

The Problem of the Motivation for the Phenomenological Reduction

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From the time when Husserl first began talking about the phenomenological reduction (around 1906) until the end of his life, he never tired of emphasizing its importance for phenomenology. But the great effort he devoted to the reduction in his last decade—documented in the research manuscripts recently published in *Husserliana XXXIV*—suggests that he was never completely satisfied with his understanding and presentation of it. Among the many difficulties posed by the reduction, one of the most fundamental is the problem of the motivation to perform it. At the heart of this problem is a certain paradox that seems to attend the very idea of moving, via the reduction, from the natural to the phenomenological (or transcendental) attitude. In what follows, I will explain this paradox in detail, and then consider several proposals for resolving it. Though I will not be offering a concrete answer to the question of what motivates us to perform the reduction, I do hope to show that a resolution of the paradox does not imply, as it might seem to, that Husserl's Cartesian project of "ultimate grounding" must be abandoned.

I

The need for the phenomenological reduction grew out of Husserl's demand for "scientifically" rigorous, ultimately grounded philosophy, a demand that directs us to reject as ungrounded and hence dogmatic any assumption that cannot be verified by experience. This demand was in place as early as the *Logical Investigations*, which are governed by an epistemological restriction Husserl calls the "principle of freedom from presuppositions" (Hua XIX/1, 24). It was only after the *Investigations*, however, that Husserl came to realize that this demand entails that we must put in question the most basic belief of everyday waking life, viz., the assumption that the world of our experience exists independently of us.¹

The phenomenological epoché calls our attention to this *Weltglaube* or "belief in the world" and asks us to withhold judgment on it, to "put it out of play" or "not go along with it." In not going along with this assumption, we leave the natural attitude and enter into the properly phenomenological or transcendental attitude. Husserl thus calls the belief in the world the "General Thesis" of the natural attitude.²

In his presentations of the reduction, Husserl tended to emphasize that the choice of whether or not to go along with the General Thesis is (as he puts it in the *Ideas*) "a matter of our complete freedom" (Hua III/1, 63). But this way of presenting the reduction overlooks a significant problem: that the General Thesis can only be recognized when one has *already* performed the epoché. The performance of the epoché thus seems subject to an inescapable circularity: to recognize that one has the freedom to go along or not go along with the General Thesis is already to be released from what Eugen Fink called the *Weltbefangenheit* that characterizes the natural attitude.

Let us examine the difficulty more closely. We can begin by drawing a distinction between two levels of reflection. In ordinary, waking life consciousness is absorbed in the world of its concerns; it is "given over" to the things it experiences. Using the language of intentionality, we can say that although consciousness intends objects in the world, for the most part it is lost in what it intends and so is not aware of itself as intentionally directed toward these objects. But occasionally a shard of lucidity breaks through this patina of absorption, and we become, for a moment, aware of ourselves as watching the scene, listening to the rain, etc. Philosophers long ago learned to exploit this peculiar human ability to self-reflect, developing a method we call "introspection" that enabled them to "inspect the contents of the mind."

But such reflection, which Husserl calls “natural reflection” (Hua XIX/1, 389; VIII, 82f., 120; CM, 35–36), falls short of what is required for the phenomenological epoché. For this reflection is as yet completely unconcerned with the ontological status of the objects of its experience. Reflecting on my act of seeing in natural reflection, I do not in any way give up, or even pay heed to, my belief in the existence of what I am seeing; I simply make myself aware of the fact that I am seeing it and continue to believe in its existence as before.³

In the kind of reflection that characterizes the phenomenological epoché, on the other hand, this belief in the existence of the objects of experience comes to the fore. In performing the epoché, I make myself into a “disinterested” or “nonparticipating” observer of my intentionally directed experiences and their objects: I do not merely reflect on them; I also inhibit, or “put out of play,” the belief in their existence. And I do this, moreover, not just for isolated, individual intentional experiences and their objects, but *en masse*—that is, for the entire sphere of my conscious experiences. In one blow, I inhibit my belief in the existence of the entire world: I inhibit, that is, the General Thesis of the natural attitude. Put differently, in the epoché I overcome the fundamental naïveté that characterizes natural experience: the naïve (that is to say, unreflected-upon) belief in the existence of the world.

