

The method of Husserl's phenomenology
(Wesensschau [intuition of essences], Epoché, eidetische Variation [eidetic variation])

by Wolfgang Brauner
(lecture, held at the Nankai University, Tianjin / May 2005)

The phenomenology, originated by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the first half of the preceding century, was one of the most important and influential philosophical conceptions in the 20th century. The writings of Husserl were the starting point for a movement where many excellent and the contemporary philosophy largely determining thinkers like Scheler, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and many others came from. The main works of Husserl which these thinkers refer to are the *Logical Investigations*, first published in 1900/01, the *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy, first book* from 1913 and others like the programmatic essay *Philosophy as Rigorous Science* from 1911, *Formal and transcendental logic* from 1929 and the *Cartesian meditations* from 1931.

Husserl was an extraordinary writer. His books, lectures, essays and manuscripts, which count approximately 40.000 pages, have been mostly published in the collection known as *Husserliana*. This collection comprises at present about 35 volumes. In view of this extremely extensive work of Husserl, it is quite difficult to say something consolidated and definitive about his philosophy. There is also the fact, that his thinking is spanning a period of approximately 50 years and has been changed and modified several times. We cannot say that *the* transcendental phenomenology is one: the phenomenological approach has been appearing at least as *descriptive phenomenology* in the former years, as *transcendental phenomenology* at the time of publishing the *Ideas I* and as *genetic phenomenology* in the later scripts. So we have to focus only on a few of his works to explain the phenomenological method.

The starting point of Husserl and the specific phenomenological method was the empirical psychology of Franz Brentano. Brentano created a kind of psychology which describes the empirical phenomenons and facts of consciousness seen in an *inner awareness* [innere Wahrnehmung]. These facts of consciousness, e.g. a judgement [Urteil], belief [Glaube] or a wish [Wunsch], are examples of *acts* [Akte] and their main feature is the *intentionality*, which means, that they are directed towards a real object, e.g. a tree in the park, but this object is 'inside' the consciousness as an 'intentional object' [intentionales Objekt].

The earliest writings of Husserl, like the *Philosophy of arithmetics* from 1891, are still psychological in terms of Brentano. In the *Philosophy of arithmetics* Husserl applied the

empirical method to the field of mathematics claiming psychological acts, which are responsible for the ability to do mathematics. There is for example an act of consciousness called 'Kolligieren', which joins various impressions together to unity like concepts [Inbegriffe].

Husserls criticism against psychology and its method first take place in his *Logical Investigations*. Regarding the psychological laws like the law of association and the inductive method of psychology, which results in these laws, he believed that psychology cannot lay the foundations of an a priori philosophy with universally and necessarily valid laws similar to the laws of natural science. So his aim was to find a method, which enables us to find non-empirical entities and laws. These entities and laws are the 'essences' [Wesen] resp. the 'laws of essences' [Wesensgesetze] and the method he carried out in the *Logical Investigations*, the *Ideas I* and other writings is the so-called 'intuition of essences' [Wesensschau].

The assumption of essences had caused a wide discussion since ancient Greek philosophy. Platon thought that the essences, the ideas, e.g. the 'good in itself' [agathon] are real existing entities, that they are existing independent from the empirical things which we know through our senses. On the other hand Aristotle criticized this platonic realism of ideas and tried to overcome the separation of the ideas from the world of empirical things e.g. by the thesis, that the form [eidos] is a part of the empirical things as their immanent target. In the scholastic philosophy this discussion lead to the so-called *problem of universals* [Universalienstreit]. Some philosophers said, that the essences resp. the universals, e.g. the 'Beauty in itself', the 'Tree-being' or 'the essence of human-being', are real existing entities, others said, that they are just names or concepts of things and only exist in our mind or in our soul. This discussion about the universals has been continuing up to the present.

