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Universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*: Husserl's Method for the Treatment of Ethical, Existential, and Metaphysical Questions as *Grenzprobleme* of Phenomenology

Abstract

The founder of the phenomenological movement, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), early emphasized the practical relevance of phenomenology as a philosophical approach. Especially after World War I, he regarded phenomenological philosophy as promising cultural renewal for European and global humanity. Yet the main works that he published in his lifetime left the impression that he was oriented only on the natural and mathematical sciences and their theoretical methods. Now, given the publication of his Fichte lectures, Kaizo articles, *Ideas II*, ethical studies, life-worldly investigations, and especially *Limit Problems of Phenomenology*, it is generally accepted that Husserl had a profound understanding of the relationship between phenomenological reflection and practical life. The topic of this paper is the question concerning Husserl's method for the treatment of ethical, existential, and metaphysical questions as "limit problems of phenomenology". The basic outlines of the transcendental-phenomenological method are widely recognized if not fully understood. To present the phenomena, one performs the phenomenological epoché or transcendental reduction, provides eidetic descriptions, and produces universally valid results. With that, however, the limitations of the transcendental-phenomenological method in the usual sense also become apparent. As Husserl acknowledges, there are problems, namely "limit problems of phenomenology", to which the transcendental-phenomenological method does not appear applicable without further ado, if at all. The question arises concerning which method is suitable for the "limit problems" and how this method is related to the transcendental-phenomenological method—to discern the difference but not to posit an opposition. A leitmotif of the texts of Husserliana XLII is that the method that Husserl applies to the "limit problems of phenomenology" is the method of universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*. Among the problems that are treated with this method one can distinguish between "marginal problems", for example, unconsciousness, including birth, sleep, and death, and "elevated problems", for example, ethical, existential, and metaphysical problems, including God, freedom, and mortality. This paper focuses on the ethical, existential, and metaphysical questions, especially the practical questions concerning the meaningfulness and meaninglessness of human existence. Last but not least, the paper clarifies the evidence that the method of universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* is supposed to yield.

1. An outline of the investigation

This paper focuses on the question concerning the method for the treatment of ethical, existential, and metaphysical questions as "limit problems of phenomenology" in Husserl. The basic outlines of the transcendental-phenomenological method are widely recognized if not fully understood. To clarify the phenomena in a transcendental-idealistic manner, one performs the

phenomenological *epoché*, carries out the phenomenological reduction, whereby one undertakes eidetic analyses of the intentional correlations between constituting consciousness and constituted being, and produces universally valid results in the form of knowledge of the relations between constituting acts and constituted objects. With that, however, the limitations of the transcendental-phenomenological method in the usual sense also become apparent. For there are problems, namely, “limit problems of phenomenology“ (so-called according to Husserliana-volume XLII), to which the transcendental-phenomenological method in the usual sense does not appear applicable without further ado, if at all. Thus the question arises concerning which method is suitable for the “limit problems” and how this method is related to the transcendental-phenomenological method—to discern the difference but not to posit an opposition. An answer is found in the fact that it emerges as a leitmotif of the texts of Husserliana XLII that the method that Husserl applies to the “limit problems of phenomenology” is the method of “universal sense-investigation” (*universale Besinnung*) or “self-sense-investigation” (*universale Selbstbesinnung*). The limit problems that are treated with this method are distinguished into “marginal problems” (*Randprobleme*), for example, birth, sleep, and death, as well as instincts, and “elevated problems” (*Höhenprobleme*), for example, ethical, existential, and metaphysical problems—questions concerning the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of human existence as well as questions concerning God, freedom, and duty. Last but not least, the specific evidence that the method of universal *Besinnung* is supposed to yield also merits close attention.

The general question concerning the meaning of *Besinnung* or the relationship between *Besinnung* and reduction can be divided into several specific questions, especially the following:

1. When and how does the concept *Besinnung* obtain its central methodological meaning in the phenomenology of Husserl? It is remarkable, for example, that the concept plays no significant, nor even any, role in Husserl’s *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie* (1913). It is remarkable not only because this work is a principal work of Husserl, but also because it is generally regarded as his major methodological work. It is even usual to appeal to this text as the main source for the programmatic presentation of the phenomenological method. Yet the expression *Besinnung* and its variants do not occur at all in *Ideas I* (only rarely in *Ideas II* [IV, 179, 208, 382] and again not at all in *Ideas III*). This fact alone seems to speak against the notion that one should regard *Besinnung* as a phenomenological method or as *the* phenomenological method—even for certain kinds of phenomena.

2. The question concerning what role *Besinnung* plays in the application of the phenomenological method in *Ideen I* is closely connected with the question concerning the relationship between *Besinnung* and “reflection” (*Reflexion*), since the latter concept occupies an important place in this text. The concept *Reflexion* occurs both operatively and thematically in many places in *Ideen I* (e.g., III/1, 51–53, 77–79, 162–178, 184–185, 236–237, 246–247).¹ Is perhaps “*Besinnung*” just another expression for the same thing? Is then *Besinnung* nothing other

¹ Husserl’s works are cited by volume and page of his *Gesammelte Werke* or Husserliana. See Literature.

than *Reflexion* and vice versa?² Is there anything special about *Besinnung* in the first place? In *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* too Husserl often engages in “Reflexionen” (e.g., XLII, 45–46, 51–61, 177, 186, 204, 245, 255, 282–283, 331, 377, 379, 410, 416, 472, 485, 503). There are also occasional passages in other works in which Husserl employs the expressions *Reflexionen* und *Besinnungen* interchangeably (e.g., VI, 250–251). How then is that which Husserl describes as “Reflexion” and that which he designates as “Besinnung” related?

3. Above all, however, it is a matter of an answer to the question: Can the transcendental-phenomenological method of *epoché* and reduction be applied—without further ado or even at all—to the “limit problems of phenomenology”? After all, there are *limit problems* because there are *limit phenomena*. And the treatment of such phenomena seems to put into question the “principle of all principles” (III/1, 51), which is, among other things, also a principle of evidence (*Evidenz* or *Gegebenheit*). Is it then in the case of *Besinnung* a matter of a different method (*Methode*) from the phenomenological method, or of a different application (*Anwendung*), or a different approach (*Ansatz*), or a different aspect (*Aspekt*), of the same method? In particular, how are universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* and the phenomenological method of transcendental *epoché* and reduction related and how do they interact?

The German expression *Methode* and the English expression *method* have their origins in the Greek language. They both inherit the Greek preposition *meta*, meaning, among other things, *along* or *with*, and the Greek substantive *hodos*, meaning, also among other things, *way* or *path*. Thus *method* designates that with which one along the way finds the path that is sought to the goal that is sought. This “that with which” does not have to be a list of instructions or rules. It can also be a map or a kind of map. Yet maps, especially road maps, can assume different forms. Sometimes one must draft a new map for a new region, which must first be discovered and explored. A map that does justice to the phenomena under investigation should find a methodological mean between the one extreme of an excess of Cartesian regularism and the other extreme of a defect of Feyerabendian anarchism. In many texts of *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* Husserl refers to his way of describing the “limit phenomena” not merely as “Besinnung” but rather as “universale Besinnung” or “Selbstbesinnung”. The word *universal* indicates that it is a matter of a certain scope or extent. To be clarified, then, is how the universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* at issue relates to the usual phenomenological method of transcendental *epoché* and reduction. For the phenomenological method also raises a claim to universality. In what follows, therefore, what is to be sketched, at least in its basic outlines, is a brief phenomenology of *Besinnung*.

2. Phenomenology, its “limit problems”, and its method

Husserl attempts to develop phenomenological philosophy as a pure, rigorous, and presuppositionless science of all phenomena. This universal science practices the

² See III/1, 162: “[...] die phänomenologische Methode bewegt sich durchaus in Akten der Reflexion.”

phenomenological method of transcendental *epoché* and reduction, performs eidetic analyses of noetic-noematic structures, and produces absolute, adequate, and apodictic evidence, knowledge, and truth—*insofar as* the phenomena yield such results (III/1, 314–337; XVII, 157–183, 283–295; XIX/2, 596–631, 645–656). The transcendental-idealistic leitmotif of this science is that consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) constitutes being (*Sein*) (I, 114–121) and that thus all phenomena are to be clarified in terms of intentional correlations between constituting acts and constituted objects (III/1, 225–294). The science moves from ontology, formal and material, through phenomenology, to metaphysics—not to traditional, naïve metaphysics, but rather to transcendental-phenomenological, genuine metaphysics, that is, to the ultimate science of reality (XXIV, 95–115).