We are now in a position to understand more clearly what the aforementioned difficulty consists in. If the epoché inhibits our belief in the existence of the world, it seems obvious that it can only do so if we are already aware of this belief. For how can I inhibit a belief I don’t know I have? But this implies that by the time I perform the epoché, the General Thesis must already have loosened its grip on me. This is because in becoming aware of my adherence to the General Thesis, I take a certain distance from it; I no longer simply “go along with it” in the unreflective way one does in ordinary life and natural reflection. As Elisabeth Ströker (following Fink) puts the point, “as soon as I know myself to be enmeshed in the belief in the world, I have in essence already broken out of it.”⁴

In order to perform the epoché, then, I must in a sense already have set aside my belief in the world. Yet this setting aside is precisely

what was supposed to occur through the epoché (or better: it *is* the epoché). It was through the epoché that my belief in the world was supposed to come to reflective awareness, enabling me to see that I have been in thrall to the General Thesis without realizing it.⁵ Put differently, by the time I realize that it is “within my complete freedom” to suspend my naïve belief in the General Thesis, I have already suspended it.

It appears, then, that we have a curious timing problem: in order to perform the epoché I must be aware of my adherence to the General Thesis, but being so aware implies that I have already performed the epoché. The cart must come before the horse, but the horse is what is pulling the cart. The problem, however, is obviously not a mere temporal one. Rather, there seems to be a basic conceptual or “logical” difficulty lying at the very heart of phenomenological method. Of course, the fact that we, as practicing phenomenologists, have performed the phenomenological epoché entails that we can perform it. But we do not yet understand how it is possible to do so. It may be true that it is within my freedom to suspend my naïve belief in the General Thesis, but how can someone who has not yet performed the epoché come to recognize that she has this freedom?⁶

A closely related yet distinct question is this: If someone is in the grip of the natural attitude, what could induce her to put and hold the General Thesis out of play? What could lead someone to abandon the straightforward, unconscious adherence to the General Thesis and adopt the attitude of phenomenological reflection? What, indeed, is the purpose of inhibiting my belief in the General Thesis? Why would I want to do this? These questions concern the motivation for performing the epoché and reduction.

The two questions are indeed closely linked. For the question of motivation asks what could induce me to set aside my enthrallment to the General Thesis and perform the epoché, and any such inducement, if it could be found, would necessarily entail that I became aware of that enthrallment, thereby solving the circularity problem. The most basic question, then, is this: What are the conditions under which someone in the natural attitude could come to desire to leave that attitude by

performing the phenomenological epoché? It is this question that I will have in mind in what follows in referring to the “problem of the motivation for the reduction.”⁷

II

But perhaps this difficulty is not as troublesome as it seems. Perhaps the motivation problem, and with it the circularity problem, can be solved in a fairly straightforward manner simply by appealing to the notion of science—science, that is, understood in the sense of *Wissenschaft*, a term which covers a broader range of areas of inquiry than mere natural science. The idea would be that the demand for scientific rigor, which is clearly present in the natural attitude and which in that attitude provides the motivational impetus that leads to natural science, mathematics, and other scientific disciplines, is capable of causing us to notice that the General Thesis is in force and then of furnishing us with grounds for setting it out of force. There is, on this view, nothing special to worry about here. The transition from the natural to the phenomenological attitude is continuous with, and perhaps even the culmination of, the scientific attitude central to Western culture since the Greeks.

This suggestion is especially appealing because Husserl’s own path to transcendental phenomenology might be thought to have followed this very course. Beginning with the *Logical Investigations*’ demand for a phenomenology “free from presuppositions,” a demand that is reiterated in the famous “principle of all principles” of *Ideas I*,⁸ Husserl’s insistence that all phenomenological results be grounded in intuitive givenness might be thought to have led him from the “mundane” descriptive psychology of his early years to the more radically presuppositionless position of his mature, transcendental phenomenology. Whereas the phenomenology of the *Investigations* was still carried out against the background of a naive and unquestioned naturalistic metaphysics, with the institution of the reduction and the turn to transcendental phenomenology, Husserl was able to overcome this naiveté and discover a more truly original foundation for his philosophy. On this reading of Husserl’s development, the motives for his move to transcendental phenomenology were

already contained in his earlier view, and hence the motivation for performing the epoché and reduction grew out of a position that rested squarely on the shoulders of the natural attitude.

