



Introduction

This book has a double purpose. First, it is an essay in the history of European philosophy. Its goal is to present to Anglophone readers a hitherto largely ignored chapter in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German thought: the dispute about the foundations of the natural and human sciences involving the Neo-Kantians and the so-called life-philosophers, or *Lebensphilosophen*. Second, it is a critical study of Husserl's late work. As such, its goal is also to advance our understanding of transcendental phenomenology by locating it in the philosophical context of its time. In this second respect, it can be considered an essay in what the German philosopher Dieter Heinrich termed *Konstellationsforschung*, or constellation analysis. This historical–philosophical method prioritizes intellectual spaces [*Denkräume*] over individual figures and is designed to shed light on complex ideas that developed in the context of ongoing philosophical exchanges among multiple thinkers.¹

Not infrequently, Husserl is presented as an isolated thinker, too engrossed in his own project to engage productively with the great philosophers of the past, let alone his contemporaries. Moreover, post-Husserlian phenomenologists such as Heidegger or Derrida often projected back on their putative father their own theoretical concerns, thus encouraging generations of scholars to explore Husserl's work from an extremely idiosyncratic point of view. For decades, it was

¹ Martin Muslow provides the following definition of a philosophical constellation: “A philosophical constellation can be defined as the strong connection of people, ideas, theories, problems or documents that influenced one another in such a way that only the analysis of this connection (and not the analysis of its isolated components) enables the understanding of the philosophical import and development of said people, ideas and theories.” M. Muslow, “Zum Methodenprofil der Konstellationsforschung,” in M. Muslow and M. Stamm (eds.), *Konstellationsforschung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), 74–97. Here 74.

customary to read Husserl hunting for the latent seeds of subsequent existential hermeneutics and deconstruction, attempting to expose purported *aporiae* that only later practitioners of phenomenology were able to fully acknowledge. In effect, in the wake of post-Husserlian phenomenology, scholars often compelled Husserl himself to join in a rather artificial dialogue with the likes of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Gadamer, and Derrida. Admittedly, reading Husserl as part of this dialogue proved fecund for the development of postwar European thought, but as far as Husserl himself is concerned, this is a dialogue that never actually occurred. The historical Husserl took part in very different conversations, and, in particular, from the 1910s onward, he actively contributed to the aforementioned dispute concerning the philosophical foundations of the natural and human sciences. This dispute had been going on virtually since the demise of Hegelian idealism in the second half of the nineteenth century, and its roots reach deep into Kant's transcendental philosophy. In light of Husserl's contribution to the debate on the foundations of the natural and human sciences, the twofold purpose of this book finds its theoretical justification. More specifically, I intend to show that this debate was an incubator for the development of Husserl's mature thought.

As the chapters unfold, it will become increasingly clear that from roughly the beginning of the 1910s until his death in 1938 Husserl understood himself explicitly as a contributor to this debate. He avidly read the works of leading philosophers such as Rickert, Simmel, and Dilthey and responded to them, in part overtly and in part implicitly, in both his published and unpublished writings. Stated more boldly, transcendental phenomenology could only gain its distinctive contours in the context of Husserl's thoughtful confrontation with his contemporaries, who, in turn, carried forward a philosophical legacy dating back to Kant. While it has been shown convincingly that Husserl's *Logical Investigations* developed within the context of a fruitful conversation within the Brentano school,² the fact that his work *after the Logical Investigations* was carried out in ongoing intellectual exchange with the Neo-Kantians and the life-philosophers has been mentioned here and there, but it has never been the object of a thorough study. This book intends to fill this gap in the existing Husserlian scholarship and to

² See, for instance, R. Rollinger, *Husserl's Position in the School of Brentano* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999).

situate Husserl's transcendental phenomenology (back) in its authentic philosophical lineage: Kant's critical philosophy in its specific connotation as a transcendental theory of knowledge.

