The greater part of Edmund Husserl’s Ideas II is a regional ontology explicating, in order, the regions of material nature, animal nature, and the spiritual world that in good detail defines them individually, distinguishes them from each other, and explores the manner of their interrelation. This work gives the initial impression of being a research manuscript outlining or opening up three important regions that could be the basis for further, more specific phenomenological descriptions. The final chapter, however, explicitly makes the argument that the spiritual world has ontological priority over the naturalistic world. Argumentation is commonly conceived of as being foreign to phenomenological research, but the final section of this chapter makes it clear that Husserl is also attempting to convince non-phenomenologists of this position, thus arguments are required. The order in which the regions are explored and the consistency and kind of examples employed makes it clear that the non-phenomenologists Husserl has in mind are those belonging to the natural-scientific community in general and psychologists specifically. The point of the argument is to show that to do naturalistic psychology or any other natural science without considering the contribution of the spiritual world is not only naïve, but dangerous. In this essay, I will concentrate on clarifying the arguments that Husserl makes for the priority of the spiritual world over the naturalistic with the aim of making phenomenology convincing to non-phenomenologists, or at least showing how this can be done.

In Ideas II, Husserl presents two general arguments for the priority of the spiritual world over the naturalistic. The first is what could be called the transcendental or constitutive argument. In this case, the point is made that spirit has an absolute existence, while nature is relative in the sense that it is constituted by spirit. The second is an argument posed by Husserl specifically against the psychological theory of psychophysical parallelism. According to this theory, the mental and physical are parallel realms in the sense that for every physical stimulus of the human body, specifically the sense organs, brain, and neural network connecting them, there is a parallel event in consciousness, such as a sensation or idea. The point of Husserl’s argument is to demonstrate that this relationship is not strictly parallel; while there are many important parallels, there are profound aspects of consciousness for which there are no physical correlates. Coming to accept this point leads back to the first argument establishing the constitutive priority of the spiritual world. Thus, if non-phenomenologists could be convinced of this second argument, the first would be implicit and thus rendered more approachable.

Given the history and tradition of the natural sciences, it is difficult to imagine that such scientists would even pause to consider the transcendental argument, much less come to accept it. Long ago the natural sciences had declared their independence from philosophy, turning instead to the materialist ontology and inductive-empirical method of physics. To make the general claim that the spiritual world has ontological priority over the one studied by the natural sciences would seem from their point of view to be a step backwards and preposterous. The spiritual world is the subjective or personalistic world of objects and values encountered in mundane living. It includes practical objects and affairs occupying individuals and society, pleasures and pains, likes and dislikes, motivations, and, in short, all the meanings of everyday existence. These are subjective affairs and, clearly, subjectivity is exactly what the natural sciences are attempting to
control if not eradicate altogether in order to be radically objective.

Another difficulty for the natural scientists certainly would be Husserl’s use of the “world annihilation” thought experiment as evidence to back up the constitutive argument.8 The way this experiment works is to imagine the situation in which the harmonious synthesis of world experience were to become disrupted. In such a situation, while the world as correlate of our mental processes would, in a certain sense, no longer exist, consciousness itself would continue to exist. Obviously, this argument could easily be confused for extreme idealism and even if posed in the most careful constitutive language would seem absolutely ridiculous to non-phenomenologists or at least another reason why philosophy should be avoided.9 Thus, it is difficult to imagine that natural scientists could be convinced that their scientific knowledge would be greatly enhanced by a phenomenological turn to the subject. More than contradicting their program, the transcendental argument is also too general. Coming to accept it must seem like inviting a total revolution of ontology and method, without the benefit of understanding beforehand the profit of such a radical turn. There are other ways to convince, though.

Dorion Cairns believes in establishing a co-relationship of the natural sciences with phenomenology and has given much thought as to how this can be done.10 Specifically concerning the field of psychology, it is his conviction that “the dominant schools of psychology must be opposed in the name of phenomenological psychology.”11 This is not a call for the total elimination of the natural scientific program, but for a phenomenologizing of these sciences. Cairns explains: “We must show how the core of genuine knowledge already acquired by investigators belonging to the criticized schools is conserved and becomes more intelligible in connection with a concrete noetic-noematic description.”12 He also has designed a course of action by which the phenomenologist can convincingly approach the natural scientist. There are two points to this method, the first of which is more important for our purposes: (1) Avoid operating at the level of generalities, but instead engage the natural scientists on specific theories and problems. Once they have been convinced of the details, it will then be possible to work towards generalities. (2) The first point can be reinforced by demonstrating that the principle of extreme objectivism, i.e., genuine scientific empiricism, is a principle without justification.13 Cairns summarizes the proper way of convincing natural scientists of phenomenology: “Quite specific inquiries should be discussed. . . . The phenomenological-psychological analyses must be as specific and concrete as the theories with which they are contrasted. Furthermore, our criticism must include a fair appreciation of the genuinely scientific motives and results of the criticized psychology.”14 Husserl’s argument against psychophysical parallelism corresponds to Cairns’s guidelines.15 It will be helpful to first understand this theory and then consider Husserl’s arguments against it.