In order to assess the plausibility of this explanation, we need to examine more closely just what the project of scientifically rigorous philosophy is. In his recent book, Sebastian Luft recommends that we approach this issue by thinking of science as an intellectual pursuit the goal of which is to eliminate perspectival relativity.⁹ Science, he suggests, is the search for an absolute standpoint, a “perspectiveless perspective” or “view from nowhere.”¹⁰ Now of course, many philosophers, Nietzsche perhaps most famously among them, have criticized this idea as nonsensical. Whether it is so or not is obviously a large and important question, one I do not wish to take a position on here. But whatever the case may be, it is surely true that the goal of attaining an absolute, nonrelative standpoint is central to the scientific project. Even Nietzsche, in deriding the idea of a perspectiveless perspective, was not questioning that this is how science understands itself; he was indeed relying on this self-understanding of science in his criticism of it.¹¹

If the goal of science, then, is to achieve a perspectiveless perspective, where might this goal come from? One possibility, again suggested by Luft, is this: the encountering of perspectives other than our own, whether it be that of someone from another culture, of someone who leads a kind of life very different from our own, or of someone who simply views the world in a different way, can lead us to see that our own perspective is a limited one, that it is only one perspective among many. And this recognition can lead us to the idea that there is some way of looking at things that is not merely a limited point of view but is a “perspectiveless” standpoint. Having arrived at this idea, we might then identify “knowledge” with that absolute perspective (together with what is uncovered in it), and “science” with the quest for knowledge so defined. The goal of science, then, would be to move from our limited perspective to an absolute perspective, in order to learn how things are, not merely for us, but “in truth.”

How could this idea be used to explain the epoché? Think of the perspectives that science

overcomes as prejudices, and think of science therefore as an enterprise whose main goal is to overcome prejudices. Thus, Einsteinian physics, for example, supercedes Newtonian physics by overcoming the prejudice that the length and mass of a rigid body remain constant across changes in velocity. Prior to Einstein, the key structuring role that this assumption was playing in Newtonian mechanics was simply not seen, and so it was impossible to anticipate the radical revision of kinematics that its abandonment would entail. Einstein realized that this assumption was optional—that it was actually an uncritically accepted prejudice—and by rejecting it he found that a more powerful physics could be devised, one that (as things turned out) is more experientially verifiable than classical mechanics.

Now, the General Thesis might well be thought of as a similar kind of prejudice: it is the dogmatic or uncritical assumption that the world exists. It seems reasonable to think, therefore, that we could come to see the need to suspend this assumption through the general project of attempting to uncover hidden and uncritically accepted prejudices—that is, through the project of science. Whether this idea can be made to work, however, depends on one crucial thing, viz., whether we are able to discover the prejudice of the General Thesis. For as suggested above, we can only inhibit the General Thesis if we are aware of it, and this makes it unclear how it is even possible to become aware of this prejudice, prior to entering into the phenomenological attitude.

Since we are comparing the General Thesis to prejudices that emerge and are overcome in natural science, it makes sense to look for an answer to this question by asking how it is that these natural scientific prejudices are discovered. How was Einstein able to discover that the assumption that objects preserve their length and mass across changes in velocity was an assumption, one that we are free to abandon? In his essay “Einstein’s Theory of Relativity,” Ernst Cassirer argues persuasively that Einstein was led to his revolutionary transformation of theoretical physics through meditation on “a fundamental contradiction between physical experiments”¹²—that is to say, on an empirical problem in physics. Cassirer writes that in the world of physics immediately prior to Einstein’s revolutionary 1905 paper on

the electrodynamics of moving systems, “experience stood at a point at which assured observation seemed to pass directly into its opposite,” and this experimental contradiction became, as he puts it, “the ‘paraclete of thought’—the real awakener of the theory of relativity.”¹³ On Cassirer’s analysis, then, Einstein’s contribution to physics came through his recognition that a conflict between two experimental results could only be resolved by rejecting a common assumption of both experiments. His broader suggestion is that revolutions in natural science take place under the pressure of such experimental impasses, which provide the impetus for revolutionary scientists like Einstein to discover hidden prejudices in existing scientific theories, thereby putting themselves in a position to transcend them.

