

... religiously, the only thing that matters is “how” ...

Kierkegaard, *NB* 22: 79

## Introduction

This Element explores some of what happens when one allows the proper name Søren Kierkegaard to be associated with the word “phenomenology.” It is not the first study to do so. Accordingly, I would like to acknowledge the pioneering work of Jeffrey Hanson, the editor of *Kierkegaard as Phenomenologist* (Northwestern University Press, 2010), Claudia Welz’s thoughtful essay “Kierkegaard and Phenomenology” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard* (Oxford University Press, 2013), and the editorial labors of Aaron Simmons and his associates in putting together *Kierkegaardian Phenomenologies* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2024). In an Element of this size, it is regrettably impossible to do anything like justice to the wealth of attunements that one finds in Kierkegaard’s first and second authorships, and anything like showing a decent awareness of the many rich proto-phenomenological analyses he gives. For those things to be shown adequately, additional sections on love and sacrifice, along with evaluating alternate ways of construing Kierkegaard as a phenomenologist, would need to have been written, which would have drastically exceeded the limits set for this Elements series. The same limitations mean that next to no reference can be made to the texts in their original Danish. It has not even been possible to specify as narrowly as I would like the problems of even claiming Kierkegaard to be a phenomenologist. However, I have sought to identify several of those problems, see what eminent practitioners in the field have had to say about Kierkegaard as a possible forerunner, and sketch, all too briefly, what Kierkegaard’s phenomenologies of the spiritual life and the Kingdom might look like if teased out more fully than he did himself. To that end, Section 3 turns on an unusual sense of reduction and Section 4 on a memorable conversion of the gaze.

## 1 Phenomenologies

If we are to make any sense of the conjunction “Kierkegaard and phenomenology” we first need to ask, “What is phenomenology?” The answer is nowhere near as simple as the question suggests.

As a placing shot, let’s begin with Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who is usually regarded as the father of phenomenology. Even here, though, we face difficulties, since Husserl’s understanding of phenomenology developed very considerably over the course of his life. At first, he thought of the discipline as a way of clarifying concepts by tracing them back to their origin in our mental

experiences. Slightly later, he revised his position: Phenomenology is not a description of psychic phenomena but a theory of essences with no adhesion whatsoever to empirical psychology. If we follow this revision of his theory, he believed, we could “go back to the ‘things themselves,’” and so sidestep all prepackaged philosophical problems and think freshly.<sup>1</sup> We would avoid relativism and reductionism as well as psychologism. His concern henceforth was with how we can gain access to reality, which he thinks can happen by attending scrupulously only to what appears, or manifests itself, or gives itself, within its own limits. One must learn to “see” phenomena (even invisible ones) by eidetic abstraction, to clarify how they give themselves to us, and to distinguish layers of constitution.<sup>2</sup> His focus is on receiving the phenomenon just as it gives itself in intuition (awareness); and abiding by this commitment is what he calls following “the principle of all principles.”<sup>3</sup> Phenomenology therefore isolates the essences of things, regardless of whether or not these things actually exist. I can be conscious of a golden ring or a golden mountain, and it makes no difference to their essences if the one exists and the other does not. Yet there are differences: Each gives itself in a distinct manner. The golden mountain cannot appear in perception but can in imagination. “Each objective region constitutes itself in accordance with consciousness,” Husserl writes.<sup>4</sup> Two things are said here: Everything manifests itself according to its specific way of being, and all manifestations are linked to particular mental acts.

The task before us, Husserl thought, is to shift how we think about our mode of access to reality. It’s not a question of uncritically correlating our thoughts with objects, according to the venerable formula for defining truth, *adequatio rei et intellectus*, which came to the schoolmen from Aristotle (384–322 BC) by way of Avicenna (c. 980–1037). Instead, the point at issue is matching our intentions with objects *as they are intended*. “Intention,” here, means “consciousness of,” not just volition, and includes many different mental acts, for instance anticipating, cognizing, desiring, imagining, judging, perceiving, and remembering, as well as willing. Inevitably, what is intended will have varying significance. The intentional object is what is intended exactly as intended, that is, as anticipated, cognized, desired, and so on. If I perceive my friend John, it is

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), vol. 1, 252. Husserl’s rallying cry cuts across the calls of Neo-Kantians such as Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp to “go back to Kant.”