The acclaimed British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012) famously called the nineteenth century a long century, because, in his narrative, it started with the French Revolution in 1789 and ended with the outbreak of World War I in 1914. An argument could be made that the nineteenth century was even longer in philosophy, starting with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781 and ending symbolically with Husserl's death in 1938.³ This is, at least, the hypothesis I would recommend the reader to keep in mind while reading this book: Husserl is not so much the initiator of a twentieth-century trend generically called 'phenomenology,' but the last philosopher of the nineteenth century, whose work condenses some of the most interesting aspects of this fertile age of thought while, at the same time, developing an absolutely original project. Needless to say, the groundbreaking achievements of Husserl's project carried over into the next century, which, at least philosophically, is probably not over yet.

The perspective I am delineating, again, is neither intended to downplay Husserl's impact on many of the greatest minds in twentieth-century European philosophy, nor to suggest that Husserl's philosophical achievements are conclusive or definitive in any sense of these terms. Husserl's phenomenology is a working philosophy, one that is designed to carry out increasingly sophisticated descriptions of what is essential to our experiences in their multifarious variety and to our experience as a whole. The process of constant refinement and revision in which this work unfolds makes Husserlian phenomenology impervious to a definitive systematization and immune to the illusion that it can exhaust the possibilities of philosophy once and for all. Husserl's own failure to produce a system of phenomenology bears witness to the intrinsically open-ended nature of his work. Accordingly, the claim contained in the reading hypothesis suggested above is not that Husserl is the last nineteenth-century philosopher because he somehow concluded or completed the historical trajectory of transcendental thought. He is the last nineteenth-century philosopher 'just' because

³ In this sense, it was a felicitous decision to devote the final chapter to Husserl in the newly published D. Moyer (ed.), *Routledge Companion to Nineteenth Century Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

after his death, and probably already during the last years of his life, philosophy switched topics. The rise of Heidegger's existentialism on the one hand and of logical positivism on the other decreed the end of transcendental thinking and redefined almost from scratch what the true goals of philosophy ought to be.⁴ Eventually, while Husserl was still read as a forerunner of Heidegger in some circles and as a polemical counterpart in other circles, most great thinkers surrounding him during his lifetime faded into oblivion. The nascent existentialist movement had its reasons not to read the Neo-Kantians and the life-philosophers anymore. Purportedly, their debate about the transcendental foundations of the sciences did not reach the desired level of radicalism set by the master of Messkirch, that is, it failed to ask the only question worth asking in philosophy: what is the meaning of "Being" overall? In turn, the nascent movement of analytic philosophy felt exempt from engaging with the weighty tomes on the philosophical foundations of the natural and the human sciences for a different set of reasons: these works dealt with allegedly intractable pseudo-problems preempted by empiricism and the logical analysis of language.

In the Anglophone world, some scant interest for Neo-Kantianism and *Lebensphilosophie*, which inflamed the philosophical scene in pre-war Germany, seemed to linger on among theorists of the social sciences in the 1960s and the 1970s.⁵ As regards the theory of the natural sciences, on the contrary, transcendental questions about the possibility of nature as a theoretical construct had been long replaced by questions about the so-called logic of scientific discovery. In spite of this marginal attention among social scientists, the overwhelming bulk of primary texts by the Neo-Kantians and the *Lebensphilosophen* remained untranslated, and the few scholars who touched on them did so with a very selective focus, given that their primary interest lay elsewhere. Full restitution of the debate's philosophical meaning was simply not part of their agenda. Questions about the foundations of the sciences remained at best methodological questions asked by practicing social scientists in their spare time.

⁴ Note that merely decreeing that a certain idea is over does not amount to refuting or disproving the idea in question. It is more an act of the will than an act of the intellect.

⁵ Guy Oakes' abridged translations of Simmel and Rickert, along with his helpful introductory essays, are the main example of this trend. See the list of sources at the end of this book for full references.