Cassirer’s is an appealing explanation of natural scientific advance, but it is difficult to see how it could be used to explain what might lead us from the natural attitude to the phenomenological one. The problem is that there seems to be nothing in the natural attitude analogous to the conflict in experimental results that awakened the Theory of Relativity which could cause us to recognize the General Thesis as a prejudice. The most revolutionary scientist still carries out her reflections and speculations in the natural attitude, i.e., on the basis of the General Thesis, and no conceivable scientific finding, whether empirical or theoretical, could induce her to leave that attitude, for no conceivable scientific finding could bring the General Thesis to her attention. As Fink puts the point in the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, “the idea of prejudice-free, ultimately grounded science can never be radicalized to the transcendental questioning of the presuppositions of the worldly Idea of knowing and science as long as one holds precisely to the mundane Idea of science, the mundane Idea of grounding and of freedom from prejudice.”¹⁴ We seem to be forced to conclude that the idea of science can never suffice to bring us out of the natural attitude and into the transcendental one.

But is Fink right that the mundane idea of science is incapable of making us aware of the General Thesis? Are there not numerous examples from the history of philosophy that suggest that one can come to the transcenden-

tal attitude, or something very much like it at least, through a desire to overcome prejudices? Descartes, for example, famously sought to rid himself of all of the unjustified prejudices he had acquired since his youth, and this quest led him to consider the possibility that the world lying beyond his experience was a mere fiction. This was, expressed in Husserl's language, something very much like the discovery of the General Thesis. But was Descartes's motivation not a scientific one? Was his aim not that of achieving absolute knowledge?

In his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl makes it clear that, on his reading, it was precisely Descartes's "demand for a philosophy aiming at the ultimate conceivable freedom from prejudice" (CM, 8) that led to the most radical move of the *Meditations*, viz., that of regarding the existence of the world no longer as an obvious matter of fact but rather, as Husserl calls it, merely an "acceptance-phenomenon" (CM, 19). By "following Descartes," Husserl says, we are thus led to a "great reversal that, if made in the right manner, leads to transcendental subjectivity" (ibid.).

On Husserl's view, then, Descartes's demand for scientific rigor does seem to have been sufficient to have made him aware of the General Thesis of the natural attitude. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that in the *Nachwort* to the *Ideas*, written shortly after the *Cartesian Meditations* were published, Husserl expresses agreement with Fink that motivation to leave the natural attitude is not present in that attitude:

Natural life and its natural way of having the world are limited . . . simply by the fact that, living continuously in its "naturalness," it has no motivation to make the transition into the transcendental attitude, i.e., to carry out transcendental self-reflection by means of the phenomenological reduction. (Hua V, 153)

If this is right, then the motivation that Descartes gives for his Method of Doubt—the desire to reform the sciences—cannot explain what would have caused him to take the radical step of bringing into question the existence of the world. For the reform that Descartes

sought was clearly a reform of mundane science, science in the usual, worldly sense.

The only way to resolve this apparent contradiction, I think, is to say that the philosophical impulse behind Descartes's project is one that is already "unnatural" in the sense that it involves an element that goes beyond the natural attitude. The desire for absolute science, for a science that eliminates all prejudices, including the General Thesis, is one that takes us past the demands of science in the ordinary sense. For the General Thesis is not merely one prejudice among others that the steady progress of science could gradually ferret out and set aside. Rather, it is, as Husserl puts it, the "universal basis" of all science (CM, 19), and indeed of all normal waking life. Thus the Cartesian demand for a complete elimination of all unjustified prejudices, insofar as it does not limit itself to the kinds of prejudices uncovered in normal, natural-scientific activity, already implicitly contains within it the "unnatural" recognition that the natural attitude is anchored by the General Thesis.