For some interpreters Husserls position in this question seems to be a platonic position. But is Husserl in fact arguing, that the essences are real existing entities like Platons ideas? Husserl refuses clearly the metaphysics and mythology of Platon. So his paradigm is not the ideology [Ideenlehre] Platons, but generally the pure logic and the pure mathematics, the first because of its non-empirical essences, e.g. the syllogisms like BARBARA¹ or the law of noncontradiction² [Satz vom Widerspruch], the second because of essences like the numbers

¹ Syllogism BARBARA:
All living beings die. (maior)
All human beings are living beings. (minor)
All human beings die. (conclusio)

² Aristotle: "One cannot say of something that it is and that it is not in the same respect and at the same time." (Met. 1005b).

or the Pythagorean theorem³ [Satz des Pythagoras]. Husserl thought that essences and laws of essences are universal entities, whose validity is independent from the concrete situation of grasping them. They are one and the same regardless the various acts in which they can be thought or intended.

Now Husserl's aim was to find similar a priori essences like the mentioned ones not only in the field of mathematics and logic, but in all kinds of phenomena and in all areas of reality. Hence, he attempted to create a new science: an extensive eidetic science, which works out the pure essences and laws of essences that underlie all phenomena. This eidetic science was first developed in the *Logical Investigations*, which influenced a great number of philosophers e.g. Roman Ingarden, Alexander Pfänder, Hedwig Conrad-Martius or Max Scheler applying the intuition of essences to various fields like emotions, religion, ethics or aesthetics. But as Husserl's thinking in the *Ideas I* changed into a phenomenology of transcendental subjectivity, most of his disciples didn't follow him. In the *Ideas I*, the object of the intended eidetic science is the pure transcendental consciousness, its a priori structure and its pure experiences. The analysed essences are here the pure experiences and their laws, e.g. the experiences of perception.

But what is an essence at all? The *Logical Investigations* are an attempt to clarify the a priori conditions, the pure (categorical) concepts [kategorialen Begriffe] and laws that found all kind of empirical sciences. So Husserl's attempt here can be called a 'logic' or 'theory of science', which regards the a priori concepts and laws of scientific theories as essences. His search for a priori conditions is of the same kind as Kant's search for the 'conditions of the possibility of experience', e.g. the pure concepts of the understanding resp. categories like 'unity', 'plurality' or 'cause and effect'⁴. For Husserl there are lots of pure concepts and laws which must be examined by the 'intuition of essences', e.g. the concepts 'unity', 'relation', 'combination', 'representation', 'truth', 'concept', 'expression', 'meaning' and others, the laws of combination of propositions [Verknüpfung von Sätzen], e.g. the hypothetical judgement⁵ [hypothetisches Urteil] or the laws of foundation, e.g. the reciprocal foundation of colour and extension in opposite to the one-sided foundation between acts of representation and judgement⁶. The phenomenologist is convinced that the concepts used in normal language have an ideal meaning [ideale Bedeutung] that is independent from the concrete linguistic

³ The Pythagorean theorem states: 'The sum of the areas of the squares on the legs of a right triangle is equal to the area of the square on the hypotenuse'.

⁴ See Kant, KrV, B106.

⁵ Hypothetical judgement: 'If there is real justice, the evil will be punished'.

⁶ See LU II 2, III. LU, §§14ff.

usage or as to say it in terms of the later Wittgenstein independent from the ‘language game’ [Sprachspiel] in which the concept is used. This general ideal meaning, which is the same during all concrete situations of usage, can be ‘peeled away’ from the normal meaning by the abstracting phenomenological method, which Husserl also calls ‘*eidetic abstraction*’ [ideierende Abstraktion] or ‘*eidetic reduction*’ [eidetische Reduktion].

But as a specific phenomenological attitude, the phenomenologist is interested in the pure concepts and laws not without regarding the acts resp. experiences of consciousness, which are related to these a priori entities. So one of the general results of the phenomenological enquiry in the *Logical Investigations* is that several acts of consciousness can apply to one identical essence, e.g. the acts of meaning the unity of something (a tree, a car, a house and so on) apply to one and the same ideal meaning ‘unity’ or judgements like ‘the flower is yellow’, ‘the lecturer is a foreigner’ and so on apply to the one ideal judgement ‘S is P’.