According to psychophysical parallelism, the mind and body are correlated to each other in a manner such that events on one side are accompanied in a consistent and lawful way by events on the other without any direct causal interaction occurring between these two realms.16 Thus, happenings in the brain are parallel to happenings in consciousness and the correlation is regular, meaning that the same kind of events on the one side are always accompanied by the same kind of events on the other. For instance, activity in the visual cortex of the brain necessarily correlates to sensations of sight in consciousness, according to this theory.

With the development of psychology as an independent science throughout the course of the nineteenth century, the theory of psychophysical parallelism became a core issue of debate. As we have seen, to be included among the natural sciences, psychology would have to employ the empirical-inductive method and be reducible to the general terms of physics, which would mean subscribing to the ontology of materialism. Gustav Fechner endorsed the theory of psychophysical parallelism in The Elements of Psychophysics in 1860, which would have an enormous influence on the development of experimental and quantitative psychology.17 He truly wanted to maintain a parallelism of mind and body such that both realms are of equal dignity and importance, but for scientific reasons he greatly emphasized the role of physiology. Because
consciousness is recalcitrant to the application of the scientific method, Fechner’s advice is to approach the mental through the physical, which would be possible because they are in a relationship of functional dependence upon one another. Consciousness of itself may not be measured or mathematized, but such is possible regarding the controlled stimulation of the body and observing the correlates of such in terms of conscious sensations.

While Fechner’s approach would set the standard for psychological experimentation, the pure sense of parallelism would not be maintained. It is important to note, though, that psychophysical parallelism was endorsed by the majority of both psychologists and physiologists well into the twentieth century. Scientific materialism was rapidly becoming the ontological paradigm and would influence the replacement of the pure sense of parallelism, first with the dual aspect theory and then with the mind-brain identity theory. These latter theories should be thought of as descendents or subspecies of parallelism. In many cases, even those holding strict materialist positions employed parallelism as a working hypothesis to aid in their theory development and experiments. The first step towards materialism is the claim that mind and body are just two aspects or modes of the same thing with the dual aspect theory. These latter theories should be thought of as descendents or subspecies of parallelism. In many cases, even those holding strict materialist positions employed parallelism as a working hypothesis to aid in their theory development and experiments.

Husserl’s argument against psychophysical parallelism in Ideas II is in many ways consistent with Cairns’s recommendation. Husserl begins his argument generally concerned with discussing a possible parallelism of the natural and human sciences. Both of these are cultural accomplishments constituted in absolute consciousness, which is intersubjective. Being thus constituted, Husserl wonders if the kind of lawful organization or regulation of these two regions, nature and spirit, is two-fold or parallel. If it is two-fold, then each region would have its own unique manner of regulation. If it is parallel, then the regulation must be fundamentally of the same kind for both: “they would just be two sides of something one and the same, and would express something one and the same in the two sides, if all nexuses that present themselves as facts in the human sciences also emerged in natural science, simply within a different apprehension. But,” Husserl assures his readers from the outset, “that is not the case.”