But if this is right, it re-raises the whole problem of circularity. For if the demand for absolute science already contains a "transcendental motivation," so to speak, then our question has just been pushed back one remove: we now must ask where the demand for absolute, radically prejudice-free science comes from. The appeal to science, it seems, has not brought us any closer to an answer to our question of where the motivation to carry out the epoché comes from.

Husserl, for his part, tended to answer this question by adverting to the history of Western philosophy, a move that, as I shall explain in a moment, raises circularity problems of its own. First, however, I want to examine an alternative proposal for explaining where the motivation to enter the transcendental attitude via the phenomenological reduction might come from.

III

Some philosophers have tried to explain the motivation for the reduction by means of the idea that certain unusual and extreme life-events—the kind of thing that Jaspers called "limit situations"—can intrude upon us in the natural attitude and cause us to become aware

of the fundamental belief in the world upon which that attitude rests. In the second part of the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, Fink proposes just such an “existential” explanation of the motivation for the reduction. Certain “tragic experiences,” such as the death of a someone close to us, can, he suggests, overcome us in the natural attitude and cause us to be “torn out” of the familiarity of that attitude in such a way that we are put into an attitude of astonishment, or “wonder,” vis-à-vis the world as a whole.

Not surprisingly, Husserl is skeptical about Fink’s proposal, which is clearly inspired by Heidegger’s discussions of anxiety and death in *Being and Time*, and which hence for him smacked too much of the “worldview” philosophy he always opposed.¹⁵ For Husserl, the motivation for the reduction was always indissolubly bound together with the desire for a scientifically rigorous philosophy, and he seems to have been reluctant to look “behind” this motivation for a “deeper” motivation in concrete, nonscientific life. This reluctance was not a mere personal preference on Husserl’s part; rather, he seems to have believed that the attempt to find such a “real life” motivation unavoidably lands us in a logical problem not unrelated to the paradox discussed above. In a manuscript from 1931, Husserl levels an attack at Heidegger and the other so-called *Existenzphilosophen*, arguing that the “anthropological” approach to grounding phenomenology presupposes pregiven knowledge about human beings and is therefore viciously circular. “May we no longer ask,” he complains,

how such an anthropology is to be grounded? How is the ultimate grounding for the being of the human being as human being in its surrounding world—as human being who experiences himself as unified with others, who thinks in this and that way and in so doing constructs anthropology—to be carried out? Or does one want to say, in accordance with the most recent turn in philosophical fashion, that what is at issue is not *science* [*Wissenschaft*] at all, that science is a particular mode of comportment of . . . human beings arising from the con-

crete circumstances of their lives? (Hua XXXIV, 257)

Any attempt to begin phenomenology on the basis of a presupposed conception of human beings, Husserl’s rhetorical questions imply, is subject to the objection that it attempts to obtain phenomenological results, which are supposed to be free from presuppositions, on the basis of ungrounded knowledge claims. For anthropology, like every other positive science, falls under the phenomenological epoché, and so no anthropological “knowledge” can be invoked by the beginning phenomenologist.

This objection is worth taking seriously, but it seems to me that it is not limited to the existential explanation of the motivation for the reduction. For the underlying issue is a quite general one, and it applies equally, *mutatis mutandis*, to the approach to the problem of the motivation for the reduction that Husserl himself seems to have preferred. I am speaking of the attempt, which Husserl develops at length in his *Crisis of the European Sciences* and *Erste Philosophie* lectures, to explain the origin of the reduction by appealing to the historical genesis of phenomenology.

In brief, Husserl’s idea is that the motivation to leave the natural attitude can only be understood as the result of a particular historical development, one begun by Socrates and Plato and culminating in transcendental phenomenology.¹⁶ Doubts about the plausibility of Husserl’s sometimes potted history of philosophy aside, his approach raises a concern that is directly germane to our problem. For he also argues, in *Ideas I*, that in performing the phenomenological reduction we exercise an epoché over all tradition, scientific or otherwise, and he explicitly draws the implication that this entails the exclusion of the history of philosophy: “The philosophical epoché that we here undertake . . . consist in this, that we completely withhold judgment with respect to the doctrinal content of all pre-existing philosophy and carry out all of our demonstrations on the basis of this withholding” (Hua III/1, 39–40).

