious that every ‘researcher’ would consider it beneath his dignity to deal with them. He thus introduced into the human thinking of our time a new responsibility – to say and to claim only what I can answer for because I see it with my own eyes. But here the ‘eye’ is not an organ of the body; rather, it is the view that knows about its responsibility – the mind’s eye.

And as in real science, where from a few trivialities that everyone knows and no one denies – for instance, that quantities of three are equal amongst themselves, that a triangle is delimited by three sides, that any given side can always be halved – several consistent mental steps lead to results that are no longer trivial because no one is able to take these steps consistently in the right order, so too a great wealth of ideas soon grew for Husserl out of his banalities. But the main thing that grew was the renewed

will to responsible thought, to radicalism of thinking, towards which no investigation is rigorous enough, no thesis clear enough, not to be able to be, not to have to be, re-examined again and again until either the foundation is discovered beyond which no one can go or a crack is found in what was supposed to be solid concrete.

Husserl’s radicalism has provided impetuses in a great variety of directions. His ideas have elicited nothing but criticism and endless debate. This debate has largely filled the history of ideas of our times. It has also reached our country, and we are trying to find our place in this debate. Nevertheless, we will not take an oath on the words of the master, because no true philosopher would wish that, least of all Husserl, for whom truth meant the responsibility of each individual to say what he sees, nothing less and never anything more.



Edmund Husserl