There is, however, not only the *epistemological* but also the *existential* Husserl. His approach to the question concerning the meaning of life, or, more modestly, a meaningful life—a neglected aspect of his work—shows that his phenomenological philosophy includes a phenomenology of existence. Given his critical remarks on “Existenzphilosophie” in his Afterword of 1930 to his *Ideen* of 1913 (V, 138–162), one might suppose that Husserl posited an insuperable opposition between transcendental phenomenology and existential philosophy. Yet texts that he composed between 1908 and 1937 and that are now accessible in *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Husserliana XLII),³ especially those from two comprehensive groups of texts, namely, “Metaphysics: Monadology, Teleology, and Philosophical Theology” and “Reflections on Ethics from the Freiburg Years”, show that *the existential Husserl* sketched out the basic outlines of a phenomenologically founded *philosophy of existence* or a scientifically grounded *phenomenology of existence*.⁴

Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie contains texts from Husserl’s literary estate in four different thematic areas: (1) the phenomenology of unconsciousness and the related problems of birth, sleep, and death (XLII, 1–81); (2) the phenomenology of instincts (XLII, 83–136); (3) metaphysics—monadology, teleology, and philosophical theology (XLII, 137–263); and (4) the ethics of the Freiburg years from 1916 to 1928 and beyond (XLII, 265–527).⁵ To be sure, the diversity of these texts, particularly the fact that they stem from widely separated periods of Husserl’s philosophical creativity, but also the fact that they cover widely disparate topical areas, speaks against grouping them together, even in one comprehensive volume. Nonetheless, these texts are united by the common property that they attempt to treat of problems that overstep the limits of phenomenological description, but, according to Husserl, can only be “scientifically”

³ Edmund Husserl, *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie: Analysen des Unbewussten und der Instinkte, Metaphysik, Späte Ethik—Texte aus dem Nachlass (1908–1937)*, Husserliana XLII, ed. Rochus Sowa and Thomas Vongehr (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014).

⁴ There is an old distinction between *Existenzphilosophie* and *Existenzialismus*. See Bollnow, “Deutsche Existenzphilosophie und französischer Existenzialismus”, *Deutsche Existenzphilosophie, Französischer Existenzialismus, Das Problem einer Überwindung des Existenzialismus*, and *Existenzphilosophie*; Gadamer, “Existenzialismus und Existenzphilosophie”; Hartmann, “Existenzialismus” und “Existenzphilosophie”; Thurnherr and Hügli, *Lexikon Existenzialismus und Existenzphilosophie*.

⁵ The selection and arrangement of the texts as well as their titles and subtitles come from Sowa: XLII, v–xvii, xix–cxv.

(*wissenschaftlich*) solved if their solutions are phenomenologically founded. Purist reservations notwithstanding, the designation “Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie” (*limit problems of phenomenology*) is justified, for, although Husserl does not employ this expression (see, however, XXXIX, 875–876),⁶ he does write about “Grenzphänomene” (*limit phenomena*: e.g., *Materialien* VIII, 89–106, especially 105) and the “Limeserwägung” (*limit consideration*: XLII, 9) of them as well as about “Grenzfälle” or “Limesfälle” (*limit cases*) as problems of phenomenology (e.g., XLII, 8, 10, 22, 30, 108; *Materialien* VIII, 105, 154, 158, 191). The organization of the volume also reflects a distinction among the “limit problems” between the “marginal problems” (*Randprobleme*) of the first and second groups of texts and the “elevated problems” (*Höhenprobleme*) of the third and fourth.⁷ Above all, the texts of the third and fourth group are directed to the encompassing question concerning the position or situation of the human being in the cosmos as well as to the overarching ethical and existential problems of human life, that is, the questions concerning the meaning or meaninglessness of human existence and concerning the individual and collective highest good (e.g., XLII, 297–333; cf. VI, 4; XXIX, 104). Husserl describes these “elevated problems” as “highest and ultimate problems” (I, 165; VII, 204), “metaphysical problems” or “metaphysical questions”,⁸ or, freely following Kant’s postulates of practical reason, “questions concerning God, freedom, and immortality” (VI, 7; XLII, 217),⁹ or, finally and totally, as the question concerning the “meaning of the world” (XLII, 261, 430) or the “meaning of the being of the world” (XLII, 231; XXXIX, 466).¹⁰

For Husserl, accordingly, the existential question concerning the meaning of life and the metaphysical question concerning the meaning of the world are inextricably linked. For this reason alone one must be careful not to posit an artificial opposition between phenomenology and metaphysics in Husserl. The first phenomenologist’s late turn to metaphysics is not to everyone’s taste. But some phenomenologists have usefully and fruitfully appropriated his approach and taken the path “from” transcendental phenomenology “to” “transcendentally-phenomenologically founded metaphysics” (“transzendentalphänomenologisch fundierte Metaphysik”: XLII, 160) “and teleology” (“und Teleologie”: XLII, 581).¹¹ For Husserl’s “late turn” is not a turn *away from* phenomenology and *toward* metaphysics (it is also not “late”, since it begins in the year 1908, more precisely, on September 28 of that year). It is, rather, an integral and organic part of his long-range plan to clarify transcendently-phenomenologically the position or situation of the whole human being in the entire cosmos. Over lengthy stretches the texts on metaphysics in Husserliana XLII even possess the character of “Prolegomena to any

⁶ Cf. XLII, xix.

⁷ Cf. XLII, xix–xxx. Cf. also Husserl to Adolf Grimme, 5 April 1918, *Briefwechsel* (hereafter: BW) III, 82.

⁸ Husserl to Gustav Albrecht, 3 June 1932, BW IX, 83 f.

⁹ See Husserliana-*Materialien* (hereafter: MAT) IX, 6. See also Husserl to Dietrich Mahnke, 2 December 1916, BW III, 406. Cf. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 127–169.

¹⁰ Husserl to Dorion Cairns, 21 March 1930, BW IV, 24; Husserl to Paul Feldkeller, 25 May 1925, BW VI, 98–99. Cf. XLII, xx–xxv, lxi–lxvi. Cf. also MAT IX, 225–226.

¹¹ Cf. Marion, *Réduction et donation: Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie, Étant donné: Essai d’une phénoménologie de la donation*, and *De surcroît: Études sur les phénomènes saturés*. Cf. also Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason, Eucharistic Presence*, and *Christian Faith and Human Understanding*.

future metaphysics that will be able to emerge as phenomenology” (“Prolegomena zu einer jeder künftigen Metaphysik, die als Phänomenologie wird auftreten können”).¹² The allusion to Kant’s *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*, is deliberate. Husserl, like Kant, wants to do justice to the fact that the human being, whether by creation or evolution, whether by design or chance, is such that she must pose questions to which she cannot give answers that could rest on absolute, adequate, and apodictic evidence in the epistemological sense. Husserl’s late ethics or metaethics is also not separable from his late metaphysics. To the contrary, this late metaethics should be regarded as a phenomenology of the ethical “limit problems”, which is not to say that all the ethical reflections of Husserliana XLII deal with “limit problems of phenomenology”.

The question concerning the method for the “limit problems of phenomenology” comes up directly or indirectly in numerous passages of *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*.¹³ In these texts, Husserl develops a transcendental phenomenology of human existence in that he applies the method of universal “Besinnung” or “Selbstbesinnung” (e.g., XLII, 228–235, 425–449) and appeals to a justification by means of an evidence that one can designate as “existential”, “ethical”, “practical”, and “situational” (e.g., XLII, 447–448). The “limit problems of phenomenology” also indicate the limits of the usual phenomenological method (XLII, 118, 160, 412), of the “principle of the presuppositionlessness of epistemological investigations” (XIX/1, 24–29; XLII, 245, 248–249, 254–255), and of the criteria of absolute, adequate, and apodictic evidence (e.g., XLII, 425–501). For Husserl describes the limit problems of the phenomenology of existence not only in existential and ethical but also in metaphysical and religious terms (e.g., XLII, 297–333). According to his descriptions, generally speaking, human beings should make use of their freedom to counteract “*the dark horizon*” of meaninglessness (XLII, 304–309), of their reason to recognize the teleology of the world (XLII, 137–263), and of their agency to bring about harmony between human and divine entelechy (XLII, 265–527). He argues that their vocations obligate human beings to perform habitual acts of rational faith (*Vernunftglaube*: XLII, 169–176), of resolute hope (XLII, 495–501), and of absolute love (XLII, 343–344). He concentrates on the question concerning that which the human being must believe (or “postulate”: XLII, 217) about the world in order that human existence in it can make sense, and on the specific evidence that is connected with doing so (XLII, 236–238). He does this in such a way that one cannot reject his reflective “*Weltauffassung*” (XLII, 204–211) as an uncritical “*Weltanschauung*” (XXV, 41–62).