Fortunately, this past decade witnessed encouraging signs of resurgent interest in Neo-Kantianism and *Lebensphilosophie*, as well as growing awareness that these movements were of paramount importance for the development of mainstream currents in twentieth-century philosophy. As for Neo-Kantianism, Michael Friedman blazed the trail for this recent trend with his rightly acclaimed book *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer and Heidegger*.⁶ Through a sharp examination of the famous Davos conference in 1929 featuring Cassirer versus Heidegger on the interpretation of Kant, Friedman shows convincingly that Cassirer's brand of Neo-Kantianism had a profound impact on Carnap and the ensuing Anglo-Austrian philosophy of science up to Thomas Kuhn. Moreover, Friedman suggests that the debate between Cassirer and Heidegger foreshadows in significant ways the (in)famous rift between analytic and continental philosophy that characterized the discipline after World War II. More recently, Peter Gordon published a monumental study of the Davos debate,⁷ which expands considerably our understanding of the philosophical disagreement between Heidegger and Cassirer and confirms beyond reasonable doubt that Neo-Kantianism is worth careful consideration for those interested in twentieth-century intellectual history. Among other things, Gordon unearths a tension between 'thrownness' and 'spontaneity' underlying Heidegger's and Cassirer's interpretation of Kant and argues that this tension is a helpful foil for looking at further ramifications for philosophy after Davos. Just one year after the appearance of Gordon's book, Fredrick Beiser published a thorough study of the German historicist tradition,⁸ which includes illuminating chapters on Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert, Lask, and Simmel and argues that their work is decisive for a complete understanding of the characteristically German preoccupation with history in philosophy. Additionally, Sebastian Luft co-edited together with Rudolf Makkreel an excellent collection of essays on Neo-Kantianism and contemporary philosophy,⁹ and he is

⁶ M. Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer and Heidegger* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2000).

⁷ P. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger – Cassirer – Davos* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁸ F. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹ S. Luft and R. Makkreel (eds.), *Neo-Kantianism in Contemporary Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

about to publish a much-needed reader on the Neo-Kantian movement as a whole.

This very recent trend was to some extent pre-dated in Heidegger studies. In the wake of the ongoing publication of Heidegger's earlier works, a few years ago, Heidegger scholars started looking at the works of Neo-Kantians and life-philosophers mentioned in Heidegger's lectures. This led them to the conclusion that these thinkers are in fact worth reading and that they played an important role in the genesis of Heidegger's project of a fundamental ontology via the existential analytic in *Being and Time* (1927).¹⁰

In the wake of growing intellectual ferment surrounding Neo-Kantianism, *Lebensphilosophie* and their cultural milieu, the present book is intended to contribute a further perspective on this rich chapter of German philosophy. There are at least two respects in which this book occupies a distinctive venue among existing and developing studies on Neo-Kantianism, *Lebensphilosophie*, and their connections to phenomenology. First, to my knowledge, Husserl's position in this complicated tangle of philosophical ideas has never been adequately discussed.¹¹ In this regard, this book sets out to accomplish for Husserl what other scholars have already accomplished successfully for Heidegger. Second, the present book has a rather unusual focus: it deals exclusively with the Southwestern school of Neo-Kantianism and, to some extent, prioritizes Georg Simmel over Wilhelm Dilthey in the discussion of *Lebensphilosophie*. This is because, on the one hand, as I will discuss in Chapter 6, Husserl's appropriation of Simmel is more ramified and interesting than Husserl's initial dismissal and subsequent

¹⁰ See D. Farrell Krell, *Daimon Life: Heidegger and Life-Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); C. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1995); and most recently S. Campbell, *The Early Heidegger's Philosophy of Life: Facticity, Being, and Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

¹¹ There are, of course, a few exceptions, which convinced me that a book-length study would be a desideratum. See, for instance: R. D'Amico, "Husserl on the Foundational Structures of Natural and Cultural Sciences," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 42 (1981): 5–22; J. E. Jalbert, "Husserl's Position between Dilthey and the Windelband-Rickert School of Neo-Kantianism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26 (1988): 279–296; and the set of papers devoted to Simmel and phenomenology in *Human Studies* 26/2 (2003). Bob Sandmeyer's recent book *Husserl's Constitutive Phenomenology: Its Problem and Promise* (New York: Routledge, 2009) includes one chapter on Husserl and Dilthey.

