

Dan Zahavi

*Husserl's Legacy. Phenomenology, Metaphysics  
and Transcendental Philosophy*  
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by Rosario Croce

Dan Zahavi's latest book on Husserl has many merits. Not only does it offer a clear, sharp, and detailed reconstruction of the Husserlian phenomenological project, but it also stands out for its ambitious aim of highlighting the usefulness of a sound reading of historical texts to address theoretical questions. To do this, Zahavi chooses to focus less on the analyses Husserl devoted to various concrete topics than on the general "methodological and metaphilosophical" (p. 2) aspects of his philosophy. These latter correspond to the three topics evoked in the book's subheading, which one might summarize into three questions: What does a *phenomenological* method amount to? Is phenomenology necessarily a *transcendental* philosophy? And what (if any) *metaphysical* implications does it entail?

Despite the massive interpretative work that Husserlian scholarship has been undertaking during the last decades, a great deal of unjustified prejudices and misunderstandings on these issues remains. Thus, for instance, Husserl's approach is often misinterpreted as introspectivist, internalist, representationalist, phenomenalist, solipsistic, Cartesian – to mention only a few. Throughout the book, Zahavi sweeps away many of them one by one, by showing them as baseless when compared with a cautious reading of Husserl's theses. Admittedly, not all the controversies faced in the book derive from such superficial and rough readings. Quite the contrary, most of them have challenged appreciable scholars, and even the phenomenologists who worked close to Husserl himself. This is chiefly the case for the question as to how to understand Husserl's claim of idealism. And, as I perceive it, the several reflections carried on are basically different steps to address and settle this issue and discuss its main implications, in the light of contemporary philosophy.

In this sense, the core of the book is represented by chapter 4, in which Zahavi illustrates the kind of idealism Husserl was committed to. The three forerunning chapters deal with the methodological role of reflection to carry phenomenological investigation (ch. 1) and with Husserl's conceptions of phenomenology before (ch. 2) and after (ch. 3) the so-called transcendental turn.

Then, in light of a sound understanding of Husserl's transcendental idealism, the two final chapters of the book turn to discuss the position of phenomenology towards naturalism (ch. 5) and different versions of realism (ch. 6).

Zahavi starts out by differentiating the phenomenological method from the standard introspectionist method and the first-person approaches. As Zahavi illustrates, Husserl's employment of reflection is at odds with most of the psychological analyses which go under the label of 'phenomenological' in psychology. Indeed, Husserl conceived of reflection neither as a method to yield fine-grained descriptions of lived experiences, nor as an intellectual translation of the latter that fatefully ends up distorting them (as for instance argued by Bergson). Rather, reflection is that methodological tool which enables us to highlight and analyse invariant structures of our experience, and while it cannot replace intuition and lived experiences, there is in principle no reason to think that reflection is not trustworthy as a method of analysis. In fact, reflection is always "constrained by what is pre-reflectively lived through" (p. 22) and it is unlikely that it changes what is reflected upon beyond recognition. Furthermore, Zahavi points out that phenomenological reflection is not concerned more with the subjective experience than with the object of that experience. Therefore, phenomenology turns out to be not only an eidetic of consciousness but also an investigation of "the correlation a priori" (p. 26) between the consciousness and the object. As a matter of fact, Husserl tackled the latter problematic already in his *Logical Investigations*,<sup>1</sup> but without explicitly admitting it. Only step by step does he recognize it and face all its implications, which makes him turn from a 'descriptive psychological' program to a 'transcendental' one.

In chapter 2, Zahavi discusses the way things were before Husserl took the transcendental path, namely in the *LI*. Unlike other interpreters who read *LI* as an essentially metaphysically 'realist' project,<sup>2</sup> Zahavi insists on the metaphysical neutrality of the theory of intentionality presented in that work.<sup>3</sup> The problem of the *existence* or *reality* of the intentional objects is indeed considered basically irrelevant for phenomenological analysis, in the sense that it would be beyond its reach. Zahavi concludes then by raising the question whether the version of phenomenology delivered in *LI* is to be preferred or not to the later transcendental one. Zahavi takes issue with Benoit's overestimation of *LI* because of their non-transcendental character, and on the contrary

<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, *LI*.

<sup>2</sup> Ranging from Göttingen phenomenologists to Levinas and scholars such as J.N. Findlay, or D.W. Smith.

<sup>3</sup> Note that Zahavi means the term 'metaphysics' as a reflection on the status of reality. Different ways of intending metaphysics in Husserl are discussed in different places throughout the book. See pp. 30-2, 65, 205-6

evaluates Husserl's rethinking after *LI* as an authentic philosophical progress, rather than a reversion to a Kantian frame. Indeed, according to Zahavi, one of the main (negative) consequences which follows from metaphysical neutrality in *LI* is that it is impossible then to distinguish "between hallucinations and perceptions" (p. 49). For, on the basis of the account of *LI*, there would be no essential difference between the experience of a true perception and that of a hallucination.