Thus there is for Husserl no conflict between transcendental phenomenology and existential phenomenology. To the contrary, in his manuscripts on the “limit problems of phenomenology” he prepares the way for an existential phenomenology or a phenomenology of existence in that he engages in universal “Besinnungen” or “Selbstbesinnungen” in order to seek answers to questions that lie beyond epistemological phenomenology and that can be summarized as “the

¹² III/1, 7–8; VII, 187–188, fn. 1; I, 178–183.

¹³ XLII, 81, 118, 154, 170, 179, 182, 186, 233, 248–249, 259, 262, 266, 268, 281, 369–370, 380, 430, 433, 444, 449–450, 460, 480.

questions concerning the meaning or meaninglessness of this entire human existence” (*die Fragen nach Sinn oder Sinnlosigkeit dieses ganzen menschlichen Daseins*: VI, 4; XXIX, 104). Finally, Husserl also has an ethics, even a metaethics, which is deeply anchored in his metaphysics (XLII, 265–527).

3. The ethical-existential origins of *Besinnung* in Husserl

The existential Husserl is *an other Husserl* than the epistemological Husserl. But how did Husserl come to value existential philosophy (XLII, 228–235)? When did the concept *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* come into his existential phenomenology? From where did these concepts find their way into his phenomenology? All who are familiar with Husserl’s philosophy are aware of its origin as “descriptive psychology” and its development into “transcendental phenomenology”.¹⁴ In the process, *Die Idee der Phänomenologie: Fünf Vorlesungen* (1907), with the systematic introduction of the phenomenological method of transcendental *epoché* and reduction, represents an important milestone (Hua. II).¹⁵ Yet why did Husserl perform the turn to the existential questions and thus to the method of *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*?

A hint is provided by the twin fact that, as noted, the expression *Besinnung* does not occur in *Ideas I* of 1913, whereas the concept *Selbstbesinnung* almost assumes the status of a kind of leitmotif in Husserl’s “Nachwort zu meinen ‘Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie” of 1930. In the later text, Husserl vehemently criticizes the notion, which was widespread in the late 1920s and early 1930s, that his phenomenology focused so sharply on “the transcendental questions” (V, 156) that it missed “all questions to be posed by the concrete human being, including all so-called metaphysical questions as well” (V, 141). In doing so, he specifically mentions “the problems of so-called ‘existence”” or “the metaphysical problems” (V, 140), that is, the questions that “philosophy of ‘existence”” (Jaspers and Heidegger), “anthropology” (Scheler), and “Lebensphilosophie” (Dilthey) (V, 138) were perceived to be addressing. Evidently, Husserl was at this time suffering from a strong sense of having being misunderstood (V, 140).

A bit of *Besinnung* on the part of the reader indicates why. Concentrating on the “meaning” of his life and his philosophical “mission” (XXIV, 442–449),¹⁶ but suffering from chronic depression,¹⁷ Husserl lived through “the fate of a philosophical existence in its entire

¹⁴ XVIII, 12–13; XIX/1, 22–24; XX/1, 313; XXII, 203–208; XXV, 36.

¹⁵ Cf., however, the “Seefelder Manuskripte” of 1905–1907 [X, 237–268]). Cf. also XXXIV, 315 (28 November and beginning of December 1931): “[...] ich sage: ‘1905 habe ich [in] Göttingen zuerst die phänomenologische Reduktion ausgeführt’.”

¹⁶ Husserl to Gustav Albrecht, 27 September 1917, BW IX, 54.

¹⁷ Husserl to Heinrich Husserl, 20 September 1906, BW IX, 276; Husserl to Gustav Albrecht, 8 September 1909, BW IX, 45–46; Husserl to Flora Darkow, 28 February 1923, BW IX, 168; Husserl to Ruth Rosenberg, c. 22 May 1932, BW IX, 407; Husserl to Gustav Albrecht, 3 June 1932, BW IX, 82–83. Cf. X, 39–40, and Schuhmann, *Husserl-Chronik*, 191–192, 195–196, 199, 201, 211, 219, 222, 227, 236. His own experience with depression enabled Husserl better to counsel his student, Dietrich Mahnke, who also suffered from the condition. See Husserl to

seriousness” (VI, 17). He had to overcome several crises in the late 1920s and early 1930s, for example, the break with Heidegger¹⁸ and the unjust and inhumane treatment by the National Socialist regime.¹⁹ He also had to struggle with doubts about philosophy as rigorous science or about its skeptical reception in 1934/1935 (VI, 508; XXVII, 238). Thus one is tempted to localize Husserl’s crisis years as lying above all in the 1930s. This is not to suggest, however, that *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* played no role in his thinking during the National Socialist regime. He writes, after all, of “Existenzangst”, “hopelessness”, and “despair” in June of 1933 (XLII, 495–501: “Most extreme situation”). Thus he writes to a scientific colleague in the spring of 1934: “*Wir* können nur sein in der Unendlichkeit, die alles Endliche relativiert, aber im Absoluten alles überwindet—im heroischen, nie endenden Sichbesinnen, sich Aufbauen.”²⁰ A few days later he writes, moreover, to an old friend: “Unser Leben geht hier in der in der Revolutionszeit zum Normalen gewordenen Unruhe weiter. Ich stehe in ständigem Kampf um meine Stille, die Seelenstille, die rein weltabgewandte Besinnlichkeit, ohne die in mir keine Gedanken wachsen.”²¹ Nonetheless, the actual context for the evident emergence of *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* in his works as a method for seeking answers to existential questions is the First World War (1914–1918) and its not only for him oppressive consequences.

In fact, the “Great War” represents a turning point in the style of Husserl’s philosophizing. It is remarkable that in *Ideen I* of 1913 there is no mention of “Besinnung” or “Selbstbesinnung”, and certainly not in the existential sense of the word, whereas “Besinnung” and “Selbstbesinnung” play a major role in many of his writings already in the final years of the war as well as shortly after it. This holds especially for existential *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*. In his “Drei Vorlesungen über Fichtes Menschheitsideal”, for example, which he delivered on three separate occasions between November 1917 and November 1918 (the last hour was on the fateful November 9, 1918),²² Husserl pointed to the urgent necessity of “Besinnung”:

In der Tat, in der Not unserer Zeiten gibt es nur eins, was uns halten, stärken, ja unüberwindlich und in allem Leid “selig” machen kann. Es ist der göttliche Geist der Idee, es ist die Besinnung auf die reinen Ideale, um deren Verwirklichung wir da sind, der Ideale, die in unserem deutschen Volk ihre edelsten und erhabensten Repräsentanten gefunden haben. Ein Volk, das solche Geister hervorgebracht, das, in ihnen und von ihnen geleitet, so sehr nach Reinheit des Herzens gestrebt, so innig Gott gesucht und selbstgeschaut Ideale in so erhabenen Gestaltungen verkörpert hat—muß die Hoffnung

Mahnke, 19 July 1917, BW III, 415; 1 November 1919, BW III, 423; 17 October 1921, BW III, 435; 8 June 1928, BW III, 467, 469. Later Husserl’s own depression recurred. See Edmund and Malvine Husserl to Mahnke, 4/5 May 1933, BW III, 491, 493.

¹⁸ Husserl to Alexander Pfänder, 6 January 1931, BW II, 180–184; Husserl to Dietrich Mahnke, 8 January 1931, III, 473–476; Edmund and Malvine Husserl to Dietrich Mahnke, 4/5 May 1933, BW III, 491–502.

¹⁹ Husserl to Gustav Albrecht, 1 July 1933, BW IX, 91–94. Cf. BW III, 491–520. Cf. also Schuhmann, *Husserl-Chronik*, 428–429, 433, 472.

²⁰ Husserl to Rudolf Pannwitz, 17 May 1934, BW VII, 219. See also 220, 226.

²¹ Husserl to Gustav Albrecht, 19 May 1934, BW IX, 100.