To be fair and, I believe, more convincing, Husserl narrows his approach to the specific discussion of the stimuli-sensation relationship involved in perception, which dominated the psychological literature leading up to this time. In order to approach the natural scientist on par, Husserl permits several assumptions to be maintained without critical examination, namely that there is “a plurality of subjects in mutual intersubjective understanding,” which is the condition for an objective world in general including objective things, bodies, and spirits. In fact, the natural sciences in general and their stockpile of objects and knowledge may be presupposed for the sake of argument. Thus, the scientific account of the relationship of sensations to the body may be assumed as well as the sensory composition of the body as being a system of sense organs related to what Husserl calls “the central organ B,” by which we must assume he means the brain and the neural network connecting it to the sense organs. The natural-scientific explanation of sense perception is that an object in one’s field of perception causes, physically or chemically, the sense organs to be stimulated. This stimulation, then, effects a nervous impulse of an electric nature to be sent to the relevant area of the brain to be processed. Somehow, these nervous impulses are there “translated” into the sensations experienced in consciousness. Within this framework, it could be believed that the sole source of all the contents of consciousness is the stimuli-sensation relationship generally described here and that brain
states regulate this relationship. It is, thus, easy to see how the theoretical push for the naturalization of consciousness could be very convincing. Considering this situation, though, Husserl asks: “The question is then whether not only these sensuous contents but also, in the same or in a similar sense, all apprehensions and higher consciousness functions can be said to be dependent on [the] brain.” Simply put, does all of consciousness necessarily have a physical correlate in the brain so that “to every conscious lived experience in my consciousness, there corresponds a certain state in my brain?” Further, is the regulation of consciousness identical to the kind of causal necessity found in the brain? Husserl answers both of these questions in the negative and claims, “we have all sorts of phenomena, the reduction of which to a causal dependency on brain states would be nonsense.”

Husserl’s argument against psychophysical parallelism is multifaceted; roughly four very interrelated points can be distinguished in which the causal dependency of consciousness on brain states is clearly not the case. These include the annihilation of the world argument, acts of empathy, the essential order of retentions, and the relationship of the mental act to its background. Each of these points is noetic in nature and in general describes the order of motivation as opposed to that of physical causality; “determinate states of the brain of a certain individual pertain only to the sense data in the consciousness of a certain individual but not to consciousness’ noetic aspect, taken in a broad sense.” While the first point has been dealt with adequately above, the others will now be clarified.

There are important acts of consciousness that exceed neural correlation and the regulation of these aspects is neither causal nor contingent. Empathy is an excellent example of such an act. When another person’s consciousness is present to our own there is much in this act of knowing that is not strictly dependent upon psychophysical causality. The other is present to us in part through the stimuli-sensation relationship, but we are conscious of more than is strictly presented via the senses; more is always appresented than is presented and it is the appresented content that is key. Husserl writes: “Here we should also introduce empathy, in virtue of which in the individual consciousness, with his psychophysically determined content of sensations, there results a simple understanding, one that is not predelineated by psychophysical laws, of the psychic life of the other, which life is then given as existing and determines, by way of motivation, the rest of the psychic life of Cm.”

While psychophysical causality is necessarily involved, empathy is not limited to it. The other is not the mere sum total of sensory information, but by acts of empathy another person in the full sense of having consciousness and motivations is perceived. In much the same way a book or any other personal or even natural object is not merely the sum total of its possible sensations (white, heavy, smooth), but objects constituted within the context of an intersubjective world. These things are phenomenal, but do not strictly have their origins in sensory stimulation.

Regarding the order of retentions, Husserl makes the point that there are essential laws of consciousness that are incompatible with a thoroughgoing psychophysical parallelism; “there is an absolutely fixed lawfulness that does not have any parallel in the empirical lawfulness of brain.” Husserl points out that there is an important difference in the kind of necessity that the laws of consciousness have as compared to that of psychophysical causality. Laws concerning the coexistence and succession of lived experiences are essential laws, while those concerning brain states are contingent. Lived experiences cannot occur in any other order or coexist in any other way than they do, they are a priori, but changes in brain states, because they are subject to natural laws, could be otherwise. Husserl writes: “If now, as belonging to the apriori essence of consciousness, there exist certain necessities in the course of its succession—the way, e.g., the modes of retention within the constitution of time are linked (a priori), as succeeding one another necessarily, to various impressions—then these nexuses of the sequence could not be conditioned by brain and by the sequence of its Objective states.” Present sensations may be so conditioned, but not the retentions linked to these. While brain events succeed each other in a forward causal motion, i.e., cause to effect, retentions move backwards sinking into the past. In addition, because retentions and protentions are constituted in the present, nei-
ther is static nor stable. For instance, the content linked to a certain impression may change; vaguenesses may become distinct and unclarities clear or the reverse.

