I. Husserl's quest for apodictic certainty leads him to transcendental consciousness

Our goal for today is to gain a basic understanding of Husserl's concept of the “lifeworld,” and to begin to see what about his phenomenology would be called into question by Heidegger and the twentieth-century existentialists. Let's begin with the endpoint of our last class. The following question was raised: Doesn't the notion of the transcendental field (what Prof. Flynn characterized as the “view from nowhere”) and Husserl's focus on essences over facts somehow make phenomenology artificial, and not connected to human experience? Actual human experience, after all, is precisely not a view from nowhere. It is always a view from my perspective. I do the math.

The first thing to notice here, is that the move to transcendental consciousness is not a move away from subjectivity; it is only a move away from personal subjectivity. The transcendental field is still defined by the intentional (noetic) relation. It must be so defined, because for Husserl there just isn't anything meaningful “outside” or “beyond” this relation. The move to the transcendental level is thus a move away from my subjectivity (and as I will suggest in moment, for Husserl, even from any specifically human subjectivity) to subjectivity or consciousness as such. Husserl thinks this de-personalization is essential for his goal of securing the foundations of a truly “rigorous science.”

Basic arithmetic can help us to illustrate what he has in mind. As opposed to the principles used in sciences such as biology or economics, basic mathematical principles are not merely highly probable, but absolutely certain. Though we may at times use inductive methods to arrive at certain principles (just as we might argue that children learn that 1+1=2 by inference from a large set of examples), the mathematical truth that (for example) 1 + 1 = 2 is not itself inductively verified truth: we don't think that it is merely highly probable that an apple together with another apple will make two apples. It is mathematically certain. This is a major difference between the certainty of mathematical principles and mere principles of high probability. Mathematical certainty holds irrespective of the number of actual cases: the elderly person who has had occasion to encounter a pair of apples many, many times in her long life is not more certain that one apple and another apple make two than is the ten year old who has only known how to count for a few years and has encountered significantly fewer apples in his relatively short life history. Mathematical certainties just don't work this way. There is no possible increase (or decrease) in probability here: 1 + 1 = 2 is never more true or less true; it is an absolute certainty, it is, in Husserl's terms, apodictic.

Our example also helps to show how such apodictic certainties must have another necessary characteristic, one which is equally important for Husserl's quest to found a truly rigorous science: These truths have an impersonal character; they are not relative to the particular observer. The old woman and the young boy do not just happen to have the same concept of two: the concept of two, as an apodictic number concept, is necessarily the same for every conscious observer of the apples. In this sense, there is only one number two, and it will have the same meaning for every consciousness. This is why professor Flynn emphasized the notion of the transcendental field as a “view from nowhere.” As Descartes recognized, the number two is not personal: it is not mine or yours or anyone else's. It is the same for every observer.

In fact, Husserl will take this idea even further: for him, not only is apodicticity impersonal, it is not even necessarily human! For, Husserl thinks, we have no phenomenologically justifiable reason to think that the horse or the dog operates with a different conception of “twoness” than we do. This is why Husserl usually refers to the transcendental field in terms of ego, consciousness, or subjectivity, but never in terms of the human or humanity. As he writes in the essay we read for last time, “Phenomenology and Anthropology,” [135, just above mid-page]:
I lived in a world of experience whose existence I took for granted. But since this world of experience must now remain in question, my being as man among men and among other realities of the world has become questionable too and is also subject to the epoché. Due to this epoché, human solitude has been transformed into transcendental solitude, the solitude of the ego. As an ego I am not this man in the existing world, but the ego who doubts the existence of the world, as well as its being thus-or-so, without reservations, or, in other words, the ego which still has its universal experience but has bracketed its existential validity.

Based on what we said about the transcendental field a moment ago, we can see why Husserl says that the transcendental ego has “universal” experience: the transcendental ego is not me as human person, and therefore the experience which it has is not my experience as a human person; any more than two is my number and not someone else’s. But notice that this transcendental relation of consciousness to its objects is nonetheless still an intentional relation: it is still a relation between consciousness and its objects. It is just that consciousness is now to be understood not as my human consciousness, but as any consciousness: consciousness “as such.”

But why does Husserl think he needs to do this? Why isn't it enough to say that apodicticity is universal for human beings? Think back to our first session on Husserl, in which Prof. Flynn talked about psychologism. [What was that?] We said that psychologism (not to be confused with psychology) was the view that logical laws were nothing more than empirically discoverable psychological regularities. Simplifying things a little, we could say that, for psychologistic logicians, logical principles, including mathematical principles, are not essentially different than the various conditions cataloged in the DSM-IV (the manual listing psychiatric disorders and used by psychiatrists in diagnosing patients). On the psychologistic view (again, simplifying quite a bit) that 1+1=2 is a mere regularity, a habit of human thinking, just like a disorder listed in the DSM-IV; the only difference is that arithmetic is a universal habit of thought, whereas psychiatric disorders only affect a minority of the population (this is why we call them dis-orders; they are defined as being ab-normal or outside the norm). But characterizing logic in this way is unacceptable for Husserl, because the grounds for making such psychological claims are sets of observed data, empirical evidence derived from the existing world, and this is what must be bracketed (but not forgotten or taken away), by the epoché. As Hume recognized, observed empirical data can never give us more than high degrees of certainty via induction. This is perfectly fine for many disciplines, and it has many good and useful purposes. But it is not certainty, and thus for Husserl, the mathematician-turned-philosopher, it is not enough.