²² XXV, 267, fn. Cf. Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* and *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben*, as well as Hart, “Husserl and Fichte: With Special Regard to Husserl’s Lectures on Fichte’s Ideal of Humanity”.

der Menschheit sein und bleiben. Daß dem aber so sei in lebendiger Wahrheit, das ist unser aller unendliche Aufgabe, unser aller, die wir siegen wollen in diesem Kriege für die fortgehende Offenbarung göttlicher Ideen in unserem herrlichen deutschen Volk, auf daß es zu wahrer Herrlichkeit fortwachse, sich in sich erhöhe und durch sich die ganze Menschheit. (XXV, 292–293)

Shortly after the war, in which he lost his younger son, Wolfgang (in 1916 at the battle of Verdun),²³ Husserl wrote about the war (1920): “Dieser Krieg, der universalste und tiefste Sündenfall der Menschheit in der ganzen übersehbaren Geschichte, hat ja alle geltenden Ideen in ihrer Unklarheit und Unechtheit erwiesen.”²⁴ A little bit later he writes: “Dieses Jahr [1922] war eine Zeit großer Besinnungen.”²⁵ There appears, then, to be a direct connection between the meaning-annihilating power of the war and the existential need to understand the meaning of the “the things themselves”, all things, including human existence and the whole world. Thus *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* seems to be Husserl’s philosophical, even phenomenological, answer to the question posed by the lost war and its subsequent crises.²⁶

Thus it is not for the first time in his “Crisis Texts” between 1934 and 1936 (XXVII, 184–221, 240–244; VI, 314–348; XXIX, 103–139; VI, 1–276)²⁷ that Husserl poses the existential questions and seeks their corresponding phenomenological answers. Already in 1923 he poses, for example, the question: “Kann ich leben in einer ‘sinnlosen’ Welt?” (XLII, 307) His answer is “no”, though he concedes that a meaningful life must be lived against “*the dark horizon*” of meaninglessness (XLII, 304–309). On the other hand, however, the human being also cannot live her life without being able to want it (XLII, 215).²⁸ Yet Husserl also argues that a life can only be lived against “*the dark horizon*” on the basis of a rational faith (*Vernunftglauben*) in a God (XLII, 304–309, 169–176).²⁹ On December 28, 1924, for example, he asks how the world—a world of tension between good and evil, love and hate, and success and failure—is “to be understood otherwise than as under the idea of God”:

Wie anders, als dass durch alles Ich und Ich-Leben, durch alles Bewusstsein, eine absolute Teleologie hindurchwaltet und dass sie sich—ähnlich wie ein personales Wesen in seinen personalen Forderungen—auspricht in den absoluten Forderungen in den Seelen? Ich kann nur selig sein, ich kann es in allem Leiden, Unglück, in aller Irrationalität meiner Umwelt nur sein, wenn ich glaube, dass Gott sei und diese Welt

²³ Schuhmann, *Husserl-Chronik*, 200.

²⁴ Husserl to Winthrop Bell, 11 August 1920, BW III, 12.

²⁵ Husserl to Adolf Grimme, 1 September 1922, BW III, 85.

²⁶ See, e.g., Husserl to Hermann Graf Keyserling, 29 September 1919 (draft), BW VI, 223. See, e.g., also Husserl to Georg Pfeilschifter, 10 January 1925 (copy), BW VIII, 13–16. On the effects of the war on Husserl and his family see de Warren and Vongehr, *Philosophers at the Front: Phenomenology and the First World War*, 15–115.

²⁷ Prager Abhandlung; Prager Brief; Wiener Vortrag; Prager Vorträge; *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*.

²⁸ Cf. Obsieger, “Husserls Frage: ‘Kann ich mein Leben leben, ohne dass ich es wollen kann?’”.

²⁹ Cf. Held, “Gott in Edmund Husserls Phänomenologie”.

Gottes Welt. Und will ich mit ganzer Kraft meiner Seele an dem absoluten Sollen festhalten—und das ist selbst ein absolutes Wollen—, dann muss ich absolut glauben, dass er sei. Der Glaube ist absolute und höchste Forderung. (XLII, 203)

This is just one of many passages in *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* in which Husserl articulates what amounts to his philosophical-theological credo.³⁰ The decisive existential question involved is: “*Was muss geglaubt werden, damit die Welt doch einen Sinn haben kann, damit Menschenleben in ihr vernünftig bleiben kann?*” (XLII, 238)

Husserl’s answer is to be found in the texts of *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*, which exhibit unmistakable existential features. From his treatments of the topics from the third and fourth groups of texts one can see how phenomenology relates to metaphysics and metaethics as well as how phenomenology approaches the problems that overstep the limits of phenomenological description and enter the realms of metaphysics and metaethics. The pivotal point throughout is that transcendental phenomenology, as Husserl intends it as rigorous science, reveals itself not as closed to metaphysics without further ado but rather as open to a “transcendentally-phenomenologically founded metaphysics” (*transzendentalphänomenologisch fundierte Metaphysik*: XLII, 137–153, 160–168, 581). According to Husserl, in fact, the intention toward phenomenology finds genuine and complete fulfillment only in connection with such metaphysics.³¹ In a certain sense, phenomenology is even teleologically ordered to metaphysics. Here metaphysics is naturally not to be confused with ontology, formal or material, and above all not with traditional, dogmatic “transcendent metaphysics”, which speculates about things that cannot in principle be given in experience (XXIV, 95–115). As far as Husserl’s late reflections on ethics are concerned, it suffices to note that the ethics, or, more precisely, the metaethics, that he develops in his Freiburg period is inextricably linked to his metaphysics. His metaethics is, so to speak, “embedded” in his metaphysics (e.g., XLII, 183–203, 297–333).³²

The question concerning the phenomenological method that Husserl applies to the “limit problems”, that is, to the “limit phenomena”, can be formulated as a methodological paradox. *On the one hand*, there are only 3 places in the 37 texts and 47 supplements of *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* at which Husserl mentions the “phenomenological reduction” (XLII, 160, 412) or the “transcendental reduction” (XLII, 118), and only a single spot at which he mentions the “phenomenological *epoché*” (XLII, 129). (By the way, the word *Epoché* also has the meaning of “sich enthalten” in the practical realm of the drives and of the will: XLII, 109–110, 112, 498, 501. The expression *Reduktion* also occurs in a different meaning: XLII, 39, 47–48, 132, 139, 460.) *On the other hand*, there are far more than 100 (c. 125) places in the 527 pages of Husserliana-volume XLII at which Husserl employs the expression *Besinnung* or

³⁰ Cf., e.g., also XLII, 237–238, 254–255, 261, 407.

³¹ Cf. the numerous passages that Sowa has collected: XLII, xix–xxix, lxi–xc.

³² This statement is consistent with the leading literature on Husserl’s phenomenological ethics. Cf., e.g., Melle, “The Development of Husserl’s Ethics”, “From Reason to Love”, and “Husserl’s Personalist Ethics”; Peucker, “From Logic to the Person: An Introduction to Edmund Husserl’s Ethics” and “Die ethischen Grundlagen von Husserls Philosophie”; etc.

Selbstbesinnung and its variants, for example, *sich besinnen*. There is also the fact that in other writings the transcendental reduction makes up the core of the phenomenological method, whereas in the texts of Husserliana XLII *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* is not expressly designated as a phenomenological method. Intent and effect can, of course, be two different things. With that, however, Husserl seems to suggest that it is possible to engage in *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* without performing or mentioning the reduction, above all in connection with those problems or phenomena which tend to transcend the limits of phenomenology. Yet with that the question concerning the method for the treatment of “limit problems of phenomenology” is again posed. Is it in the case of the “limit problems of phenomenology” a matter of a “break-through of the reduction” (XLII, 223)? What is “*Besinnung*” or “*Selbstbesinnung*”, especially *universal* “*Besinnung*” or “*Selbstbesinnung*”—a different method from the phenomenological, or another application, a special approach, or a mere aspect, of the same method?³³

4. The method of *Besinnung*: Its kinds and its applications

Husserl approaches “limit phenomena of phenomenology” via *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*. To understand the concept of *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* in *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*, however, one must expand the hermeneutical horizon. To begin with, Husserl already employs the expression *Besinnung* at one place in *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900/1901)³⁴ to characterize the phenomenological investigation of the *sense* of the “things themselves”.³⁵ Only after *Ideen I* (1913), however, does he develop this approach, for instance, in the Londoner-Vorträge (1922), the *Vorlesungen: Einleitung in die Philosophie* (1922/1923), the Kaizo-Artikel (1922–1924), and the lectures on *Erste Philosophie* (1923/1924). He systematically applies the “method of *Besinnung*”, as “radical *Besinnung*”, for the first time in *Formale und transzendente Logik* (1929). Phenomenological “*Besinnung*” or “*Selbstbesinnung*” is also operative in *Cartesianische Meditationen* (1931). “Historical *Besinnung*” or “historical *Rückbesinnung*”, finally, is the guiding method of Husserl’s historical-philosophical investigations in *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* (1936). Thus *Besinnung* is not *the* formal phenomenological method, but it is *a genuinely* Husserlian method. The fact that Husserl does not write anywhere in Husserliana of “die Methode der *Besinnung*” is not dispositive, because he does write several times of the “Methode der *Selbstbesinnung*” (I, 37, 119, 179) as well as of the “Methode der radikalen *Selbstbesinnung*” (XXXIV, 175).³⁶ *Besinnung* is also the method that Husserl applies in many passages of *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*. Whether he explicitly designates *Besinnung* as a “method”, is not the issue.