In addition, it must be considered that lived experiences also have a background, an environment of coexistences of other lived experiences in the present and as retentions sinking into the past, which is another aspect defying the kind of regulation implied by psychophysical parallelism. Husserl writes, “every lived experience has its background, its environment in the order of coexistence as well as its environment in the sinking down into the past.”37 The background of an act is composed of those acts that coexist alongside that act. If I engage in a present act of remembering, this act is accompanied by sensings and possibly some kind of problem solving; I am searching my memory for the whereabouts of my wallet, for instance, and at the same time feel the pebble in my shoe and hear the wind rustle the trees. Such are acts of consciousness not causally conditioned within consciousness. To a certain extent, the sensory content is so conditioned, but the acts I choose to engage in and those acts either associated or simultaneous with these acts are clearly not so conditioned. It is not suggested by Husserl, but we could certainly look to the noematic content of these acts and demonstrate that, while there is indeed some conditioning, there are definitely gross exceptions to the rule. Take the famous example of the Rubin’s famous vase/face illustration. At one time I see a vase and at another two faces. While all of the stimuli remain identically the same, the content in the two cases is vastly different and may not coexist.38

Husserl thus claims: “On such grounds, it seems to me, one can radically refute parallelism.”39 Such a refutation, though, is not an argument in favor of a historically opposing theory such as interaction or mind-brain identity. Rather, this is an argument generally for a phenomenological grounding and foundation for the natural sciences and specifically for a phenomenological psychology. He then concludes the main text with the transcendental argument.40 It should also be pointed out that Husserl is in support of experimental psychology even of the psychophysical sort and thinks that there are important tasks to be performed by such: “The human being as an inductive-real psychophysical unity is therefore a legitimate theme, but it must not be substituted for the psychic as the goal of an exclusively psychophysical psychology.”41 The task left open here is that it would be the job of such psychology to discover the extent to which consciousness is conditioned by the brain. Certainly this is a genuine appreciation for the empirical discipline as Cairns recommends.

There are two ways in which this matter can be advanced and made relevant for contemporary discussions within the disciplines of phenomenology and psychology. One is through the further engagement of the natural sciences with the style of approach recommended by Cairns, that is, to engage them with specific problems in order to thereby convince them of the general position of phenomenology. This line of approach is well exemplified by the work of Aron Gurwitsch.42 Interestingly, much of his life’s work was devoted to demonstrating that Gestalt theoretic principles may be imported into Husserlian phenomenology and a key aspect of this endeavor involves the dismissal of the constancy-hypothesis, a psychological theory that is entailed or implied by psychophysical parallelism. Another way in which this discussion could be fruitful for contemporary discussion is by employing and adapting this argument for the ontological priority of the spirit world over that of nature to bolster against the strong contemporary movement within cognitive science and philosophy of mind to assimilate phenomenology by naturalizing it.

ENDNOTES

2. The title of Chapter Three is: “The Ontological Priority of the Spiritual World over the Naturalis-

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4. Regarding danger, this theme of Ideas II is an incipient version of the one presented in The Crisis of European Sciences. Also see Ulrich Melle, “Nature and Spirit” in Lester Embree and Thomas Nenon, eds. Issues in Husserl’s Ideas II (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996), 15–35. Melle shows how the naïve “spirit” of scientific-technological-industrial expansion has put the human race itself and nature in a very precarious position concerning survival.

5. The idea of parallelism is employed in order to avoid implying that there is direct causal interaction between the two spheres. See footnote 16 for more on the topics of parallelism and interaction.

6. Most notably, there was Leonhard Euler’s 1748 memoir Réflexions sur l’espace et le temps declaring not only the independence of physics from philosophy, but the Baconian idea that philosophy should be a sub-discipline of physics, concerning itself only with scientific concepts. See Aron Gurwitsch, “Husserlian Perspectives on Galilean Physics,” in Lester Embree, ed., Phenomenology and the Theory of Science. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 36–37. In the early history of psychology, the devotion to materialism and the hierarchy of physics can be seen in the 1842 manifesto written by E. Dubois-Reymond with Ernst Brücke, which was signed together with Karl Ludwig and Hermann von Helmholtz, all students of Johannes Müller. It is rumored that these four signed this manifesto in their own blood. Dubois-Reymond’s wrote the following in his journal: “Brücke and I pledged a solemn oath to put into effect this truth: no forces other than the common physical-chemical ones are active within the organism. In those cases which cannot at the time be explained by these forces one has either to find the specific way or form of their action by means of the physical-mathematical methods or to assume new forces equal in dignity to the chemical-physical forces inherent in matter, reducible to the forces of attraction and repulsion.” See Michael Wertheimer, A Brief History of Psychology (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), 44.

7. The personalistic world and attitude are treated by Husserl in §§50–53. This is not the only place, but much relevant content of this kind is concentrated here. See also Ideas I, §27. Such is an incipient version of the life-world that is fully developed in the Crisis of European Sciences.