reappraisal of Dilthey. Similarly, on the other hand, while Husserl always maintained a polite and at times even obsequious attitude towards the so-called Marburg school¹² (the current of Neo-Kantianism starting with Cohen and culminating with Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms), he engaged actively only with the Southwestern school, and in particular with the work of his predecessor at the University of Freiburg, Heinrich Rickert. The Southwestern Neo-Kantian insistence on the necessity to *demarcate* different fields of scientific inquiry, rather than focusing chiefly on the natural sciences (Cohen) or on the dynamics of symbolization common to all human activities (Cassirer), was naturally appealing to Husserl, since it seemed to lead straight to fundamental questions that only phenomenology could adequately address.

In fact, asking about the correct demarcation of different fields of knowledge lies at the heart of philosophical thinking from its very inception. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates struggles with his interlocutors to establish who is competent to speak meaningfully about various topics. This often involves attempts to define the sphere of competence of various 'arts' and to keep them separate from one another. In the early dialogue *Ion*, for instance, Socrates ridicules the rhapsodes for believing that they can speak meaningfully of things lying outside their own sphere of competence, which is restricted to poetic declamation. In the *Republic*, Socrates' famous refutation of Thrasymachus similarly revolves around the sophist's conflation of two different 'arts': money-making and politics. Knowledge of the Forms, for Plato, would grant the philosopher the capacity to distinguish sharply between spheres of knowledge that need to be kept distinct.

¹² In a footnote to his lectures on *Natur und Geist* in 1919 (which will be discussed at length in Chapter 5) Husserl remarks in passing that "only the Marburg Neo-Kantianism was able to avoid a trivialization [*Verflachung*] of Kant's powerful intuitions." E. Husserl, *Natur und Geist. Vorlesungen Sommersemester 1919, Husserliana Materialien*, vol. 4 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002), 193 n. Hereafter Mat IV. In any case, Husserl does not expand on this laudatory remark, and he rather hastens to add: "However, in Marburg Neo-Kantianism, too, it is not the whole Kant who lives on. The whole Kant can only be drawn out of Kant's own writings" (*ibid.*). Husserl would often pay homage to the Marburg school, and he was certainly positively impressed by their philosophical achievements. However, with the exception of Paul Natorp's transcendental psychology, Husserl *de facto* never felt compelled to deepen his understanding of the Marburg school beyond the basics.

In a similar vein, Aristotle often defers discussion of certain topics with the explanation that they belong in a different discipline, thus defending the necessity to organize the universe of knowledge in a way that keeps conflation and equivocations at bay. The very thrust of his *Metaphysics* is in the definition and demarcation of a new, fundamental philosophical discipline. Disquisitions about the distinctions and hierarchic order of different fields of knowledge cut across the whole Middle Ages and were still paramount to Descartes. The situation slowly changed after the scientific revolution, which seemingly imposed the universal adoption of the *mos geometricus* for whatever subject matter was under scrutiny. As we shall see in Chapter 7 of this book, it was not until Kant's Copernican turn that the sphere of validity of naturalistic methods was relativized, thus reopening an intellectual space for a pluralistic conception of knowledge and for a debate that had lain dormant for most of the foregoing two centuries. As the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* evidences, Kant bestowed great importance on the philosophical demarcation of different fields of inquiry and considered this a necessary presupposition in order for any discipline to stop "groping about"¹³ and set itself on "the secure path of a science."¹⁴

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the impressive flourishing of historical, literary, political, and economic studies, whose high standards of rigor could hardly be disputed, called for philosophical elucidation. Previously, such disciplines either did not have scientific status or had been overshadowed by the dominance of naturalistic research. Their rapid flourishing in the spirit of rigor bore witness to reason's capacity to understand empirical reality well beyond the limited scope of nature. In particular, the common trait of virtually all the humanistic disciplines coming to fruition in the nineteenth century was that they dealt in some way with human cultural achievements. Unlike the subject matter of physics, the subject matter of history, literary studies, and political economics, to mention but some, is undeniably shaped by subjective activity. Accordingly, thinkers in the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie*, such as Dilthey and Simmel, worked to articulate a transcendental foundation of these disciplines by reference

¹³ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 106 (B vii).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107 (B x).

to historically living subjects whose activity is at the origin of both cultural objects and the methods for their cognition. In the human sciences, as Dilthey famously puts it, “life grasps life,”¹⁵ therefore these disciplines should be sharply distinguished from the natural sciences.