One finds in Husserl’s works four different kinds of *Besinnung*, one general and three specific. First, in the most general and comprehensive sense, the expression *Besinnung*

³³ Cf. Moran, “What is the Phenomenological Approach? Revisiting Intentional Explication”.

³⁴ XIX/1, 25.

³⁵ XIX/1, 10; XXV, 21; XLII, 184, 187, 350.

³⁶ Cf. XXXIV, 230–231, 277–278, 386.

designates the philosophical activity of the investigation of phenomena with respect to their *sense*, or the attempt to clarify their *sense* in a transcendental-idealistic-phenomenological way. This is also the most basic meaning of *Besinnung* in Husserl's works. The expression with this meaning appears for the first time systematically in his *Vorlesungen: Einleitung in die Philosophie* of 1922/1923, where it is closely connected with the phenomenological method of transcendental *epoché* and reduction.³⁷ Husserl presented these lectures on the basis of his Londoner-Vorträge of 1922, in which the meaning of *Besinnung* is also general and comprehensive.³⁸ The same holds for its conceptual content in *Erste Philosophie, Zweiter Teil: Theorie der phänomenologischen Reduktion* of 1923/1924.³⁹ It emerges from these texts that one can also engage in a kind of *Besinnung* prior to performing, and thus even without performing, the transcendental *epoché* and reduction. It also emerges from them that the performance of the transcendental *epoché* and reduction is only the first step in the direction of phenomenological *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*. In them both *Besinnung* and reduction are operative, and they both cooperate in the methodic investigation of the sense of things.

In the Kaizo-Artikel on *Erneuerung* ("Renewal") of 1922–1924 there is also a noteworthy development in Husserl's concept of *Besinnung*, for here his employment of the expression *Besinnung* takes a noticeable turn toward the "*principle* questions of practical reason", which demand "radical *Besinnung*" and require not only "scientific" but also "ethical" "*Selbstbesinnungen*".⁴⁰ Husserl's turn toward the practical in the Kaizo-Artikel is even stronger than it was in the "Drei Vorlesungen über Fichtes Menschheitsideal" of 1917–1918 (XXV, 292–293). Here it is worth repeating and emphasizing that the First World War represents a turning point in Husserl's style of philosophizing, for there appears to be a clear connection between the virtually innumerable victims of the war and the urgent existential need to understand the sense of human existence as well as of the whole world. One only needs to use the word search function while perusing Husserliana to establish that the frequency of the expression *Besinnung* increases markedly in the texts that Husserl composes after the war and that the expression also assumes a practical—an ethical-existential—valence that it did not possess before it.

Besinnung in the first specific sense is "radical *Besinnung*" or "original sense-explication". This is the leading meaning of the expression *Besinnung* that is operative in *Formale und transzendente Logik: Versuch einer Kritik der logischen Vernunft* of 1929.⁴¹ It is worth noting that in the Introduction to the work Husserl methodically defines "radical *Besinnung*" as the method that he intends to employ in the investigations of the sense of modern logic and mathematics that comprise large parts of the work (XVII, 9–17, 21; cf. 34, 40, 45). He describes "Besinnung" thus:

³⁷ XXXV, 27, 34–38, 46, 48–52, 58–64, 93–96, 241–242, 247–248, 254–256, 259, 264–266.

³⁸ XXXV, 316–317, 327–328, 336.

³⁹ VIII, 3–7, 29, 34–37, 58–59, 86–88, 120–121, 124–125, 154–155, 164–166, 203–211 (*Erste Philosophie II*). Cf. VII, 7–12, 30–34, 38–39, 62–63, 66–67, 73, 141–142, 157–160, 166–168 (*Erste Philosophie I*).

⁴⁰ XXVII, 9–10, 37–38, 42–43, 46–47, 64–65, 87–88.

⁴¹ XVII, 9–17, 21, 34, 40, 45, 88, 124, 172–173, 218–219, 236, 243, 280–283, 285. Cf. Hartimo 2018.

Besinnung besagt nichts anderes als Versuch der wirklichen Herstellung des Sinnes “selbst”, der in der bloßen Meinung gemeinter, vorausgesetzter ist; oder den Versuch, den “intendierenden Sinn” (wie es in den *Logischen Untersuchungen* hieß), den im unklaren Abzielen “vage vorschwebenden” in den erfüllten Sinn, den klaren überzuführen, ihm also die Evidenz der klaren Möglichkeit zu verschaffen. Eben diese Möglichkeit ist Echtheit des Sinnes, also Ziel des besinnlichen Suchens und Findens. Besinnung, können wir auch sagen, ist, radikal verstanden, *ursprüngliche Sinnesauslegung*, die Sinn im Modus unklarer Meinung in Sinn im Modus der Klarheitsfülle oder Wesensmöglichkeit überführt und zunächst überzuführen strebt. (XVII, 13)

He describes “radical Besinnung“ thus:

Radikale Besinnung ist *eo ipso* zugleich Kritik, die ursprünglicher Klärung dient. Diese Klärung hat hier den Charakter einer neuen Sinngestaltung und nicht den einer bloßen Ausfüllung einer vorweg schon bestimmten und gegliederten Vorzeichnung. Eine derart ganz bestimmte Sinnesvorzeichnung ist ja überall und wesensmäßig nur möglich als eine sekundäre Folge einer schon gewonnenen Klarheit. Ist deren lebendige Evidenz verflossen, so verbleibt ihre habituelle Leistung, mit der Möglichkeit einer zunächst leeren Restitution, die dann in der Leergestalt die bestimmte Sinnesvorzeichnung enthält. Diese führt dann die Gewißheit möglicher klarer Restitution als Wiederholung der Evidenz mit sich. Ist, wie für uns, dieser Fall nicht in Frage, so bedeutet ursprüngliche Besinnung ineins Näherbestimmung der bloß vage unbestimmten Vorzeichnung, Abhebung der aus assoziativen Überschiebungen herstammenden Vorurteile, und Durchstreichung der mit der besinnlichen Erfüllung streitenden; also mit einem Wort Kritik der Echtheit und Unechtheit. (XVII, 14)

Husserl leaves no doubt about the fact that *Besinnung*, understood as *radical Besinnung* or *original sense-explication*, is the method that he is going to apply in *Formale und transzendente Logik*: “Dies zur allgemeinsten Charakteristik der in dieser Schrift versuchten Zielstellung und befolgten Methode.” (XVII, 14) On this characterization, the method of *Besinnung* is an original clarification of the sense of a thing, which involves a process that moves from a vaguely intended sense of it to a clearly fulfilled sense of it in genuine evidence:

Wir sprachen von *echter* Erkenntnis, *echter* Wissenschaft, *echter* Methode. Die logischen Ideen sind durchaus Ideen der “Echtheit”. Das Echte ist das, worauf die Vernunft letztlich hinaus will, selbst in ihrem Verfallsmodus der Unvernunft. Es ist das, was in der Unklarheit und Verworrenheit “verfehlt” wird, während es in der Ziel- und Wegklarheit und den ihr zugehörigen Wesensformen erzielt wird. (XVII, 32)

In Part I Husserl applies the method of radical *Besinnung* to clarify the relationships between formal logic as formal apophantics (logic of judgments) and formal logic as formal ontology (logic of objects); in Part II he does the same for the relationships between objective formal logic and subjective transcendental logic.⁴² In the final chapters of the work the usual phenomenological method of transcendental *epoché* and reduction, which is mentioned by name only once in the entire work (XVII, 281), is subsumed into the method of radical, original *Besinnung*. Then transcendental phenomenology emerges as “the self-explication of transcendental subjectivity“ (XVII, 280), and the investigations of subjective transcendental logic as “*radical Selbstbesinnungen* of transcendental subjectivity” (XVII, 280–283).

