THE THINGS THEMSELVES IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW PHENOMENOLOGY: AN INTERVIEW WITH HERMANN SCHMITZ

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[I]n the waves of affective involvement (Betroffensein), in order to assume the role of commander in the cabin.
— Hermann Schmitz, Situationen und Konstellationen.

Iulian Apostolescu: Professor Schmitz, could you be so kind to retrace your philosophical itinerary by identifying some of the major influences on your thought?

Hermann Schmitz: The question of my philosophical influences is a bit of a quandary. At the beginning of my studies, I was quite taken by Husserl's careful phenomenological diligence. Aristotle was always a model for me. At times I was really excited by Heidegger (Being and Time, "The Origin of the Work of Art"), but I was more sympathetic to Ludwig Klages because of the subtleties of his science of appearances as well as his skepticism towards modern dynamism. The fact that I have turned so strongly toward affective involvement (affektives Betroffensein) is partly a reaction to my experiences during Hitler's time. Of the people I knew, Erich Rothacker (by raising my awareness for historical breadth) and Paul Lorenzen (by sharpening of my efforts toward mathematical accuracy in the introduction of philosophical concepts) have influenced me.

IA: What do you regard as your most important contribution to philosophy?

HS: My most important discoveries along this path were: the subjective facts of bodily-affective involvement, the lived body (its way of being extended and its dynamic), bodily communication, feelings as atmospheres and bodily animating forces, the universal doctrine of multiplicity and its connection to not-numerical types of multiplicity-
ity, the primitive present and its unfolding into the world (see *Phänomenologie der Zeit*, Chapter 2). As to which is the most important discovery, I would prefer not to decide.

**IA: How would you describe the development of your own thinking? What, in its pure sense, is the intention that traverses and animates your effort to ground phenomenology in the archi-facticity of the originally lived and spontaneous corporeality (*Leib*)?**

**HS: The guiding thread throughout my philosophical endeavours is the attempt to make real life understandable for the human beings who live it. More precisely, to make accessible, through the destruction of historically formed artificial constructs (*Verkünstelungen*), spontaneous life experiences—that is, all that people distinctly experience, without having it deliberately worked out—of contextual understanding. These constructs originate in the first place in ancient philosophy (with Democritus, Plato, and Aristotle) in the form of the separation between the world and the human being through psychological-reductionistic-introjectional objectification. Building upon these there are the artificial constructs of medieval Christianity (dynamistic and autistic failure) and of the modern sciences of nature (expansion of the dynamistic failure into a dynamistic, constellation-like one) as well as the ironic failure brought about by the misunderstanding of the subjectivity since Fichte and the early romantic period (see *Kurze Einführung in die Neue Phänomenologie*, and *Gibt es die Welt?,* 143–46).

**IA: To what extent is the New Phenomenology committed to go back “to the things themselves,” to consult them in their self-donation and to set aside all prejudices alien to the phenomena?**

**Re: With the slogan “to the things themselves” Husserl makes it too easy for himself. He falls prey to the illusion of believing that when a thing shows itself, it also clearly reveals what it is. In fact, every statement concerning that thing depends on the perspective of the researcher, that is, on the situations in which she is caught (for example the language she speaks) and out of which she elaborates the questioning. Even the most well-intended observer carries with her prejudices, some of which she does not see through. However, she can also test these prejudices through phenomenological revision, that is, through the constant variation of her assumptions until some state of affairs (*Sachverhalt*) emerges wherein she cannot
earnestly dispute that she deals with facts. Through this experience, she gets to know her own prejudices better, which means, more explicitly.

**IA: How does the Husserlian determination of phenomenology prevent the things themselves from being able to freely confront us?** The maxim of phenomenological investigation is not in and of itself bound to the egological dimension of the transcendental subjectivity.

**HS:** The transcendental subjectivity is a fiction just like Thomas Nagel's closely related "view from nowhere," and much like that view, it is replaced by the objectification of subjective meanings (that is, contexts, programs, problems) (see *Gibt es die Welt?*, Chapter 4).