The character of these ideal essences is their identity, which is for Husserl an *identity of species*⁷. The main example, he uses to illustrate this, is the ‘redness’⁸. There are for example several red pieces of paper lying on the table in front of me. They are all individually red coloured, that is their redness – Husserl says their ‘moment of redness’ [Rotmoment] – is an individual case of the ‘redness in specie’, which is one of the ‘universal objects’ or ‘Generalia’, that in Husserl’s opinion don’t exist like Platon’s ideas in a celestial place [topos ouranios]. They exist just as elements of a special intuition, called the *categorial intuition*⁹ [kategoriale Anschauung], which is not the same as the sensible intuition [sinnliche Anschauung]. Although the categorial intuition can be viewed separately in an additional reflective act, this intuition is primarily not separated from but based on the acts of intuiting a sensible object [sinnlichen Gegenstand] or an object of imagination. The piece of red paper on the table, which is first grasped as a whole in a simple act of perception, can be grasped afterwards in new acts with regard to its elements, its internal coherences and its categories and essences, e.g. the ‘redness in specie’. Therefore these essences are nothing ‘outside’ or ‘separated from’ the sensible objects. So on the one hand they are nothing like Platons ideas, but on the other hand they are also no ‘fictions’ or ‘names’, which are caused by the understanding, as the nominalists thought. They have an status of ‘ideal being’ [ideales Sein] and can be looked at in a similar way as the ‘real being’ [reales Sein], that is the sensible objects¹⁰.

⁷ See LU II 1, I. LU, §31, 100.

⁸ See LU II 1, I. LU, §31, 100f.

⁹ See LU II 2, VI. LU, §§45ff.

¹⁰ See LU II 1, II. LU, §8.

In my opinion, this argumentation of Husserl causes some questions. It reminds me of the empiricism and the discussion between Hume and Kant about the origin of the categories, e.g. the causality. In Hume, the origin of causality is the empirical world, habit, association and learning. And it seems to be the same kind of ‘taking the categories out of the empirical world’, if Husserl says, that the essences can be ‘seen in’ or ‘abstracted from’ the sensible objects e.g. pieces of red paper. The essence ‘redness in specie’ is given through several acts of perceiving individual things, the red pieces of paper. In the repetition of these individual acts we get knowledge of the essence ‘redness’ by an *act of identification* [Akt der Identifizierung]¹¹. We identify, what all these pieces of paper have in common. So the origin of the essence ‘redness in specie’ are at last the empirical things. But Husserls phenomenology is far from any empiricism. Therefore Husserl claims, that the categories like ‘unity’ or ‘causality’ are elements not of the empirical things, which are intended in acts of consciousness, but of these acts themselves. But how is this thesis compatible with the thesis about the ‘redness in specie’ and the act of identification? And what about the very abstract concepts like ‘being’, ‘object’ or ‘truth’? Can they also be found in acts, that are in any way related to the empirical world? Are their origins also perceived sensible objects?

To discuss this question I want to have a look at Husserls example of a categorial intuition, the intuition of the concept ‘and’, e.g. in the relation ‘Sokrates *and* Platon’, a book *and* a magazine’ and so on. First, the intuition of the conjunction ‘and’, that is of the category of collection [‘Kollektion’], can refer to two different kinds of connections [Verknüpfungen]: (a) the *sensible or real form of connection* [sinnliche oder reale Verknüpfungsform] and (b) the *categorial or ideal form of connection* [kategoriale oder ideale Verknüpfungsform]¹². The real forms of connection are as Husserl says, “moments of the real objects”, they are “contained in them, although only implicit and can be taken out of them by an abstracting perception”¹³. In contrast, the ideal forms of connection are forms which “belong to the act-synthesis, that is forms, which constitute themselves objective in the synthetic, on sensibility based acts”¹⁴. So the categorial intuition is a new kind of act, which constitutes the categorial forms like the ‘and’ as a new ‘high-order object’ [Gegenstand höherer Ordnung] or as an ‘epitome’ [Inbegriff]. These essences are part of the acts and not part of the intended real objects.