What Husserl explains about the relationship between *Besinnung* and reduction in *Formale und transzendente Logik* of 1929 is reiterated and reinforced in *Cartesianische Meditationen* of 1931. There he writes at one point:

Es gibt [...] nur eine radikale Selbstbesinnung, das ist die phänomenologische. Radikale und völlig universale Selbstbesinnung sind aber untrennbar, und zugleich von der echten phänomenologischen Methode der Selbstbesinnung in Form der transzendentalen Reduktion, der intentionalen Selbstausslegung des durch sie erschlossenen transzendentalen ego und der systematischen Deskription in der logischen Gestalt einer intuitiven Eidetik. (I, 179–180)

Other passages in *Cartesianische Meditationen* support this interpretation.⁴³ It is also confirmed by the many texts that Husserl composed on the phenomenological reduction between 1926 and 1935.⁴⁴ “Universal *Besinnung*” or “*Selbstbesinnung*” in the pregnant sense plays out within the framework of the phenomenological method of the transcendental *epoché* und reduction. Thus *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* emerges as Husserl’s preferred expression for the specific kind of thinking that is operative in the phenomenological attitude (*Einstellung*). *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* in this sense is also not to be separated from the phenomenological method of transcendental *epoché* and reduction (V, 139, 147–149, 151, 153, 160–161, especially 153).

Besinnung in the second specific sense is “historical *Besinnung*” or “historical *Rückbesinnung*”. “*Besinnung*” in this sense presents itself as Husserl’s hermeneutical method in *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie* of 1936.⁴⁵ In this work *Besinnung* (singular) is carried out as systematic *Besinnungen* (plural) on the critical condition of the modern sciences as well as on the potential of transcendental phenomenology to alleviate it. For Husserl, the situation has both a scientific and an existential dimension because, he argues, the sciences and

⁴² XVII, 88, 124, 172–173, 218–219, 236, 243, 280–283, 285.

⁴³ I, 43–44, 49–50, 53, 63, 103, 116–118, 174, 179–180, 182–183.

⁴⁴ XXXIV, 98, 141, 143, 162–176, 224, 230–231, 270–271, 277–293, 304, 386–387, 445, 447, 451, 481–495.

⁴⁵ VI, 4, 12, 15–16, 39, 48, 50, 54, 57–60, 68, 72–74, 100, 106, 121, 124, 135–138, 142, 156, 158–159, 169, 176, 178–179, 184–186, 190, 193–195, 200, 207, 215, 224, 250, 254–255, 262–264, 266, 272.

philosophy have lost not only their genuine scientificity but also their “meaningfulness for life” and transcendental phenomenology can contribute to regaining them (VI, 3–5).⁴⁶ He writes:

Unseren Ausgang nehmen wir von einer an der Wende des letzten Jahrhunderts hinsichtlich der Wissenschaften eingetretenen Umwendung der allgemeinen Bewertung. Sie betrifft nicht ihre Wissenschaftlichkeit, sondern das, was sie, was Wissenschaft überhaupt dem menschlichen Dasein bedeutet hatte und bedeuten kann. Die Ausschließlichkeit, in welcher sich in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts die ganze Weltanschauung des modernen Menschen von den positiven Wissenschaften bestimmen und von der ihr verdankten “prosperity” blenden ließ, bedeutete ein gleichgültiges Sichabkehren von den Fragen, die für ein echtes Menschentum die entscheidenden sind. Bloße Tatsachenwissenschaften machen bloße Tatsachenmenschen. Die Umwendung der öffentlichen Bewertung war insbesondere nach dem Kriege unvermeidlich, und sie ist, wie wir wissen, in der jungen Generation nachgerade zu einer feindlichen Stimmung geworden. In unserer Lebensnot—so hören wir—hat diese Wissenschaft uns nichts zu sagen. Gerade die Fragen schließt sie prinzipiell aus, die für den in unseren unseligen Zeiten den schicksalsvollsten Umwälzungen preisgegebenen Menschen die brennenden sind: die Fragen nach Sinn oder Sinnlosigkeit dieses ganzen menschlichen Daseins. Fordern sie nicht in ihrer Allgemeinheit und Notwendigkeit für alle Menschen auch allgemeine Besinnungen und ihre Beantwortung aus vernünftiger Einsicht? (VI, 3–4)

To the question concerning what *Besinnungen* of the required kind can and must mean “for us”, “we philosophers of this present”, Husserl gives this answer:

Unsere erste historische Besinnung hat uns nicht nur die faktische Gegenwartslage und ihre Not als nüchterne Tatsache klargemacht, sie hat uns auch daran erinnert, daß wir als Philosophen nach der Zielstellung, die das Wort “Philosophie” anzeigt, nach Begriffen, Problemen, nach Methoden, *Erben* der Vergangenheit sind. Es ist klar (was könnte hier sonst helfen), daß es eingehender *historischer und kritischer Rückbesinnungen* bedarf, um *vor allen Entscheidungen* für ein radikales Selbstverständnis zu sorgen: durch Rückfrage nach dem, was ursprünglich und je als Philosophie gewollt und durch alle historisch miteinander kommunizierenden Philosophen und Philosophien hindurch fortgewollt war; dies aber unter *kritischer* Erwägung dessen, was in Zielstellung und Methode diejenige *letzte Ursprungsechtheit* erweist, welche, einmal erschaut, den Willen *apodiktisch bezwingt*. (VI, 16)

In *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* Husserl applies the method of *Besinnung* by engaging in *Rückbesinnungen* and *Vorbesinnungen* to render

⁴⁶ See Heffernan, “The Concept of *Krisis* in Husserl’s *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*”.

comprehensible how transcendental phenomenology can help human beings out of the crisis of the modern sciences, the natural sciences and the human sciences, which is also a crisis of philosophy.⁴⁷ In this work Husserl distinguishes, in connection with general observations about method in general,⁴⁸ between the natural scientific or objective-scientific method,⁴⁹ the transcendental-phenomenological method,⁵⁰ and the method of *Besinnung*.⁵¹

Besinnung in the third specific sense is “universale *Besinnung*” or “*Selbstbesinnung*” in the existential sense. This meaning of the expression *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* occurs frequently in the texts on “Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie” from 1908 to 1937.⁵² There is clear and convincing evidence in *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* that Husserl regards the method of all-encompassing *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* as suitable for the attempt to answer not only existential but also ethical questions. Indeed, he practices “universale *Besinnung*” or “*Selbstbesinnung*” in numerous—almost even innumerable—passages in his investigations into the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of human existence (e.g., XLII, 248–249). “Universal *Besinnung*” or “*Selbstbesinnung*” is also the kind of *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* that he applies to “metaphysical questions” concerning “God, freedom, and immortality” (VI, 7; XLII, 217) as well as to the question concerning the meaning of life or concerning a life of meaning (VI, 4; XXIX, 104; XLII, 238, 297–333). The universal or all-encompassing aspect of this kind of *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* is also the key to understanding why, in those cases which involve the problems of phenomenology of existence, Husserl takes a different approach from the usual phenomenological method of transcendental *epoché* and reduction. For the question concerning the entire meaning of individual and collective human existence in its totality is one of the major “Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie”. The phenomenological method in the usual sense may suffice as long as it is a matter of the epistemological clarification of the constitutional relations between the acts and objects of consciousness with respect to knowledge, truth, and evidence. That is no longer the case, however, when it is a matter, for example, of the question concerning the meaning of life or concerning a life of meaning. All-encompassing existential questions require correspondingly all-encompassing existential answers and thus *existential Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*. They demand a different approach, and Husserl develops it. Thus one must not posit a methodological opposition between *Besinnung* and reduction, as if it were a matter of a choice between two mutually exclusive methods only one of which could be applied. Nothing could be further from Husserl’s intent, as he shows when he writes this:

Nur wenn die Totalität des transzendentalen Lebens, in dem sich als Normierung alle Seinskonstitution, alle Konstitution von Werten aller Stufen vollzieht, thematisch wird und die universale Struktur all ihrer Leistungen als solcher in wesensmäßiger Relativität

⁴⁷ VI, 4, 12, 15–16, 39, 48, 50, 54, 57–60, 68, 72–74, 100, 106, 121, 124, 135–138, 142, 156, 158–159, 169, 176, 178–179, 184–186, 190, 193–195, 200, 207, 215, 224, 250, 254–255, 262–264, 266, 272.

⁴⁸ VI, 1–17.

⁴⁹ VI, 42–44, 48, 50, 52, 57, 59, 64, 135, 173, 208, 219, 222, 224, 227, 255, 264, 271.

⁵⁰ VI, 182, 190–191, 207, 213, 239, 251, 263–265, 274–275.

⁵¹ VI, 58–60, 71–74.

⁵² XLII, 213, 223, 229, 255, 449, 472–474, 484, 517–518, 526–527.