It would seem, then, that no pre-existing philosophy can furnish us, as beginning phenomenologists, with valid materials with which to begin the phenomenological project

of scientifically rigorous, ultimately grounded philosophy. Like the “Heideggerian” approach championed by Fink, any attempt to explain the motivation for the reduction by appeal to the historical genesis of phenomenology seems unavoidably to fall prey to a vicious circularity. For how can we appeal to the history of philosophy to explain why we begin our philosophy the way we do, if one of the opening moves of our philosophy is to exclude the history of philosophy? The point is well expressed by David Carr. If, as Husserl suggests in the *Crisis*, an investigation of history is essential to an introduction to phenomenology, then, Carr points out, “it is no longer sufficient simply to bracket the views of other philosophers and turn with an unprejudiced gaze to a reflection on consciousness. On the contrary, we must consider the views of others in great detail . . . and in doing so, we seem committed to a special version of [the natural attitude].”¹⁷

Considerations such as these have led many of Husserl’s readers to conclude that reflection on the factors that condition his own philosophy inevitably entails (whether he recognized it or not) the abandonment of the Cartesian program of philosophy as a rigorous science that strives for absolute, prejudice-free knowledge. Whether because certain primitive features of “human facticity” constitute the ultimate conditions for the possibility of coming to recognize the General Thesis as a prejudice, or because it is impossible to come upon the idea of the epoché without knowledge of the history of philosophy, we must acknowledge, say these commentators, that the idea that philosophy should begin *ab initio*, with no prior assumptions, is a deeply misguided notion bequeathed to us by our Enlightenment predecessors. In the final section of this essay I want to argue that this reaction is unwarranted.

IV

It is important to remember that, as pointed out above, the question we are asking here is not whether we can perform the epoché and reduction. That we can do so is entailed by the fact that we do so. What we are interested in is to know how it is—or better, how it was—that we are (or were) motivated to do so. Now, it might seem that we have to answer this question before we can perform the epoché. If I do

not know how I can perform the epoché, if there seem to be insuperable barriers to its performance, if the very idea that I would be motivated to perform it is deeply obscure to me, then how can I be expected to carry it out? But the fact of the matter is that I am—somehow—motivated, and able, to bracket my belief in the existence of the world. Indeed, anyone who performs the thought experiments of Descartes’s First Meditation with sufficient rigor has in essence enacted the epoché. How can we explain this paradox?

Let us return to the original situation, putting ourselves back in the shoes of the beginning philosopher. If we do so, what we notice is that we feel the pull of the demand for absolute, unprejudiced knowledge, the demand to detach ourselves from our biases and preconceptions and take up a radically unprejudiced stance. I may not understand where this demand comes from exactly, but the mere fact that I feel its pull is sufficient for me to come upon the idea of the epoché: noticing that the General Thesis is in play and that it lies at the root of vastly many of my other beliefs, I resolve to put it out of play so as to be able to take a certain distance from it rather than go along with it blindly. All of this I can and do do as a beginning philosopher.

Once I have entered the transcendental attitude, I may now, among other activities, engage in a retrospective examination of the experiences that led me into it. Perhaps, reflecting phenomenologically on the run-up to my performance of the epoché, I discover that, say, the death of my father had led me to question many things and had “thrown me back on my heels” in a such a way that I saw for the first time that most everything I believed was based on the assumption—which I had never before thought about, much less questioned—that the world is a factually existing entity or quasi-entity that is “there” “on hand” for me. Imagine that I am a physicist who has thought deeply about the nature of the universe but only recently, through this experience, has come to the realization that this assumption was silently at the root of all my musings about reality. If I were to discover these things, I would thereby learn much about myself, and, I would be inclined to say, about what it is in general to be the kind of being that I am. (It would be hard for me not to generalize from

my own case.) And I might, should I happen to pick up a copy of Husserl's *Ideas* or *Cartesian Meditations*, feel that I understood exactly the point that was being made there about the epoché and reduction.