So in Husserls arguments we can find at least two different answers to the question about the origin of essences: an ‘answer of empiricism’ and ‘an answer of transcendentalism’. In my

¹¹ See LU II 2, VI. LU, §48, 162.

¹² See LU II 2, VI. LU, §48, 156.

¹³ LU II 2, VI. LU, §48, 156.

¹⁴ LU II 2, VI. LU, §48, 156.

opinion, these two answers are problematic and not really compatible. On the one hand, the essences are not a priori if abstracted from the empirical things, on the other hand the transcendental categories are just asserted to be build in special synthetic acts and to be viewed in the categorial intuition. But maybe it is a general problem of Husserl's 'intuition of essences' to refer on the one hand to empirical things and to the method of intuition and on the other hand to essences and categories, which are a priori and maybe no objects of any intuition.

However, in the fifth *Logical Investigation* and especially in the *Ideas I*, the intuition of essences focuses on the acts resp. experiences of consciousness and wants to find out the essences of these experiences and their a priori laws. In this context Husserl also works out the details of the method, which leads him to a fundamental knowledge of the functioning and the elements of consciousness. The eidetic reduction is now completed by a method called *transcendental-phenomenological reduction* or, in Greek, *epoché*. As the aim of the *Ideas I* is still an eidetic science, Husserl is now particularly interested in the essences of the experiences and acts of the pure consciousness. And the transcendental conception in the *Ideas I* is like the philosophy in the *Logical Investigations* also an attempt to overcome empiricism and psychologism. Therefore Husserl emphasizes on the difference between the essences and the matters of fact [Tatsachen] and the independence of the latter from the former. Essences needn't be based on empirical phenomena, they can also be based on objects of imagination and fantasy like a unicorn or a melody, which I have just created in my imagination. Real existing is not relevant for the intuition of essences: the essence of a melody I heard is the same as the essence of a melody I imagined. Consequently Husserl can say that apprehending essences doesn't imply anything of apprehending matters of fact¹⁵. Essences are universals and of necessity, matters of fact are individuals and accidental. Of course, there are relations between an essence and a matter of fact, e.g. the latter: heard tones, a seen triangle and so on can be starting point for the intuition of the essence, the 'tone in itself' or the 'eidos triangle', but they are not necessary for this intuition.

The intuition of essences has not less certitude than the sensible intuition. The former is, as Husserl says, an 'original giving intuition' [originär gebende Anschauung] and subject to the 'principle of all principles', which sets "that everything that is given originally (so to say in its incarnate reality [leibhafter Wirklichkeit]) in the intuition, has to be accepted as it is given,

¹⁵ See *Ideas I*, §4.

but only within the limits, in which it is given”¹⁶. So the intuition of essences, which is in no way like the method of *deduction* used in the science of mathematics and logic, is a method equally important for philosophy than the sensible intuition for the empirical sciences.

Now let’s have a closer look at the phenomenological method, as it is described in the *Ideas I*. In this book, which is one of the basic books about phenomenology, Husserl analyses the essence of the elements of pure consciousness in a detailed way. The way to find these essences includes at first two methodical steps: (1) the *transcendental-phenomenological reduction* and (2) the *eidetic reduction*. And there is a third step, which is described in other works of Husserl and which leads to a more definite eidos: (3) the *eidetic variation* [eidetische Variation].

The first one (1) lays open the field of the transcendental or pure consciousness and lets us leave the field of empirical and psychological phenomena, the second one (2) enables us to find the universals, the essences of the individual phenomena of consciousness and with the third one (3) we can isolate and define more precisely, what the essence contains or not. In the following, I want to describe these steps, which are the main parts of the phenomenological method as a whole.