**IA: How does your attempt to return to the things themselves make manifest the things (Atmosphäre, Gefühlraum, Leib, Regungen, Verspürungen) as they manifest themselves? What are the things themselves for you?**

**HS:** The expression "the things themselves" does not seem to me quite appropriate for the last instance before which philosophy must justify itself because it shifts this instance too far out into the objective. Essential, in my view, are the situations that have a diffuse internal significance (out of states of affairs, programs, problems, but also those with manifold content) that, for example, encompass both the subject and the object in bodily communication, as well as the primitive present (*die primitive Gegenwart*).

**IA: Do you accept Husserl's demand for philosophy as a rigorous science (Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft)?**

**HS:** For me philosophy is the human being's act of reflection upon her finding herself (*Sichfinden*) in her environment with regard to the misleading nature of this finding. The human being is not trapped in situations like animals are. This is why she must constantly orient herself on her own; this is why she must philosophize. However, this cannot always be done in a scientific manner, and this is why philosophy is not dependent on being scientific. Nonetheless, philosophy has a strong need for being scientific. My way of philosophizing is scientific in the sense that while I refrain from immersing myself in the spontaneous experience of life, I attempt to approach this experience using precise yet flexible concepts. For this endeavour, I enlist
scientific rigour. To this belongs what I find lacking in Husserl and in almost every other contemporary (namely analytic philosophy of Anglo-Saxon decent): a clean way of coining concept with carefully measured definitions based on universally accessible bases, much as Aristotle did. However, I would not follow Husserl in saying that philosophy should merely be clear without also being deep.

**IA:** What are the tacit *transcendental naiveties* of Husserl’s inquiry into the static and genetic configurations of lived experience and of the world-horizon?

**HS:** Husserl’s biggest naivety consists in his concept of consciousness and his singularism. The consciousness that Husserl researched as a mirror, or projection, of a conscious world (e.g., “flux of consciousness”) does not exist. It is merely a residue of the soul left by its psychological-reductionistic-introjectional objectification. Instead of such a consciousness, the possession of consciousness by its possessor (subject) is sufficient. Singularism is the opinion that everything is readily unique and individual (*einzeln*). In the case of time consciousness, this leads Husserl astray (see *Phänomenologie der Zeit*, §6.4).

**IA:** Can the *New Phenomenology* be legitimately considered as a subtle reframing of Husserl’s phenomenological explorations of the different strata of lived experience in order to produce a discourse about the lived body and the various forms of embodied experience without bringing into question the horizons of transcendental subjectivity?

**HS:** Transcendental subjectivity is a fiction (see above). The horizons of intentionality consist in the pre-intentional object relation of incorporation (*Einleibung*) in half things (*Halbdinge*) and—after the escape of human beings from their confinement within situations (unfolding of the primitive present into the world, see *Phänomenologie der Zeit*, Chapter 2)—in the webs of meaning species, which are organized according to differences and similarities into which something as unique and individual (an instance of a species) appears.

**IA:** In your essay “*Wozu Neue Phänomenologie?*,” you insist that “Subjects exist only trough subjective facts, whereas subjectivity-for-someone does not already presuppose this someone as a subject. Rather, at its root, in my affective involvement, subjectivity-for-me is such that the word ‘me’ is to be under-
stood not so much as a pronoun but rather as an adverb (like ‘here’ and ‘now’) that does not nominate an object but characterizes a milieu—just as we do not with the word ‘here’ refer to an object (‘the here’) but to what is here, in the milieu of maximum proximity.” 1 What exactly does this subjectivity-for-me mean? How are we to understand this desubjectification of one’s affective involvement in the world?

HS: I have abandoned this idea of “desubjectification of one’s affective involvement in the world” in favour of a sharper distinction between absolute identity, unicity (or individuality) and relative identity with something. A possessor of consciousness is already involved in the most originary affective involvement. However, she participates as an individual only after the unfolding of the primitive present; before this she is only involved as absolutely identical. You can find my current views in my books, Kritische Grundlegung der Mathematik, Phänomenologie der Zeit, and Gibt es die Welt? (and partly already in Bewußtsein, 2010).