<sup>2</sup> See Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, 1: *General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2014), § 24.

<sup>4</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, 1, 296.

very different from remembering him or imagining him in another place. In memory, John is not here in flesh and bone but merely represented: My intention can be at best only partially fulfilled. And in imagination, I cannot even posit John as existing in the past but must content myself with a quasi-perception of him. I imagine him in Oxford or Paris but my representation of him functions as if he were in Durham, NC, where I live. This “as if” is important, for my mental depiction of him abides in a “now” that falls outside the flow of time as I concretely experience it. We can already see that an intended object gives itself to me in a particular profile, depending on how I intend it. The human engagement with reality, then, is not one of merely responding to things regarded as simply existing; rather, it is a matter of aligning intentional objects with the objects that are intended and seeking adequate fulfillment.

In order for us to grasp the correlation of the subject’s mental act and the intentional object (or, as Husserl calls them in *Ideas* 1 [1913], noesis and noema), we must therefore put naïve realism out of play. Most of the time we live in what Husserl calls the natural attitude, which is widely held but not the only stance that we can take with respect to the world about us. It’s a mental framework that we associate with “common sense,” which we variously inherit from Aristotle, John Locke (1632–1704), and Thomas Paine (1737–1809). The problem before us is less the distortions of reality that come from uncritically adopting the natural attitude, which, after all, has its uses when we know how it comes about, than in accepting the thesis that goes along with it, which insouciantly tells us that the intended object and the intentional object are exactly the same. This prejudice must be suspended – Husserl uses the Greek word *ἐποχή* (transl. *epochē*) – and only once this has been done can we be led back to the otherwise undisclosed domain of transcendental experience. In having access to this domain we do not thereby annul the existence of any object in the world; it remains just as it was. Only the thesis of the natural attitude is suspended. With this moratorium, which is perpetually willed by the philosopher, we can view the immense world of possible experience, of noetic–noematic correlations, which vary according to whether the intentions match intentional objects in consciousness, nature, or culture. Such is the effect of the phenomenological or transcendental reduction. It enables us to attend closely to how one experiences something, not the object that is experienced.

Husserl identified all sorts of stances we can adopt with respect to reality, not just the natural attitude. If I’m teaching physics, some of the time (depending on the level of students I have) I will be in the naturalistic attitude, regarding the universe as in effect a closed causal system. At other times, especially if I’m teaching an advanced class, I will be in the theoretical attitude, speculating about quantum theory or string theory, quite disconnected from the usual

operations of cause and effect. At yet other times, I will be in the practical attitude, checking circuits and electrical leads, writing reports on experiments, and so forth. At home I might slip into the religious-mythical attitude in which I seek to account for the world and my place in it by appealing to the founding narratives of my culture. “Myth,” here, does not mean a false story but a capacious, organizing narrative, what the ancient Greeks called *μῦθος* (transl. *muthos*), such as that of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. It can easily be seen that Husserl is animated less by the questions “What?” and “Why?” than by the question “How?” The interest is in the sense of the manner or way or being, not in “how” as an alternate way of asking “why?” (as in “how come?”). He urges us to see how things are in their modes of appearing, in every available human mental act, as well as in the various attitudes or stances we adopt with respect to the world. We are invited to pass from what is pre-given to what is given and, in the process, to wonder at the world and our place in it.