(und der schon normgerechten einstimmigen Wahrheiten aus Quellen der Evidenz) verständlich gemacht wird, und zwar in der dann einzigen und notwendigen Methode transzendentaler Forschung, kann der absolute Sinn der Welt—darin beschlossen [der] des menschlichen Daseins—und kann das absolute Universum des Seienden verstanden, im letzten und einzig denkbaren Sinn absolut erkannt werden. (XLII, 249)

To be sure, this passage does not say anything about the transcendental *epoché* or reduction. Nonetheless, the passage, an “existential” one at that, seems to preclude the possibility that the method of *Besinnung* could serve as an *Ersatz* for the method of reduction. Rather, “universale Besinnung” or “Selbstbesinnung” appears to be a specification or *Präzisierung* of that thinking which takes place within the framework of the phenomenological method of transcendental *epoché* and reduction. Otherwise than in *Formale und transzendente Logik* and in *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* there is no place in *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* at which Husserl expressly writes about “Besinnung” as “method”.⁵³ But he does apply it all over the place.

The decisive point in the question concerning the role of *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* in Husserl’s philosophy is that one cannot reduce the phenomenological method to the transcendental *epoché* and reduction. When he approaches the questions concerning the meaning of human *Dasein*, *Existenz*, or *Sein* as “Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie”, Husserl does so by developing a new aspect of the usual application of the phenomenological method. Originally, of course, he developed the method of transcendental *epoché* and reduction for the solution of epistemological problems. To the existential questions, however, Husserl applies the more suitable method of universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*, and this is his preferred method for doing phenomenology of existence. But from this one may not infer that it is a matter of two contrary methods, for these approaches or methods or methodical approaches mutually complement one another. If one fails to recognize that Husserl has this other methodological approach at his disposal, then one can also fail to acknowledge that his phenomenology includes its own highly developed and finely nuanced philosophy of existence. Thus it is also not the case that transcendental phenomenology is unable to provide indispensable answers to existential questions because it lacks the method to address them. Therefore the objection against transcendental phenomenology that is based on the question concerning the totality of the transcendental *epoché* and reduction is thrown into doubt. According to Merleau-Ponty, namely, “the most important lesson that we learn from the reduction” is “the impossibility of a complete reduction”, and the phenomenological reduction is “not a procedure of idealistic philosophy—rather, it belongs to existential philosophy”.⁵⁴ He is right about the relationship between the phenomenological reduction and existential philosophy, but he does not do justice to the universality of *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* in Husserl’s philosophy of existence. The

⁵³ Once again: XLII, 81, 118, 154, 170, 179, 182, 186, 233, 248–249, 259, 262, 266, 268, 281, 369–370, 380, 430, 433, 444, 449–450, 460, 480.

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 14–15.

Besinnung or *Selbstbesinnung* that investigates the meaning of being only insofar as it is constituted by consciousness is “universal” only in a limited sense, that is, it is not *universal* at all. It must also encompass the entire sense of human existence in order to be “universal” in the genuine sense. By the same token, however, one should not without further ado sustain Husserl’s objection that Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (e.g.) is not phenomenology—because he does not perform the transcendental *epoché* and reduction in the work.⁵⁵ “Universal *Selbstbesinnung*” with respect to the consciousness that constitutes being and “universal *Selbstbesinnung*” with respect to the existence that constitutes being are two different things.

If one understands the texts of Husserliana XLII in the complete context of the whole life and work of Husserl one will see that it is high time to understand Husserl’s philosophy not only as transcendental phenomenology but also as existential phenomenology. His is an all-encompassing phenomenology of human life in all its epistemological, ethical, existential, metaphysical, and spiritual dimensions. One is again reminded of Husserl’s *Selbstbesinnung* that his published writings comprise only a small part of his total literary and philosophical legacy: “In der That, der größte u. wie ich sogar glaube wichtigste Theil meiner Lebensarbeit steckt noch in meinen, durch ihren Umfang kaum noch zu bewältigenden Manuscripten.”⁵⁶ Temporal distance can be both an advantage and a disadvantage to understanding,⁵⁷ and understanding Husserl as an *Existenzphilosoph*, or, more precisely, as an *Existenzphänomenologe*, is an idea whose time has finally come. Yet Husserl would not be Husserl if he did not have a proper method for his phenomenology of existence. But he has such a method, and it is “*Besinnung*” in the sense of “universal *Selbstbesinnung*”. As the Husserlian human being of *Logische Untersuchungen* is a “sense-intending” being (XIX/1, 30–110), so the Husserlian human being of *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* is a “meaning-seeking” being. The distinction lies in the fact that it is a matter of the meaning (*Bedeutung*) of expression (*Ausdruck*) in the *Untersuchungen* whereas it is a matter of the meaning (*Sinn*) of life (*Leben*) in the *Grenzprobleme*. Now the “sense-bestowing” or “sense-fulfilling” acts assume existential and ethical functions. And the entire horizon within which phenomenology investigates phenomena has considerably widened and deepened (XXXIV, 228–253 [c. mid-December, 1930]).

5. *Rückbesinnungen* und *Vorbesinnungen*: Thinking back and thinking ahead

What began as a brief phenomenology of *Besinnung* must end as a preparatory prolegomena to a proper phenomenology of *Besinnung*. According to Husserl, “limit problems of phenomenology” are problems that overstep the limits of phenomenological description but can only be solved

⁵⁵ Breuer, “Randbemerkungen Husserls zu Heideggers *Sein und Zeit* und *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*”.

⁵⁶ Husserl to Adolf Grimme, 5 March 1931, BW III, 90. Cf. Husserl to Paul Natorp, 1 February 1922, BW V, 151–152: “[...] Vielleicht arbeite ich, mit aller menschlich möglichen Anspannung der Kräfte, nur für meinen Nachlaß.” Cf. also Husserl to Flora Darkow, 28 February 1923, BW IX, 168: “Die Erndte meines Lebens ist aber noch nicht abgeschlossen, meine größten Arbeiten noch unveröffentlicht. Eine große Sorge!”

⁵⁷ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 296–305.

“scientifically” if their solutions are phenomenologically founded. The focus on the limit problems is an appropriate occasion on which to pose the question concerning the method for their treatment. The present investigation shows that Husserl’s answer is *universal Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*—a certain kind of “sense-investigation” or “self-sense-investigation”. The study also suggests, however, that due to their plurality, diversity, and temporality one cannot generalize about the texts of Husserliana XLII. To the contrary, one must always talk cases. Therefore this deliberately limited investigation cannot, nor does it attempt to, do justice to the individual texts of *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*.

Yet, to summarize the preliminary results of this essay on the phenomenology of *Besinnung* or this short *Besinnung* on *Besinnung*, one can at least set forth the following observations:

1. There are *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* because there are *Grenzphänomene der Phänomenologie*. The point is to develop a fitting method for the approach to limit phenomena and for the treatment of limit problems. This method is universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*.

2. Universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* is a transcendental-phenomenological method that aims for a moderate mean between the excessive extreme of Cartesian regularism and the defective extreme of Feyerabendian anarchism. As the texts of *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* document, universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* is the phenomenological method that Husserl employs in his investigations of existential, metaethical, and metaphysical phenomena.

3. This *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* is, however, not *the* phenomenological method, that is, the phenomenological method of transcendental *epoché* and reduction. Such *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* is thus also no substitute for *epoché* and reduction. Rather, the execution of the transcendental *epoché* and reduction is a presupposition for the performance of the transcendental-phenomenological *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*.

4. The method of *epoché* and reduction is, however, also no substitute for the method of universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung*. The phenomenological method cannot be reduced to the transcendental *epoché* and reduction. It must include universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* as its logically consistent continuation.

5. After the phenomenological *epoché* and transcendental reduction one continues with transcendental-phenomenological *Besinnung*, which in the most encompassing sense becomes universal *Selbstbesinnung*. On the other hand, natural *Besinnung* and *Selbstbesinnung* without further ado can also take place without the *epoché* and the reduction. In that case, however, one must ask whether what one is doing is phenomenology and in what sense it is.

6. *Besinnung* is not reduction and reduction is not *Besinnung*. Yet the phenomenological method of transcendental reduction and the phenomenological method of *Besinnung* are not two contrary or contradictory methods but rather two mutually complementary methods.

7. One can also say: Transcendental reduction and universal *Selbstbesinnung* are two moments (non-independent parts) of the whole *the phenomenological method*, or two applications, approaches, or aspects of this one method.

8. *Besinnung* is not mere reflection,⁵⁸ and not at all empty speculation. The concepts *reflection* and *speculation* are too general and vague to comprehend specifically and sharply the content that the concept *Besinnung* contains. For “reflection” and “speculation” can mean anything and everything. But “*Besinnung*” designates the attempt to bring the confused and unclear sense of something to its distinct and clear sense. “*Besinnung*” is “*sense-investigation*”, and in the pregnant sense it is the “*sense-investigation*” that seeks and if necessary generates the genuine *sense* of “the things themselves” in a radical, original, and universal manner. Something similar also holds for the universal *Selbstbesinnung* on the limit phenomena of phenomenology and their concomitant problems. Here it is a matter not of a sense that one languidly and passively considers, but rather of a sense that one actively and energetically constitutes.