The major challenge to this view stemmed from the consideration of the newly born discipline of experimental psychology. Grounding their work on the hypothesis of psychophysical parallelism, researchers in this novel field, such as Wundt and Fechner, proved that the psychic life of human subjects can be fruitfully investigated relying on the very same methods employed to discover laws in other provinces of nature. Psychology, on this account, is just another natural science. Rickert and most Neo-Kantians rejected Dilthey and Simmel’s criteria for a demarcation of the sciences precisely in consideration of the explanatory power of experimental psychology. Granted that psychology is a natural science, they opposed the idea that references to psychic life can be sufficient to clarify what is distinctive about the human sciences. These sciences, in Rickert’s view, do not deal with psyche but with culture, that is, with objects bearing an ostensible relationship with significant, culturally acknowledged values. Without anticipating too much, it is important to underscore that late nineteenth-century psychology and its philosophically ambiguous status were a battlefield of endless controversies in almost the same sense in which Kant spoke about metaphysics roughly one century earlier. It is revealing that over three decades into the twentieth century, in his unfinished work *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1935–1936) Husserl claims emphatically that psychology is still “the truly decisive field,”¹⁶ that is, the field whose correct demarcation and

¹⁵ W. Dilthey, “Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften,” in W. Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1927), 79–291. Here 136. Hereafter GS VII. English trans. by R. Makkreel and J. Scanlon, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, in W. Dilthey, *Selected Works*, vol. 3 (Princeton University Press, 2002), 100–311. Here 157, translation modified. Hereafter SW 3.

¹⁶ E. Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einführung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, *Husserliana*, vol. 6 (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1954). Hereafter Hua VI. English translation by D. Carr, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 208. Hereafter *Crisis*.

investigation have the most bearing on the future of philosophy and of Western civilization as such. For nineteenth-century thinkers, including Husserl, therefore, questions about the demarcations of different scientific fields and in particular about the correct classification of psychology were anything but otiose academic undertakings: they stood at the vital core of philosophical inquiry. Reviving the genuine philosophical impetus behind these questions is one of the main goals of this book.

As far as Husserl is concerned, the importance of his work on nature, psychic life, and the different spheres of scientific inquiry are certainly not unknown. What has been mostly overlooked is rather the central meaning of these topics for a correct understanding of transcendental phenomenology as a whole and for a full grasp of its intersections with other philosophical trends in Husserl's time. It is noteworthy that none of the numerous introductions to Husserl's phenomenology that appeared in English in recent years presents Husserl's position on the natural and the human sciences, let alone the broader debate in which his position took shape. Presumably, this issue has been deemed marginal to the actual core of Husserl's work and thus dispensable for introductory purposes. While there is some truth to the fact that Husserl's phenomenological analyses of nature, psyche, and culture are rather advanced and that they presuppose at least some basic familiarity with the phenomenological method in general, they cannot be considered as dealing with a delimited sphere of problems that can be safely isolated and left out of consideration. On the contrary, these analyses are crucial to understanding both the import and the scope of Husserl's transcendental-phenomenological philosophy as such. To give just one example, the rationale behind the performance of the phenomenological *epoché* and reduction is bound to remain obscure if the burning questions about the ontological status of psyche and the scientificity of psychology are not adequately understood.¹⁷ Perhaps it was insufficient appreciation of this point that led various post-Husserlian thinkers to believe that they could harmlessly drop the *epoché* and the reduction as mere relics of an embarrassing Cartesian past and still continue to do phenomenology. In this regard, I believe that the reactivation of the debate on the philosophical foundations of the natural and the human sciences attempted in this book, among other

¹⁷ This point will be discussed at length in Chapter 6.