Steven Crowell: *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger*
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Steven Crowell’s book is a welcome addition to the literature in phenomenology as well as a demonstration of the importance of phenomenology for those working in other areas of contemporary philosophy, especially those areas of Anglo-American philosophy concerned with normativity, meaning and the philosophy of action. Through a series of thirteen independent but thematically linked essays, he offers a novel account of the importance of normativity to phenomenology, a carefully argued re-thinking of the Husserlian and early Heideggerian accounts of intentionality in light of this account, and ample considerations of the relevance of this reading—and of the classical phenomenological tradition more generally—for broader issues of contemporary philosophical concern.

Part I lays out Crowell’s conception of phenomenology as transcendental philosophy in the Kantian tradition and explains his special emphasis on meaning and normativity. He takes as his starting point a very broad conception of normativity, which not only the usual suspects of explicitly formulated rules governing actions and practices but also “anything that serves as a standard of success or failure of any kind,” “in short, whatever it is that measures our speech and behavior” (2). This focus on norms pairs with Crowell’s ongoing interest in explicating the phenomenological tradition in terms of a “space of meaning” and his continued focus on the transcendental character of phenomenology to offer new takes on familiar terms and concepts in Husserl and Heidegger while remaining engaged with more traditional interpretations and disputes.

Such discussions are aided by Crowell’s clarification of a point often misunderstood in the Anglo-American literature that does attempt to deal with classical phenomenology: Phenomenological claims are not a “first-order,” but transcendental in the Kantian sense: they do not concern the metaphysical status of the objects of experience as such but the conditions of their possibility as intentional and meaningful for the subject. This “second order” move is open to the transcendental phenomenologist insofar as the phenomenological reduction brackets the existential status of the existing object, but not its presence as a “normatively structured unity of meaning.”

Crowell’s reinterpretation of the basic interests of transcendental phenomenology in terms of normativity and meaning allows him to illustrate clear connections between this tradition and recent work in the analytic tradition concerned with similar themes. Chapter five, for example, presents an admirably clear account of the way in which both phenomenologists conceptions of meaning do not fit into the contemporary dichotomy between semantic “internalism” and semantic “externalism,” since they reject from the outset the inner/outer dichotomy upon which such accounts are based. The error of readings that attempt to oppose Husserlian “internalism” to Heideggerian “externalism” with regard to meaning are traced to a misunderstanding of the status of Husserl’s noema as a sort of mental representation. Crowell thus dismisses in one stroke two of the most pernicious aspects of recent analytic readings of Husserl: the view (held by Hubert Dreyfus, among others), that Husserl’s thought is hopelessly tied up in an outdated “Cartesianism,” and the claim (first argued by Dagfinn Føllesdal and later developed by David Woodruff Smith and Ronald McIntyre), that Husserl’s noema should be interpreted as a mediating entity akin to Frege’s Sinn.

Like Robert Brandom’s pragmatic “expressivism” Husserl and Heidegger reject the priority of a broadly Cartesian model of internal “representational content,” opting instead for a conception of meaning that is “norm-governed, holistic, and quasi-inferential (109).” But a phenomenological conception of meaning must remain only “quasi-inferential: Crowell insists that an account of meaning cannot take norms as such—norms alone—as primitive, for risk of ending up in a situation like that of Brandom, who seems to abandon the claim that consciousness is even a necessary condition for intentionality. Instead, on Crowell’s reading, the phenomenological conception of immanence leads Husserl (and Heidegger) to a conception of representations that are “not mental items or brain states but ways of taking the world that are
defined in evidential—that is to say, intrinsically normative—terms” (105). Husserl and Heidegger thus both reject the view that leads to the internalism/externalism dichotomy, according to which “representation” implies two distinct ontological entities, the thing and the representation, while maintaining representation “in the sense that it insists that experience has descriptive content: the world is there in some particular way or other, as something” (113). And this normative “as-structure” for both implies an intentional subject with consciousness.

While this basic focus on normativity through intentional subjectivity is understood to be common to Husserl and Heidegger, in the historical and exegetical essays in Parts II and III of the book (devoted to Husserl and Heidegger respectively), Crowell ultimately follows Heidegger in questioning whether transcendental subjectivity can be identified with consciousness in the way it often is in Husserl’s writings. Through an original reading of the “annihilation of the world” thought experiment in *Ideas I* (§149) as showing “that consciousness cannot be intrinsically intentional, since it shows that there can be consciousness without intentionality,” Crowell argues that while Husserl correctly saw that consciousness is a necessary condition for intentionality, it is, from the standpoint of existential phenomenology, not sufficient to account for intentionality, since “acts of pure consciousness are abstractions; their thoroughly “peculiar” forms, or normative structure, cannot be understood apart from the practical contexts in which the subject, as embodied agent, is engaged” (25).