9. Phenomenology does not need to have any fear of coming into contact with or of lapsing into metaphysics or metaethics. Such *Berührungssängste* are misguided and unfounded, and it is a fundamental misunderstanding of Husserl’s *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* to claim that its texts represent not phenomenology but metaphysics—as if there were a binary opposition here. In fact, one limit problem of phenomenology is precisely the question concerning the relationship between phenomenology and metaphysics, and another is the question concerning the relationship between phenomenology and metaethics. Indeed, it is precisely in phenomenological metaphysics and phenomenological metaethics that the transcendental character of phenomenology emerges especially clearly. These connections again indicate the necessity of developing a fitting method for the treatment of the limit problems of phenomenology in these areas. The phenomena do not adapt to the method; the method adapts to the phenomena. The matter analyzed has primacy over the method applied.

10. All phenomena have their own evidences in their own *Gegebenheitsweisen* or “manners of givenness” (III/1, 48, 51, 176, 330, 354–355). Thus the “limit phenomena” also have their own manners of givenness and evidences. *Besinnungen* or *Selbstbesinnungen* in the realm of the “*Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*” are thus also subject to the “*Prinzip aller Prinzipien*”, according to which “alles, was sich uns in der ‘Intuition’ originär [...] darbietet, einfach hinzunehmen sei, als was es sich gibt, aber auch nur in den Schranken, in denen es sich da gibt” (III/1, 51). Universal *Besinnungen* or *Selbstbesinnungen* as well comply with the evidences proper to the limit phenomena, whether they be affective, ethical, practical, or religious (XLII, 233–234, 237, 241, 249, 343–345, 360–379, 383–391, 400–408). Every situation, above all, every “limit situation” (*Grenzsituation*: XLII, 497, 522), has its own evidence (XLII, 447–448). It may be a shock but it should be no surprise to read Husserl writing that “das menschheitliche Leben verläuft im Widerspruch, im ständigen Widerstreit der Evidenzen“ (XLII, 249). The given determines its manner of givenness (III/1, 314–337; XVII, 157–183, 273–295; XXX, 321–

⁵⁸ To be sure, Husserl sometimes uses “*Besinnung*” and “*Reflexion*” interchangeably. Nonetheless, *Reflexion* is not—and certainly not without further ado—*Besinnung*, and *Besinnung* is not—again certainly not without further ado—*Reflexion*. In his translation, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), David Carr translates *Besinnungen* with *reflections* (e.g., 16–18). In his *Guide for Translating Husserl* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), however, Dorion Cairns recommends “sense-investigation” as the translation of *Besinnung* and reserves “reflection” for *Reflexion* (e.g., 20, 94).

328).⁵⁹ Absolute, adequate, and apodictic evidences in the mathematical-natural-scientific sense are not to be expected in ethical, existential, and metaphysical matters. The meaning of life, for example, is, existentially-phenomenologically investigated, not the “experience” (*Erlebnis*) of a “givenness” (*Gegebenheit*), but rather the result (*Ergebnis*) of “an intentional achievement of self-giving” (*eine intentionale Leistung der Selbstgebung*: XVII, 166). The same holds, metaphysically-phenomenologically, for the meaning of the world, and the same again, ethically-phenomenologically, for the meaning of the good and of happiness.⁶⁰ Transcendental-phenomenological *Besinnungen* or *Selbstbesinnungen* on the whole of human life with all its ethical, existential, metaphysical, and religious experiences rest on the evidences that found and ground them (XLII, 425–449, especially 447–448). Evidence is as diverse as experience.

11. There remains, of course, the decisive question of who is speaking for whom and to whom when Husserl in his ethical and existential texts repeatedly writes “I” (*ich*). For the universal *Besinnungen* or *Selbstbesinnungen* on the “limit problems of phenomenology” are not supposed to represent observations that hold only for the individual, particular human being Edmund Husserl. In the texts of *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* Husserl writes in the *eidetic language* of *eidetic analysis* (*Wesensanalyse*). It is not about “me” alone but rather about “us” together. The “I” is inextricably linked to the “we”. The “I” is a “we” and vice versa.

12. There also remains, however, the question concerning whether the performance of the transcendental-phenomenological *epoché* and reduction is not implicitly operative in the investigations of *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*. On the basis of the accounts of the transcendental-phenomenological method in other works of Husserl, namely, one can argue that the *epoché* and reduction are presupposed in at least some texts of Husserliana XLII, that is, that Husserl has made these methodological steps into “habitualities” (*Habitualitäten*) of his philosophical person, and even so much so that he does not need to perform them explicitly, or even to mention them, for them to be operative in his thinking (cf. I, 95–96, 100–101). Thus the enduring and perduring observance of the transcendental-phenomenological “attitude” (*Einstellung*)—as distinguished from the “natural” (III/1, 54–66, 68, 106–107, 118, 132–134, 137–139, 156–158, 161, 204–205)—would be an unspoken presupposition of the sense-investigations in question (cf. III/1, 649: the “transzendente Epoché” as a “universale Habitualität”).⁶¹ This interpretation—certainly in its general formulation—is plausible, though it requires examination and confirmation by individual analyses of individual instances.

Thus this brief phenomenology of *Besinnung* leads to a mean between the extremes: On the one hand, it seems to be a mistake to regard *Besinnung* as a new method, different from and independent of the method of transcendental *epoché* und reduction—perhaps even as a kind of “Ersatz” for it. On the other hand, it also seems to be a misunderstanding to consider *Besinnung*

⁵⁹ Cf. Heffernan, “Evidence and Truth”.

⁶⁰ Cf. Mintken, “Husserls Evidenzbegriff in der intersubjektiven Bewährung moralischer Evidenzen”.

⁶¹ Cf. also XXXIV, 11, 41, 56, 62, 75, 94, 101, 105–106, 145–146, 157, 200, 304, 312–324, 358, 496, esp. 105: “[...] wenn wir von phänomenologischer Einstellung sprechen als derjenigen eben des Phänomenologen, so meinen wir weder einen flüchtigen Akt noch eine flüchtige Habitualität, sondern eine mit dem unendlichen Horizont des Lebens gestiftete Habitualität, und gestiftet durch einen ‘unendlichen Willen’.”

as mere, normal reflection within the framework of the phenomenological method. Therefore in the case of the relationship between *Besinnung* and reduction it is a matter not of a methodological opposition but of a methodological complementarity. For in the context of “limit problems of phenomenology” universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* is to be conceived as an essential aspect of the phenomenological method, and this method is in turn to be apprehended in a much more comprehensive sense than it usually is. The extended application of the method is decisive. The genuine application of a method must be adjusted to accommodate the “things themselves” and the manners of givenness proper to them. The universality that is to be encompassed in the case of the “limit problems” is not only that of cognitive consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) but also that of existential being (*Dasein*). That is also the reason why in many texts of *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* Husserl refers to his manner of describing the phenomena not as mere “*Besinnung*” but rather as “universal *Besinnung*” or “*Selbstbesinnung*”.

In the final analysis, of course, *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* is a hermeneutical motif that has to do with understanding the sense of things and the self that makes sense of them. Understood as a method, universal *Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* provides the key to understanding Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology not only as existential phenomenology but also as hermeneutical phenomenology:

Die Möglichkeit aller dieser Forschungen [von den Korrelationsverhältnissen zwischen Bewusstsein und Sein] hängt an der Auffindung der Methode der Korrelationsforschung, der Methode, von der intentionalen Gegenständlichkeit konkret enthüllend zurückzufragen. Echte Bewußtseinsanalyse ist sozusagen Hermeneutik des Bewußtseinslebens als eines immerzu Seiendes (Identisches) Vermeinenden, Seiendes in sich in wesenszugehörigen Bewußtseinsmannigfaltigkeiten intentional Konstituierenden. (XXVII, 177)

At the same time, however, *universal Besinnung* or *Selbstbesinnung* involves phenomenological hermeneutics not only of consciousness but also of being as well as of existence. Consciousness alone does not constitute being. Rather, the whole of existence does. With its all-encompassing scope, existential phenomenology comprehends both the phenomena that make human life meaningful and the human life that makes these phenomena meaningful, and it understands their relationships as situated on a *universal* horizon different from the *limited* one that is accessed from the perspective of epistemological phenomenology.

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