Husserl’s explanation of the (1) *transcendental-phenomenological reduction* starts with the description of the ‘*natural attitude*’ [natürliche Einstellung] of men. In the natural attitude, we experience things and processes in nature, we observe them, feel them, describe them and so on. The things are simply taken as existing, there is no question about their reality. It is the way how we handle them in our everyday life or even in the empirical sciences. And in this attitude, it is not important whether we handle things, persons, theories, psychological matters of fact like feelings or thoughts, values or others. In other words, we perform a ‘*general thesis*’ [Generalthese]. This term of Husserl means just this, that we take everything in our environment as real existing without thinking or doubting of their reality, as e.g. Descartes carried out in his *Meditations*.

Now this attitude has to be changed, when we execute the phenomenological method. In the phenomenological attitude, we ‘put’ the general thesis ‘in parentheses’ [einklammern], we ‘neutralize’ [ausschalten] or ‘disable’ [außer Aktion setzen] it, we practice an ‘abstinence of judgement’ [Urteilsenthaltung] or, with the Greek term, an ‘epoché’. With these expressions Husserl signifies the specific way of phenomenology to disregard the widely discussed philosophical question about the reality of beings. The phenomenologist is interested in the

¹⁶ See *Ideas I*, §24.

essence and the elements of pure consciousness, not in the empirical reality. So he avoids any judgement of reality, e.g. if this table here really exists or not. Therefore the phenomenological attitude is different from a sceptic or cartesian attitude which doubts the real existence of things. The phenomenologist neither claims that things, other persons or psychological matters of fact exist, nor that they don't exist.

But what is left over, when we 'neutralize' the reality like this? In Husserl's opinion, the residuum remained is the transcendental ego with the pure experiences, which constitute all our knowledge. But this region of the transcendental ego is as a result of the *phenomenological epoché* not yet the region of universal essences, it is still a region of *individual* being, that is of individual experiences, e.g. the experience of perceiving this table in front of me. While the aim of the *Ideas I* are not the essences of things but of experiences of consciousness, Husserl focuses on the different kinds of experiences appearing in the region of transcendental being, e.g. the acts of perception, judgement, feeling or remembering. And to get the universal character, that is the *essences* of these acts, the (2) *eidetic reduction*, which has been described in the *Logical Investigations* has to be executed. But in the *Ideas I* the eidetic reduction is restricted to the experiences of consciousness, while the former analysed essences like the 'redness in specie' are now titled as 'transcendent essences' [transzendente Wesen] and therefore also 'put in parentheses' in the course of the phenomenological reduction¹⁷. Finally both methodical steps altogether, the phenomenological and the eidetic reduction, which are sometimes not clearly distinguished in Husserl and more or less presupposed than explained in the *Ideas I*, allow us to grasp the essences of pure experiences.

Husserl's most detailed example here is the act of perception¹⁸. Let us have a look at this example to see the phenomenological method operating and getting results. There is a white piece of paper lying on the table in front of me. I see it and touch it and have a real experience of this paper. This is the same with all the other things lying on the table: the books, pencils, letters and so on. So if we carry out the *phenomenological reduction*, we disregard if these things and our experience of them is real existing. Maybe it is just an imagination but we don't care. And if we carry out the second methodical step, the *eidetic reduction*, we abstract from the individual acts of perceiving a piece of paper, a book or a pencil and find some features all of these acts of perception have in common: e.g. they are surrounded by 'perceptions of the background' [Hintergrundsanschauungen], the things are given through 'adumbrations' [Abschattungen] or they consist of an acting element called 'noesis' and an

¹⁷ See *Ideas I*, §§60f.