By rethinking intentionality in terms of the more primordial ontological “care structure” of Dasein, the early Heidegger is said to accomplish what Husserl envisioned but could not himself reach: an adequate account of the relationship between meaning, normativity, and the “self-responsibility” of the subject. For Crowell, Husserl’s own account of intentional subjectivity falls short due to his commitment to Husserl and Heidegger respectively), Crowell ultimately follows Heidegger in questioning whether transcendental subjectivity can be identified with consciousness in the way it often is in Husserl’s writings. Through an original reading of the “annihilation of the world” thought experiment in *Ideas I* (§149) as showing “that consciousness cannot be intrinsically intentional, since it shows that there can be consciousness without intentionality,” Crowell argues that while Husserl correctly saw that consciousness is a necessary condition for intentionality, it is, from the standpoint of existential phenomenology, not sufficient to account for intentionality, since “acts of pure consciousness are abstractions; their thoroughly “peculiar” forms, or normative structure, cannot be understood apart from the practical contexts in which the subject, as embodied agent, is engaged” (25).

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Crowell thus seeks an account of “the person” that amounts to more than mere consciousness, because in the world, and yet still does justice to the fact that we as intentional beings are both “embodied and embedded” and self-responsible agents that can act “in light of norms” and not merely “in accord with them.” These chapters of the book offer a welcome insistence on the continuity between the work of Husserl and the early Heidegger, and do much to highlight the phenomenological tenor of Being and Time.

Part III of the book is devoted primarily to an explication of this notion of responsibility in the early Heidegger, with a focus on the role of subjectivity, the care structure, and the central role accorded to conscience, reason, and discourse. Chapter ten—newly written for this volume and in many ways the centerpiece of Crowell’s broader thesis—merits a more detailed discussion.

Crowell here presents a reading of phenomenology in Being and Time that “flies in the face of received wisdom” by attributing a central and fundamental role to reason-giving, claiming that “Heidegger’s phenomenology of the call of conscience entails that giving reasons (logon didonai) belongs to authentic discourse and provides the key to what discourse (Rede) means ontologically” (214). Crowell argues that the major concern of Division II of Being and Time is the ontological irreducibility of the first-person perspective, which is revealed in Heidegger’s analysis of breakdown (216). Against many pragmatic readings of the text which focus almost exclusively on the social praxis aspects of Heidegger’s account, Division I is shown to rest necessarily upon the central insights of Division II, which “uncovers a possibility of Dasein’s being without which there could be no totality of significance, or ‘world’” (215).

Central to this interpretation is the claim that acting “for the sake of” [Seinkoennen], also always involves a trying. While this does imply a certain beholdenness to socially determined norms, Crowell emphasizes that it also implies a first-person beholdenness to the normatively determined criteria of success or failure “and that means, to act not only in conformity to such a measure (as the animal acts in conformity to the measure of survival) but to act in light of it as a measure, that is, to take my measure by it.” (219). To capture the distinction between acting in conformity with a norm vs. acting in light of one, we need an account of Dasein in the sense in which not just “being,” but my “own being (I myself) is at issue” (218). Crowell finds such an account in Division II’s discussion of breakdown, “being guilty” and conscience (§58-59).

This account of breakdown and conscience is further interpreted—in line with Crowell’s emphasis on philosophical responsibility the ontological priority of the first-person, but with a clear nod to the “Pittsburgh School”—in terms of being answerable to oneself in the sense in which one is “accountable to others in the game of giving and asking for reasons” (222). Crowell reads the role of reason and the “care-structure” in Division II of Being and Time—where reason does not play a major explicit role—with the help of the contemporaneous essay “On the Essence of Ground” and the associated lecture course on Metaphysical Foundations of Logic (GA 26). Being accountable to myself necessarily involves being accountable to others since Dasein is essentially Mitsein, and because “to be accountable is to stand toward factic givens as toward reasons, and since by their very structure reasons are (potentially) public, I cannot be accountable for myself without at the same time being accountable to others, indeed to every other” (225).