Or imagine a more ordinary scenario: For some reason that I don't fully understand, I pursue the study of philosophy in college, and there come upon the strange and unfamiliar arguments of Socrates, Sextus Empiricus, and Descartes. By the time I take my first Husserl seminar, my knowledge of the history of philosophy has prepared me for the idea of the epoché, and that procedure seems to me to embody perfectly the demand for unprejudiced knowledge that I feel growing in myself.

In either of these scenarios, there seems to be no obvious reason why such a retrospective explanation of the motivation for the reduction should be undermined by a vicious circularity. Nor is it obvious why such retrospective explanations should entail the abandonment of either the Cartesian principle of freedom from presuppositions or the project of ultimate grounding. The key point is that in entering the phenomenological attitude I was not required to rely on any assumptions regarding either the natural or the phenomenological attitudes. I was not required to give myself over to any preconception of what it is to be a human being or to any historically transmitted prejudices whatever.

To be sure, in retracing the steps I took on the way to the "entrance gate of phenomenology," and in trying to understand what induced me to enter it, I have made appeal to such things. But since I have done so from within the phenomenological attitude, I have made sure, in carrying out these examinations, to stick scrupulously to the self-evident data of my experience and hence have not violated the principle of freedom from presuppositions. Thus at no point—neither now, when I am carrying out the examinations, nor previously, when I entered into the transcendental attitude—have I abandoned the project of rigorous science, and so my retrospective explanation of what motivated me to take up the transcendental stance in no way vitiates the scientific, ultimately grounded nature of the phenomenological enterprise.

It might seem that I am somehow playing fast and loose with the concept of motivation

here. Am I not saying that when someone is on the threshold of entering the phenomenological attitude, she is motivated by something that isn't consciously motivating her? Does not the idea of a retrospective explanation of the motivation for the reduction amount to the idea that we could retrospectively attribute a motive for an action to ourselves that we didn't know we had at the time? If that is what a retrospective explanation of the motivation for the reduction is, then it seems bizarre. While it of course makes sense to talk about unconscious motives, the kind of motive that seems required to perform the reduction is surely more robust than any such "blind" motive could be. What we need, indeed, is not a mere motive; we need what is sometimes called a motivating reason to perform the epoché. The demand to perform the epoché cannot merely be some obscure urge that I feel; it must appear rationally compelling to me that I should place my belief in the existence of the world in brackets. In short, to speak of the motivation for the reduction as something that I can only attribute to myself in retrospect seems to trade on an equivocation between motives and reasons. What I am really looking for is not a mere motivation to perform the reduction, but a reason to perform it, and a reason is not something that can be understood only retrospectively. If I am in the natural attitude and don't understand why I should leave that attitude for the transcendental one, then I will never leave it.¹⁸

This objection is a deep one, I think, and to meet it, we must first acknowledge the underlying point that gives it its force: a mere blind urge to achieve an unbiased, prejudice-free standpoint will not suffice as a motivation for the reduction, because it is not a reason to perform the reduction. But the demand for a science that is free from presuppositions is not merely a blind urge; it is rational through and through. Indeed, the demand to free oneself from prejudices is in some sense constitutive of rationality itself. What is ultimately at issue, then, is the question of where the demand for rationality itself comes from. What is it in us, Nietzsche asked, that seeks after truth? This is obviously an extremely difficult and profound question, but for present purposes the only thing that matters is whether we must have an answer to it in order to perform the epoché and enter the transcendental attitude. I think it is

clear that we do not. While we might not, as beginning phenomenologists, understand where the demand for rigorous, unprejudiced science comes from, we do recognize that it holds sway over us—that is, that it is rationally compelling. Once we have taken up the transcendental attitude, we can then examine this demand retrospectively and, with any luck, discover something about its source. But this discovery is not necessary in order to begin doing phenomenology—or, for that matter, philosophy.