One of the primary reasons which drove Husserl to a transcendental reform of his philosophy was precisely the necessity to overcome such shortcomings and do justice to the difference between mere *givenness* to consciousness and true *existence* in the world. In this sense, transcendental philosophy was meant chiefly as a way of accounting for transcendence, hence of reality. In this regard, Zahavi stresses the importance of the methodological devices deployed by Husserl to accomplish this task, namely *epoché* and transcendental reduction. As persuasively shown by Zahavi in chapter 3, *epoché* and transcendental reduction far from being a redundant precaution, are necessary to phenomenology. Their aim is not to inaugurate an inward turn which shuts the world out of the analysis. On the contrary, transcendental reduction permits us to remain world-directed but in a reflective and critical way, that is by correcting our dogmatic, naïve, or "natural realist inclination" (p. 57) and revealing the very world as a correlate (and not as a part) of consciousness. Thus, it is "only by putting the world into question (which is different from doubting it), that the true contribution of consciousness can be disclosed" (p. 60). What is peculiar of Zahavi's interpretation is his rejection of all those "quietist" and "deflationary non-metaphysical" interpretations (pp. 64-5) of Husserl's transcendental project. Unlike other influential interpretations of Husserl such as that by Carr and Crowell, who interpret phenomenology as concerned only with meanings and not with realities, Zahavi argues that transcendental turn makes phenomenology lose its metaphysical neutrality and commit to an anti-realistic metaphysics (p. 60).

As Zahavi writes, phenomenology "by necessity has metaphysical implications", since it is concerned with the relationship "between phenomena and reality" (p. 74).

In the latter part of chapter 3, Zahavi tackles this issue, by considering in particular the objection of global scepticism. Zahavi claims that Husserlian phenomenology eradicates the global (or radical) sceptical doubt because it rules out the possibility of a gap between the world as it is experienced by us and the world as it is in itself. Thus, however paradoxical it might seem, the possibility of global scepticism does go along with a realist metaphysical account, but not with a transcendental idealistic one. For a realist account cannot exclude that reality is not as we perceive and know it, while on the contrary transcendental

phenomenology takes “the notions ‘truly existing object’ and ‘rationally posited object’” to be “equivalent” (p. 72).

What Zahavi strongly points out is that, although Husserl insists on evidence and justification to distinguish the real from the unreal, it would be wrong to think that Husserl was just interested in *justification* and not in real *existence*; or, to put it more straightforwardly, that he was interested in arguing that only the sense of reality is dependent upon consciousness, leaving unanswered any issue on reality itself. According to Zahavi, indeed, this would mean to fall again into a deflationary interpretation of his transcendental program, which contrasts with Husserl’s more ambitious aims.

This leads Zahavi in chapter 4 to clarify the problem of transcendental idealism and what kind of dependence between reality and consciousness Husserl has in mind. In an effective manner, Zahavi places Husserl’s position against the background of the divide between “internalists” and “externalists”. In doing this, Zahavi can show that transcendental idealism, far from falling under one of the two competing fields, delineates a third way. In § 4.2, Zahavi relates the internalist misreading of Husserl to an influential interpretation of Husserl’s notion of *noema*, which goes under the name of “West coast” or “Fregean interpretation”.<sup>4</sup> According to it, Husserl’s *noema* would be a mediating entity, which, by virtue of its meaning-content, guarantees the reference of the act to the object (analogously to the Fregean scheme to linguistic expressions). Zahavi then counterposes the latter with the other main interpretation of *noema*, usually labelled as the “East coast interpretation”.<sup>5</sup> Then, Zahavi shows the main reasons why the East coast interpretation is to be preferred to the Fregean one. While the latter wrongly ascribes Husserl an ontological dichotomy between *noema* and objects, thereby exposing phenomenology to the accusation of internalism, the East coast interpretation argues that the *noema* is not a distinct entity to the object itself (let alone an internal mental entity), but it is rather the object itself, just considered not naively but reflectively as a correlate of experience. Then, Zahavi looks back at the issue of hallucination, which has been used by Fregean interpreters as an objection against the East coast school and points out that the introduction of a third element to account for hallucination is unnecessary. In fact, “the difference between a perception and hallucination has to be established intra- and inter-experientially”, namely “the hallucinatory character of an experience is consequently revealed in the course of experience” (p. 88).

Based on this clarification about Husserl’s theory of intentionality, Zahavi finally turns to face the issue of idealism. After having rejected some wrong

<sup>4</sup> Including scholars such as Føllesdal, Dreyfus, Miller, Smith and McIntyre.

