Prompt 2: Husserl on Why Phenomenology is Not Psychology

In *Ideas I*, Husserl insists that phenomenology is *not* psychology because it is concerned with essences instead of facts and because it is grounded in a phenomenological attitude — consisting of the phenomenological epoché and the eidetic reduction — instead of the natural attitude.

At the onset of *Ideas I*, Husserl draws two main definitional distinctions between phenomenology and psychology. Firstly, while psychology is "a science of facts," phenomenology is "a science of essences" (4). Secondly, while psychology treats the realities as its phenomena, phenomenology is most concerned with the irreal, or with "the transcendentally reduced phenomena" (5).

Here, Husserl's characterization of psychology starts with experience and remains in experience. By a science of facts, Husserl means that psychology is a science of experience, which is grounded in what he calls "a natural attitude" (49). This natural attitude has several facets. Firstly, it is oriented towards the natural world that exists in space and time, with corporeal entities such as humans and animals. Such 'objects' are encountered in experience as *simply* and *always there* (49). How so? In my field of perception, the objects that I come into immediate contact with are there for me as determinate. But, beyond these encountered and determinate objects, there is a surrounding of "a horizon of indeterminate actuality," of "dim consciousness" that is infinite but necessarily there (50). A second facet of the natural attitude is what Husserl invokes as the Cartesian expression, *cogito*, to encompass the mental acts of first-person consciousness — I am conscious of the natural world as immediately "on hand," whether or not I am engaged with them. This means that the natural way of living is directed towards the natural world regardless of whether the cogito is asserted and the natural world is continuously

there *for me* even if other attitudes are adopted (such as in the case of the cogito moving in the arithmetical world). The third facet of the natural attitude comprises the other ego-subjects. Husserl argues that while every human being is conscious in different ways, the natural attitude is intersubjective and we can commonly posit "an objective, spatial-temporal actuality as our environment, existing for all, to which we ourselves nonetheless belong" (52). Taken altogether, these facets of the natural attitude become Husserl's general thesis of the natural world (the natural world as an "actuality that is there") that he will proceed to turn away from in psychology (54).

Although Husserl's characterization of phenomenology establishes several key differences from that of psychology, there are some similarities. Firstly, early on in *Ideas I*, he concedes that the subject matter of both phenomenology and psychology is "consciousness" (3). Both study our various types of experiences and "cognition of what objectively is" (The Idea of Phenomenology 15). Secondly, both are sciences. In the vein of the natural sciences, under which psychology belongs, Husserl sought to develop phenomenology into a systematic discipline, a strict science, with a well-defined domain of study and an effective methodology. Yet, beyond these, the similarities end, as Husserl characterizes phenomenology as a transcendental rather than naturalistic science, which will require a radically different method of inquiry.

As a transcendental science, phenomenology on Husserl's terms requires a radical alteration of the natural thesis. Grounded in a phenomenological attitude of the epoché, phenomenology requires the "bracketing" or the suspension of the general thesis of the natural attitude (55). In this vein, we withhold judgment of the existential commitment ('that there is world') and refrain from Cartesian skepticism, or negation, or denying of the truth of the

existence claim. By putting out of action the general thesis belonging to the essence of the natural attitude, by suspending the domain of the natural sciences (including psychology), we are engaging in what Husserl calls a method of "phenomenological reductions" (60). This eidetic reduction leads from the psychological phenomenon (the essence instantiated) to the pure "essence of consciousness as such" (60). At this point, we recall Husserl's initial definition of phenomenology laid out at the beginning of this paper. When Husserl calls phenomenology "a science of essences," what does he actually mean? The 'object' that phenomenology is oriented towards is the essence of pure or transcendental consciousness. Yet, what is this pure essence? While we are each conscious from our own subjective, first-person perspective, every act of consciousness is a consciousness *of* something. In Husserl's words, this directedness of consciousness is "intentionality" — the essence of consciousness, which remains preserved in the bracketing of the natural attitude (65). As such, the pure field of phenomenology is centrally concerned with the essential structures of intentionality within a stream of consciousness. By turning towards the first-person experience of pure consciousness, Husserl provides descriptions of the structures of intentionality, drawing the necessary distinctions amongst various elements of consciousness such as act, object, noema (content), and ego subsequently in *Ideas I*.

An objection to be raised is what Husserl's bracketing of the natural attitude implies for the body. With the suspension of consciousness as an embodied entity causally implicated in a spatio-temporal world, the body fits awkwardly, laying wholly neither in Husserl's immanent sphere of consciousness or the transcendent sphere of external objects; neither internal to my consciousness nor external to me in the natural environment. In short, the body blurs the distinction between subject and object. This problem of embodiment is glossed over by Husserl in his distinctions between the natural attitude and the phenomenological attitude. By engaging

in the phenomenological epoché, Husserl relegates the body to the suspension, resorting to describing the abstract thoughts about a body or the sensory experience localizable in a body. This ignores the role of the body in perception, in orienting our consciousness and allowing us to individuate what we perceive, as well as the possibility of the body as the mode of intentionality. As such, Husserl's arguments divorce the subject from the lived body — more than just a bearer of sensations, the body is the enduring, primordial horizon of my experience. The body's constitutive role as the seat of consciousness, as the mode of intentionality is worth being explored more than Husserl gives it attention in *Ideas I*.

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Works Cited

Husserl, Edmund. *The Idea of Phenomenology.* William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian, transl. Kluwer (1990)

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