If this is right, then the way is open for the existential, the historical, or any other approach to explaining the motivation for the reduction, and this is enough for my purposes here. For my aim has not been to say which of the approaches to explaining the motivation for the reduction is superior. What I hope to have shown instead is that however we answer

this question, there is no need to conclude that our answer threatens to undermine the very idea of scientifically rigorous, ultimately grounded philosophy. Husserl, for his part, never abandoned the goal of philosophy as rigorous science. In a manuscript from 1933, for example, he speaks of the epoché as a “universal theoretical habitus which excludes all pregiven knowledge, all presumed science, all philosophy in the traditional sense.” It is a habitus, he says, that is motivated by “the goal of a new grounding of a universal and truly rigorous science of the world” (Hua XXXIV, 263). From beginning to end, this goal stood at the center of Husserl’s thought, and he does not seem to have believed that the problem of the motivation for the reduction—or any other problem for that matter—might require us to abandon it.

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ENDNOTES

1. We must also recognize that the field of conscious experience that we are to investigate, if it is to be investigated in a way that is truly without presuppositions, must not be assumed to exist as a part of the world.
2. I will not be distinguishing between “epoché” and “reduction” here. Though Husserl sometimes draws this distinction, he often uses the terms as synonyms, and in any case for the problem I am concerned with no important philosophical issues hang on the difference.
3. “In the natural reflection of everyday life as well as in that of psychological science (that is, in the psychological experience of our own psychic experiences) we stand on the footing of the world already given as existing; as when, in everyday life, we say, ‘I see a house over there’ or ‘I remember having heard this melody,’ etc.” (CM, 35). Cf. Ströker, “Das Problem der Epoché in der Philosophie Edmund Husserls,” *Analecta Husserliana* 1 (1970): 173–74.
4. *Ibid.*, 176.
5. “My judgment that the world exists first becomes possible . . . in reflection. The universal epoché, therefore, makes the belief in the world accessible for the first time; it brings this belief reflectively into view” (*ibid.*).
6. Here I is an appropriate place to acknowledge a debt to Sebastian Luft, whose helpful analysis of this issue has influenced my presentation here. See his “*Phänomenologie der Phänomenologie*”: *Systematik und Methodologie der Phänomenologie in der Auseinandersetzung zwischen Husserl und Fink* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 79–84.
7. Since the issue here concerns the motivation for the reduction, we might be tempted to appeal to the phenomenological concept of motivation. But such an approach would only seem to exacerbate the problem of circularity. For if the phenomenological reduction is that which first opens up the field of phenomenological inquiry, then is it not manifestly circular to explain what motivates us to enter into the phenomenological attitude using methods that are only available to us once we have entered that attitude?
8. “No conceivable theory can make us err with respect to the principle of all principles: that every originally presentative intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originally (so to speak, in its “bodily” actuality) offered to us in “intuition” is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there” (Hua III/1, 51).
9. Luft, *Phänomenologie der Phänomenologie*, 62–66.
10. This last phrase comes of course from Thomas Nagel’s book of the same name. Nagel is ambivalent about the scientific desire to “get outside oneself” in order to achieve an absolute, nonrelative standpoint, though he does not think we can simply dispense with it: “We rightly think that the pursuit of detachment from our initial standpoint is an indispensable method of advancing our understanding of the world and of ourselves, increasing our freedom in thought and action, and becoming better. But since we are who we are, we can’t get outside ourselves completely. Whatever we do, we remain subparts of the world with limited access to the real nature of the rest of it and of ourselves.” *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6.
11. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 92.
12. Ernst Cassirer, “Einstein’s Theory of Relativity,” in *Substance and Function and Einstein’s Theory of Relativity* (New York: Dover, 1953), 368–69.
13. *Ibid.*, 370.
14. Eugen Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation: The Idea of a Transcendental Theory of Method*, trans. Ronald Bruzina (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 32. Fink designates the problem here “the final problem of the whole theory of method as such” (*ibid.*, 38), but he does not tackle it directly.
15. See Luft’s discussion in *Phänomenologie der Phänomenologie*, 89–97.
16. See especially the first volume of *Erste Philosophie*.
17. Translator’s Introduction to Husserl’s *Crisis of the European Sciences*, xxxii.
18. I owe this objection to Nathaniel Goldberg, whom I hereby thank.

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