This account of the public nature of reason-giving leads Crowell to debates about the status of discourse (Rede) in Being and Time, where he turns to Heidegger’s conception of Vorgriift, as a manifestation of “communicative intent,” to insist that in the early Heidegger discourse should be understood in terms of linguisticality, “the moment of normativity as such: the anticipation of a shared public form that lifts the expressions and gestures of groping animality into the clearing (Lichtung) of being (intelligibility).” Thus “discourse as the appropriation of being-with … is linguisticality in the sense of an explicit orientation toward the universal (measure as norm), and it is grounded in my being answerable” (234). This provides the needed account of the fact that we as philosophically responsible subjects can act “in light of norms” and not merely “in accord with them” and thus provides the final element of Crowell’s account of intentional subjectivity beyond mere consciousness.

Part IV applies the insights of the earlier parts of the book, especially the novel reading of the early Heidegger in Part III, to some broader problems of contemporary relevance in action theory and practical philosophy. In Chapter 11, Crowell contrasts his Heideggerian transcendental account of the subjective underpinnings of normativity with the recent transcendental-Kantian account of Christine
Korsgaard. Whereas Korsgaard’s account of our responsiveness to norms relies centrally on a notion of self-consciousness, Heidegger’s is expressed (in accordance with Crowell’s interpretation of intentional subjectivity and Husserlian consciousness in Parts II and III) in a way that “break[s] with that rationalistic tradition” by replacing it with an ontology of Dasein terms of the structure of care (240). Chapter 12 finds the resources for a phenomenological theory of the intentionality of action in Husserl and Heidegger, and shows how—despite important differences—the role of history is central for both. Here again, Husserl is said to be on the right track—for Crowell, practical philosophy is the “ultimate horizon” Husserl’s thought, “since the point of phenomenology as rigorous science is to ground the ultimate norms by which humanity is to orient itself” (261)—but in a way that demands ontological “deepening” by a Heideggerian phenomenology of praxis. Chapter 13 extends the discussion of practical reason in the previous two chapters to examine the place of moral reasoning in Heidegger’s ontology, arguing—in line with Part III’s account of Dasein in terms of answerability through reasons to self and others—that “agency also entails the unconditional—that is, moral—obligation to be accountable to others. A Heideggerian agent is thus one for whom practical reason, as reason-giving, is a moral obligation” (284).

Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger is well-researched, carefully and clearly argued, and bears the marks of extended engagement not only with primary and secondary literature in the phenomenological tradition, but with a number of important issues in contemporary analytic philosophy that are also of interest to phenomenologists. (Indeed, perhaps the greatest merit of the book is the way in which it might help to remind those working in the analytic tradition still reluctant to engage with their phenomenological counterparts of the rich research they are missing).

In terms of historical scholarship regarding Husserl and Heidegger, there is one small but important tension in the book that I think merits mention. (This is probably explained by the fact that the book originated as a series of independent essays, and the author admits to such difficulties of framing in the introduction.) At many points, Crowell seems to claim not only that the Husserlian approach to the topics under discussion by means of consciousness is insufficient, but also that it must be complemented by precisely the sort of existential account offered by Heidegger. And yet at other points, Crowell suggests that his “wider point” concerning meaning, normativity, and self-responsibility can be made from within the Husserlian phenomenological framework. Thus it is not always clear—across the different essays—exactly how great Crowell takes the distance between his narrower thesis concerning the improvements Heidegger makes to Husserl’s account and his wider point concerning the centrality of a phenomenological account of subjectivity as such for contemporary work on meaning, normativity and intentionality.

Because of this ambiguity, Crowell’s welcome attempt to bring Husserl and Heidegger closer together as transcendental phenomenologists has the unfortunate (and I think unintended) effect of downplaying the resources for an account of meaning and normativity to be found in the later work of Husserl himself, especially in the period of “lifeworld phenomenology” after—and likely influenced by—Being and Time. While Crowell does not ignore the contributions of the later Husserl on topics such as embodiment, historicity, and intersubjectivity in relation to normativity and meaning, they do not seem to be granted the same degree of exegetical benefit-of-the-doubt extended to the novel interpretations of the roughly contemporaneous work of Heidegger. A closer investigation of “philosophical responsibility” in this later work of Husserl along the same lines—despite his continued insistence on the constituting role of consciousness—might further enrich our understanding of phenomenological approaches to these topics.

This is not so much a critical objection as a remark to the effect that there is certainly more work to be done to fill out the transcendental phenomenological account of meaning, normativity, and intentionality as initiated by Crowell. Anyone interested in such a project, in the important themes of normativity and meaning in the classical phenomenological tradition more generally, and in the relevance of Husserl and Heidegger for contemporary work on these topics in other areas of philosophy, would do well to begin from the thoughtful interpretations and wide-reaching insights in Crowell’s book.