¹⁸ See *Ideas I*, §35.

intended element called 'noema'. Thus in a first approach we get the essence of an act of perception resp. the 'perception in itself'. We find and record the terms which describe it. In a further step this essence of perception can be held against the essence of other kinds of experiences, e.g. experiences of judgement, to get the essence of an 'experience in itself' or 'experience in general'. And the result of this more abstracting 'intuition of essences' can be, that the main feature of the 'experience in itself' is the intentionality.

Hence, the intuition of essences is not a way of grasping the essences at once. It normally passes through several 'grades of clarity' [Klarheitsstufen], until we get a quite comprehensive and clear defined essence. When we eye a phenomenon of consciousness for the first time, e.g. the act of perceiving a piece of paper, it may not be clear, what this phenomenon is about, what it contains and what its essence is. So we have to carry out further steps to get a clear idea of the essence. One step to get the essences is the eidetic reduction with its acts of abstraction and identification we mentioned above. A further step is the so-called (3) *eidetic variation* [eidetische Variation] I want to present in the following.

Although the eidetic variation is mentioned in the *Ideas I*, Husserl works out this method more detailed in papers around the year 1925, which have been published after Husserl's death by his assistant Ludwig Landgrebe in 1938 titled *Experience and judgement* [Erfahrung und Urteil]. Husserl's arguments in this text are in some parts a more or less critical review of the former thoughts about the intuition of essences.

The basis for this intuition has been empirical phenomena like the red pieces of paper resp. their perception. The essences have been found by phenomenological and eidetic reduction. Now Husserl stresses, that every empirical phenomenon has an *horizon of possibilities*, in which this phenomenon can be grasped. For example, the red piece of paper can be viewed under different perspectives, from the left side, from above, in bright light or in dim light and so on. In all these different perspectives the 'redness in specie' is given as a constant. Therefore every actual experience indicates a number of possible experiences of a phenomenon. But the number and the kinds of possible experiences are not undetermined and absolutely free, they are determined by the essence itself. In our example, the essence 'redness in specie' cannot be found e.g. in a perception of a green piece of paper. Or the essence 'perception in itself' can be found in the various perceptions of papers, pencils, books and so on, but it cannot be found in an act of emotion, e.g. when I love this red paper, because it is a letter from a beautiful young lady. In Husserl's opinion, the essence predetermines and

restricts the experiences or phenomena which belong to it and the rules concerning these phenomena.

In his earlier writings he said that the essence can be found by abstracting and identifying what several things or experiences have in common. Now he stresses, that the very important ability for the intuition of essences is the *imagination*. The role of the imagination is to lead the phenomenologist to the possibilities which belong to the essences. Starting from the empirical related knowledge, e.g. the seen red paper, we imagine more similar phenomena or experiences, we make an *eidetic variation*. For example we imagine a red book, a red pencil and a piece of green paper. Abstracting from all these just imagined phenomena, recognizing their differences and identifying their constant, we get the idea of the essence 'redness in specie' clearer than before and this last but not least because of the fact, that the green paper does not belong to this essence. And when we keep all the variations we imagined in mind, we get the necessary elements and features or a kind of definition of the essence.

Now at the end of this lecture, I want to show briefly the three steps of the phenomenological method with another example: the perception of the table in front of me. In the *natural attitude* I just take him as existing and perhaps judge, that he is a quite new and expensive table. In the *phenomenological reduction* I disregard his existence or 'put it in parentheses' and get the pure experience of perceiving this table resp. the table as an element of this experience. After more acts of perception we can execute the *eidetic reduction* to get the constant in these acts, e.g. the essence 'table-being' or 'table in itself'. And finally in an *eidetic variation* I imagine similar experiences of perceiving a table resp. different kinds of tables, e.g. a yellow table, a small table, a round table and so on. And I imagine a table with three legs, only one leg and without any leg. Keeping all these variations in mind, I can see e.g. as a necessary feature of the essence 'table-being', that a table must have one or more legs, otherwise it is not a table, but a wood plate. Thus the essence is determined more comprehensive and the intuition of essences comes closer to its target.