Not only did Husserl expand phenomenology by exploring definite fields such as time and imagination but also he kept probing the foundations of phenomenology and, in doing so, developing it in ever new directions. My consciousness, he realized, is not homogeneous; it has layers of sedimented sense that have built up over time and that undergird my experience of the world. I have understood the world by counting objects put before me, by trying my hand at various activities, by making judgments about states of affairs (and often revising them one or more times), and by imagining other situations. These are all active syntheses. In addition, though, I have benefited from passive syntheses, which occur primarily whenever my experiences as retained in consciousness associate with one another and, secondarily, when I pick up on experiences I haven’t had but members of my family, church, workplace, or local community have had. All this cohered with Husserl’s abiding interest in intersubjectivity, which finally, in his view, came to ground epistemic judgments. Such thoughts prompted him to pass from static to genetic phenomenology. As early as 1920, he also became deeply interested in what has since been called generative phenomenology, which turns on our distinct experiences of being at home and being in an alien place. Our recognition of a “home world” turns on our familiarity with community and local customs, language (including the narratives that are passed on from generation to generation), and shared values. Similarly, our awareness of an “alien world” stems from our experience of another community’s generation of tradition and its distinctive language, accent, and idiom.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Anthony J. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995).

If we have read anything by Kierkegaard, we will quickly see that there is little that directly links him to what I've said so far about Husserl. To be sure, both philosophers prize experience, yet they approach it from quite different perspectives: The Dane thinks that we must make truth our own, possess it subjectively as well as acknowledge it as objectively so, while the German sees it as a way by which, through careful attention to phenomena, we might attain reliable epistemic judgments. Both are interested in human subjectivity, indeed psychology; but where Husserl is concerned to purify psychic acts, Kierkegaard seeks to describe definite mental and emotive states, such as anxiety, despair, guilt, and love, without severely reducing them to their a priori essences. One entertains the absurd, although this can easily be misunderstood. (Kierkegaard objects to Hegel's sense of reason as able totally to account for everything in reality and leaves open a space for that which is beyond reason.) The other insists on reason, indeed, on a teleology of reason that becomes apparent in the movement from the Greeks to the Germans. Kierkegaard thinks that "possibility is the weightiest of all categories," but his interest is in how anxiety is leagued with possibility whereas Husserl is fascinated by the endless possibilities of noetic–noematic correlation.<sup>6</sup> Is there any common ground between the two philosophers? In terms of their writings, only a little, perhaps *Repetition* (1843), where one finds an intriguing linking of experience and reflection, and in the area of ethics. As we shall see later, there may also be a shared orientation, although one not thematized by Kierkegaard.

Husserl wrote far less about ethics than Kierkegaard did. The German was committed to self-responsibility and especially to the renewal of the European mind which, he thought, had atrophied after World War I and, more, had lost faith in reason. He was skeptical about the empty formalism of Kant's phrasing of the categorical imperative, while nonetheless committed to the objectivity of values. Accordingly, he proposed a deflated version of the categorical imperative that depends on what one can reasonably do in one's sphere of action. In old age, however, he affirmed an ethics of love; and this would have appealed to Kierkegaard. The Dane would have found Husserl's idea of God as the "all-consciousness" somewhat chilly, though; it would have reminded him too much of German idealism and would have kept the believer in the sphere of "Religiousness A," in which one seeks to form oneself in this life by following an idea of God.<sup>7</sup> The high aim, as we learn in *Unscientific Postscript* (1846), is "Religiousness B," in which one

<sup>6</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *SLW*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> See Husserl, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology: From the Lectures, Winter Semester, 1910–1911*, trans. Ingo Farin and James G. Hart (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), appendix XIII.

lives oriented to eternity, painfully riven by a conviction of sinfulness and the paradox of the singular God-Man, Jesus Christ.

More generally, Husserl writes philosophical papers and treatises, always imparting theories in a professorial voice to the academy at large, while Kierkegaard multiplies pseudonymous works in an effort to facilitate indirect communication, to make the reader judge a case or a situation for himself or herself. He writes, he says, for “that single individual whom I with joy and gratitude call *my* reader, that single individual, who willingly reads slowly, reads repeatedly, and who reads aloud – for his own sake.”<sup>8</sup> This reader subjectively appropriates what Kierkegaard writes and puts it to existential use. Of course, this hope also applies to those works he writes above his own signature; he offers edifying discourses “with the right hand” while also offering the pseudonymous writings “with the left hand.”<sup>9</sup> We know that Husserl had read and admired Kierkegaard, most likely in Christoph Schrepf’s German translations (1890–1924), but it was the sort of respect that comes from an honest appreciation of a completely different approach to one’s field. Besides, his exposure to the Dane’s thought came far too late to influence his own writings.<sup>10</sup> Plainly, we must look elsewhere if we are to find a meaningful relation between phenomenology and Kierkegaard.