<sup>5</sup> Including scholars such as Drummond, Sokolowski, Hart, Cobb-Stevens.

interpretations, Zahavi introduces his “correlationist” reading. In Zahavi’s view, it would be “a category mistake” (p. 101) to understand Husserl’s claim that reality is *dependent* upon and *constituted* by consciousness in terms of a metaphysical and causal dependence, or as a relation of supervenience. Indeed, while Husserl had in mind a dependency relation, he did not conceive of it as a metaphysical-causal one but as a transcendental one. Namely, the mind-dependence of real things does not mean that “they only exist when actually experienced”, nor that “they literally exist in the mind” (p. 113), neither as an ontological part of it nor supervening on it. Rather, transcendental idealism only claims that consciousness is a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition for the manifestation of things. In this sense, Husserl tells us something about the status of reality since he maintains that “mind and reality are bound together” (p. 114). Thus, metaphysically speaking, it would make no sense to investigate reality as something which stands on its own, separately from consciousness, not because the two things overlap or can be reduced to one another, but because they are correlated to each other and stand in “a mutually dependent context of being” (Beck 1928, 611 cit. in p. 114). At this point, the reader might be surprised that Zahavi decides not to dwell extensively on the issue of the hyletic contents, which represents the other main interpretative hurdle connected to Husserl’s idealism. Only in § 4.4 does Zahavi touch upon the issue, by recalling Husserl’s characterizations of *hyle* in terms of a primordial fact and transcendental non-ego, but without providing an extensive discussion of it. Instead, Zahavi decides to focus more on the intersubjective dimension of Husserl’s idealism (§ 4.6), in order to contrast those who take Husserl to be a methodological solipsist and show the scope and reach of Husserl’s notion of transcendental, in particular vis-à-vis the Kantian alternative.

Finally, in the last two chapters of the book, Zahavi goes on by looking outside phenomenology and tries to establish what position a (rightly understood) transcendental-phenomenological project should take towards naturalism and different forms of realism.

As for the first, Zahavi’s thesis is that, despite Husserl’s well-known antinaturalism, a fruitful exchange between phenomenology and naturalistic accounts of consciousness is possible. In particular, Zahavi discusses with the *enactivist* perspective in cognitive sciences, inaugurated by the works of Varela, Thompson, Rosch and many other scientists.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the old computationalist and behaviouristic approaches, enactivists have explained mind by taking into account the experiential and phenomenological dimension of mental phenomena, thereby creating better conditions for a discussion with phenomenology. While Zahavi

<sup>6</sup> See Varela et al. 1991, Petit et al. 1999, and Thompson 2007.

is in agreement with the general project of connecting the two disciplines, he disagrees on the way this project must be taken forward. In particular, Zahavi does not believe that naturalizing phenomenology is a necessary step to establish a fruitful engagement with cognitive sciences. For such a naturalization would amount to abandon the “transcendental aspirations” of phenomenology, hence renouncing “much of what is philosophically distinctive about” it (p. 150). Therefore, according to Zahavi, while it is right to conceive of the two projects as “mutually constraining and enlightening” (p. 164), it is important not to lose sight of the difference between an empirical and a transcendental level.

In chapter 6, Zahavi returns to the topic of realism. The first part seems to be motivated by polemical reasons and is concerned with the speculative realists’ critics of phenomenology. Zahavi returns hostility with hostility, by showing the inconsistencies of their arguments (§§ 6.1-6.2). Then, he takes into account other forms of realism and attempts to show that transcendental idealism can accommodate most of our realist intuitions better than the main versions of realism. Finally, Zahavi concludes by arguing that a phenomenological-transcendental idealism by no means contradicts empirical realism, and that far from renouncing “the realism of the natural attitude”, phenomenology attempts to “redeem” it (p. 197).

There is much of Zahavi’s book I have not touched upon – such as the discussion about facticity and historicity, the other meanings of metaphysics in Husserlian philosophy, the distinction between Kant’s and Husserl’s notion of transcendental which Zahavi deals with several times throughout the book. This would have been beyond the reach of this review. In closing, let me just say that Zahavi’s reconstruction of Husserl’s philosophy succeeds in showing not only the complexity and richness of Husserl’s project, but also the philosophical viability and relevance of his transcendental approach – even to find alternative paths to some blind alleys of current debates. Undoubtedly, such a task cannot be said to be concluded with this book, nor can we think to rely exclusively on Husserl’s ideas to accomplish it. More work needs to be done, especially in other directions, such as those of the human and social sciences. There is however little doubt that this book has made this task easier, and it will serve as a guide for future researchers in this field.

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