IA: How can one distinguish between Leib (the medium of all perception, the locus of affection, the “epicenter” of all resonance and initiative) and Körper (the physical body)?

HS: The feeling body distinguishes itself from the visible and touchable body through extension (Ausdehnung) and dynamics (Dynamik). More details can be found in my book Der Leib (see especially 7–27).

IA: What are the fundamental categories of bodily feelings? Can our sensible encounter with the world, understood as qualitative-sentimental prius, be interpreted in a Gestalt manner?

HS: The most important dimension of the lived bodily dynamic is that of narrowness (Enge) and wideness (Weite) as narrowing from out of wideness and the counterthrust of widening against the narrowness. This is one case of Gestalt-psychological relations between background (wideness) and figure (narrowness), except that one should not understand the figure from the beginning as something unique and individual, as the expression “Gestalt” (form) suggests.

IA: At one point in your book *Situationen und Konstellationen*, you assert that “Right, morals, religion, esteem as respect for what is worthy of it, all these are based on the authority of feelings. Every obligation, apart from the purely theoretical obligation of irrefutable evidence, has to do with being gripped by feelings.... If it were not emotionally gripped by authority, right would no longer have any pathos and would degenerate into the plaything of any intention able to impose itself” (242). In this regard, how is one to understand “the authority of feelings”? Would you be inclined to accept a neo-phenomenological redefinition of ethics based on our aesthesiologic sensibility?

HS: Right is based on experiences of anger and shame towards wrong as point of anchorage of the actualization of these feelings. On more than one occasion I have shown in what sense anger and shame possess authority: shame bends, anger activates sanction, not with automatic necessity but rather with one that is exigent, that turns towards the assent of the one who is gripped—that is, one that functions through a norm that has binding validity for the one who is gripped. In my *Das Reich der Normen* (140–49), I treat morals, and discuss not only anger and shame but also the feeling of guilt. It does not seem to me helpful to call ethics “aesthesiologically founded” because of this fundamental sense of being gripped by feelings. I suppose it depends on what we call “aesthesiological.”

IA: What are the ethical and political implications of your meditation on the lived body, on sensible experience and on the aesthetic dimension that unfolds beneath the phenomena of consciousness?

HS: I discuss the ethical and political implications of my founding of the personal point of view in the lived-bodily-affective involvement in *Die Liebe*, chapter 3, *Der Spielraum der Gegenwart*, chapter 4, and *Adolf Hitler in der Geschichte*, chapter 8. Negatively put, it is about overcoming the four failures of Western Spirit (the psychological-reductionistic-introjectional, the dynamical, the autistic, and the ironical). The most appropriate means to achieve this should be the strengthening of the common implanting situations, starting from childhood education. It is also important to become friend with one’s own body, insofar as the latter is never merely a means towards an end or an object of exploitation. In this context it would also be important to cultivate eroticism, which nowadays is either recklessly approved or recklessly discarded without sufficiently considering
the ambivalences and transitions. It would be a question of anchoring the will to live more deeply in the present, without robbing it of the perspective of the form of the future.

IA: Finally, how would you define the future field of focus for the phenomenological enterprise? Has phenomenology really reached the end which so many contemporary voices have announced?

HS: I see the chances of future developments of the new phenomenology primarily in the area of applications. One such successful application to religious experience has just been published in the form of a 684-page book by Sr. M. Johanna Lauterbach, "Gefühle mit der Autorität unbedingten Ernstes." Eine Studie zur religiösen Erfahrung in Auseinandersetzung mit Jürgen Habermas und Hermann Schmitz (2014). A book on architecture will follow. Applications to medicine (psychiatrics), sinology, pedagogy, and music are also productive. Missing still are applications to jurisprudence. Whether my phenomenology will be further developed by others as theoretical philosophy, I leave open for debate. Philosophy in any one of the seven quoted meanings will only die with the death and disappearance of humanity itself.2

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