We might begin by looking back in history: While phenomenology was elaborated in a highly original and ramified manner by Husserl, he was not the first person to evoke it, at least in a preliminary way. Husserl himself thought that René Descartes (1596–1650) stumbled upon phenomenology, even on the reduction, but failed to make anything of either. He also set store by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who used the word “phenomenology” on several occasions and who developed in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787) a rich theory of the modes in which things appear to us. J. G. Fichte (1762–1814), whom Husserl likewise esteemed, proposed that the second part of the *Wissenschaftslehre* would be a phenomenology, “a doctrine of appearance and illusion.”<sup>11</sup> We get a little closer to Kierkegaard (and further away from him at the same time) when we reach G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), if only because his polemic against Hegel – and Danish Hegelians such as Hans Lassen Martensen (1808–84) and Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791–1860) – conceals certain debts to

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, *UDVS*, 5.      <sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard, *WA*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> See Leon Shestov, “In Memory of a Great Philosopher: Edmund Husserl,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 22: 4 (1962), 461.

<sup>11</sup> J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowing*, trans. and intro. Walter E. Wright (Albany: State University of New York, 2005), 107. Also see Violetta L. Waibel, J. Daniel Breazeale, and Tom Rockmore, ed., *Fichte and the Phenomenological Tradition* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000).

him, perhaps not least of all to Hegel's notions of phenomenology and dialectic.<sup>12</sup> Phenomenology, for Hegel, has a dialectical structure, for consciousness experiences the world as it appears to it in progressively concrete ways.

On the face of it, Kierkegaard has a related dialectic of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), in particular, describes intersecting spheres of human existence, which shift in their mutual relations more than one finds in the forward thrust, neutralization, and retention of the *Aufhebung* (sublation) in Hegel's threefold philosophy of Idea, Nature, and Spirit. Doubtless Kierkegaard's use of dialectic answers more surely to Socrates than to Hegel; it's a matter of indirectly leading each reader by a process of maieutic questioning to a felt judgment about a concept or situation, not a dynamic unfolding of an objective state of affairs in logic or history. If we take a step back, we can see that his whole authorship is an extensive to-and-fro between various pseudonymous authors – Johannes Climacus, Anti-Climacus, Constantin Constantius, Frater Taciturnus, Inter et Inter, Quidam, Vigilius Haufniensis, and all the rest – and himself; and we, his readers, are challenged by all these different views of life and must find our own way through them in order to reach settled decisions about the issues he puts before us.

It is worth pausing to note Kierkegaard's final view of using pseudonyms. Thinking of the authorship presented over so many different signatures, he wrote, "I have actually been used without really knowing it myself, or knowing it fully. And now, for the first time, I understand and can see the whole of it – but then, of course, I cannot say 'I.'"<sup>13</sup> Philosophy, for Kierkegaard, is a putting on stage of many and varied characters concerned with questions and possible answers. We must be careful not to attribute ideas to Kierkegaard when they might better be attributed to one of his characters. All this is quite different from what we have come to expect in modern analytic philosophy in which we hear the reflections of a single individual, refined almost out of existence, who considers them from nowhere in particular.

If the prehistory of phenomenology is not of sufficient help to us, what of its developments after the work of the founding father? Phenomenology is sometimes described, tongue in cheek, as a church in which there is one Messiah (Husserl) and many heretics. Certainly, it is a broad church. Of

<sup>12</sup> For Kierkegaard's debts to Danish Hegelianism, see Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For a note of caution, see Thomas J. Millay, "Concrete and Otherworldly: Reading Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* alongside Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," *Modern Theology*, 34: 1 (2018), 23–41.

<sup>13</sup> The line is taken from a scrap of paper written by Kierkegaard at the time of *The Point of View*. See Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 559.