8. The most explicit and famous such thought experiment is §49 of Ideas I, entitled “Absolute Consciousness as the Residuum after the Annihilation of the World.” Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology, trans. F. Kersten (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1976). There is a similar experiment presented in Ideas II (303, 311). A variation is present in a footnote (308n1), which interestingly substitutes the Body for the world to the same ends. Roughly along the same lines, is Husserl’s earlier statement: “One could here have recourse as well to the fact that physical nature and its causality dissolve into motivations of consciousness” (273n1).

9. There are even plenty of phenomenologists for whom this is not convincing. This thought experiment, especially as presented in §49 of Ideas I, is often pointed to by realist phenomenologists as the very reason not to accept Husserl’s transcendental turn and method within phenomenology itself.

10. See Dorion Cairns’s posthumously published “Phenomenology and Present-day Psychology” in Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences 1 (2002): 69–77. According to the Editor’s Foreword, this text was written just prior to the outbreak of Word War II.
12. Ibid. My emphasis.
13. Ibid., 72–73.
15. It is no way being implied that Cairns influenced Husserl in this regard. Obviously Cairns was a student of Husserl’s.
16. Robert MacDougall defines psychophysical parallelism well: “Physical and psychical processes are equally real; but there is no causal relation between psychical and physical processes; the two series of events, the psychical processes of any mind and the physical processes of the brain with which they are associated, merely accompany one another in time; their relation is one of simple concomitance only. Within each series the law of causation holds good, the successive steps being related to the preceding and succeeding steps as effects and causes; but no causal links stretch from one series to the other.” Body and Mind, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen and Co, 1915), 131.
17. Preceding Fechner’s widely accepted work, there were already several publications leading towards establishing the materialist paradigm for psychological work in addition to those mentioned in footnote 6 above. These include Carl Vogt, Physiologische Briefe für Gebildete aller Stände (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1847); Ludwig Büchner, Kraft und Stoff (Frankfurt am Main: Meidinger, 1855); and the work of Jacob Moleschott.
18. Concerning this situation and methodological decision, Fechner writes: “There is a reason, however, why psychophysics prefers to make the approach from the side of the dependence of the mind on the body rather than the contrary, for it is only the physical that is immediately open to measurement, whereas the measurement of the psychical can be obtained only as dependent on the physical.” The Elements of Psychophysics, trans. Helmut E. Adler, ed. by David H. and Edwin G. Boring (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 8.
19. Experiments concerning just noticeable differences or sensational thresholds in conjunction with measured stimulation would lead to Fechner’s formulation of Weber’s law or the Weber-Fechner law as it is sometimes called, which recognizes a lawful relationship between stimulation and sensation. It should be noted, though, that Fechner was a devoted anti-materialist advocating a kind of panpsychism; all physical things, whether they have neural networks or not have a psychical correlate.
22. Some strong examples of the overt materialism of the mind-brain identity theory include Moritz Schlick’s General Theory of Knowledge (1925) and Rudolf Carnap’s The Logical Structure of the World (1928).
23. This argument occurs in §63, the second to final section of the text. It should also be noted that Husserl’s lengthy and very detailed argument against psychologism in the Prolegomena to the Logical Investigations also fits well into the model that Cairns recommends and, as we now know, was actually quite convincing to non-phenomenologists.
24. Ideas II, §63, 302–03. My emphasis. Clearly Husserl is here discussing the dual aspect theory.
25. Ibid., 303–04.
27. Ibid., 304.
28. Ibid., 305.
29. Ibid., 308.
30. Ibid.
31. This argument is specifically mentioned within the context of refuting psychophysical parallelism in §63 (303 and 308n1).
32. See also Supplement XII, Part II, §1, 352–54. Husserl here discusses the manner in which empathy exceeds psychophysical conditionality, but must still pass through the psychophysical conduit. He summarizes: “The ‘psychic life’ expressed in the other’s Body, another subject with his lived experiences, his surrounding world, etc. This is not to be understood as meaning that we have two separate things beside one another: the Body of sense intuition and in addition the repro-
sentation of something subjective; rather, what we have is an intuition of a *human being*” (352). The emphasis is Husserl’s. See also §5 of the same supplement.

33. Ibid., 307.
34. This brief point is made on page 307.
35. Ibid.
36. See Edmund Husserl’s “Natural Scientific Psychology, Human Sciences and Metaphysics.” Concerning this relationship he writes: “The motivation-relation is temporally facing backwards, the causal relation forwards” (9).
38. See note 43 regarding more material on this topic.
40. The last section of the text, §64, is entitled “Relativity of nature, absoluteness of spirit.”
41. Supplement XII, Part II, §7, 364.