This is why—to return to the passage we looked at a moment ago—Husserl said that under the epoché the “other realities of the world become questionable” and that the transcendental ego has “bracketed the existential validity” of its experience. The objects of experience are still present to consciousness; however, when we are talking about transcendental consciousness, we are not allowed to make any assumptions about the existence of those objects; we have to treat them simply as objects of meaning. For Husserl, in the transcendental field, in the “view from nowhere,” there is no existential difference between apples, ideal mathematical objects, and unicorns. Simplifying things quite a bit, we can say that traditional epistemology would usually want to differentiate these objects ontologically, in terms of their type of existence or being: the first is a “real” spatio-temporal object, the second an “ideal” mathematical entity, and the third is “non-real”; it is only imaginary. But once we have bracketed the question of existential validity, and we see these objects at the transcendental level, exclusively as meanings, the three cannot be differentiated in this way. We still recognize them as distinct types of object but they are distinguished only by what Husserl calls their essential meaning, or their essence.

This is why Husserl’s famous notion of the Wesensschanz [what was that again?] is strictly distinguished from standard scientific methods of induction. Husserl thinks that inductive principles like those used in biology and economics, while certainly useful, presuppose the existence of a “real” existing world outside of the intentional relation, and thus remain at the level of the “natural attitude.” Husserl claims that the Wesensschanz does not presuppose the world in this way; that, with the help of the eidetic reduction, we intuit the essences of intentional objects as essential meanings, and not problematically as existing things. Thus, the eidetic reduction is not induction, it is an “eidetic seeing” or “seeing of essences (in German, literally: Wesens-schanz).
II. The primacy of the lifeworld as the world of immediate experience

But what does all this abstract logical stuff have to do with the Lifeworld? Well, remember that Husserl claims that, in the phenomenological reduction, -in bracketing- we do not lose the world. We only bracket our presuppositions about its actual existence. In “bracketing being,” we do not lose the content of the world. If we did, the eidetic reduction (Wesensschau) would not be possible, since there would be nothing other-than-consciousness for consciousness to reduce.

And yet Husserl clearly cannot characterize this other-than-consciousness in the usual way, as the “external,” or “physical” world “outside” of consciousness, because this way of looking at things presupposes the independent existence of the world, which we bracket in the phenomenological reduction. Because of this, Husserl claims, instead, that the ultimate “source” of essences, which is reduced in the eidetic reduction, is not the existing world of the natural scientist, but the world of our immediate experience. And this world is immediate not only insofar as it doesn't involve the future or the past, but also because it is unmediated by existential presuppositions. When a car runs a red light and I instinctively dive from the crosswalk to the sidewalk to avoid getting run over, I am not in that moment concerned with the real existence of the car. I don't pause to ponder whether it really exists, or to assure my self that it does; I just act. For Husserl, there can be no presupposition of existence in the lived moment; there is only the immediate, essential situation. (Things are actually a bit more complex than this, since the “living present” is defined in terms of the temporal structure of protention and retention, the adumbration of fulfilled and unfulfilled intentions, and lots of other technical stuff, but we can ignore all that here.)

Now Husserl insists that, in terms of consciousness, the immediate experience of diving out of the way of the car is not structurally different than when my attention is completely absorbed in working out a mathematical proof, or in reading a complex text. In all such moments, when my attention is fixed, existence is at issue only reflectively, after the fact. Existence is not a concern in the living present of immediate experience, and for Husserl it is this immediacy of experience that is always primary. When our attention is completely absorbed in the present moment, when we are concentrating and not distracted, we often say that “time flies,” even though the time as measured scientifically—by the clock on the wall, for example—is constant. For Husserl the former “subjective time” is primary: it is only because of the basic structures of subjective immediate experience that we have the mediated objective time of physics (of the clock). If you disagree and say objective time is first—even if you're Einstein—Husserl will simply say that you are still presupposing the existence of the world; that you have not successfully accomplished the reduction and are stuck in the “natural attitude.”

So, in his later philosophy, Husserl attempts to characterize the world as most fundamentally a world of such immediate experience, and he calls this the “lifeworld.” For him, this world—and not the exactly measured, inductively characterized world of the sciences—is the real locus of actual human experience, and thus of life. This world is intersubjective (shared by different persons/subjectivities and not just my own), and is conceptually distinct from and prior to the empirical world of the scientist, since the theories of science are abstractions from immediate experience. This does not mean that such abstractions are invalid, but only that we risk misunderstanding them and their place in our lives if we forget that they are founded on something more fundamental to those lives; that they presuppose and are even grounded in the lifeworld. (By the way, Husserl also thinks that this explains why the arts and products of our culture like music or movies cannot be understood in natural scientific terms, and yet can register as “true” for us. They are just another way of representing immediate experience, and in this sense they are another region of conscious activity at the same level as the sciences (and not above or below them). Since they are not formal, they are in a way closer to our lived experience, since they do not “abstract” from it as does, say, physics or chemistry. This is why, on the “phenomenology” handout, Prof. Flynn characterized the lifeworld as “a reduction from the cultural world.”)

The notion of a “Crisis,” which became a major theme along with the lifeworld in Husserl's later philosophy, arises from these observations. The problem is that the rational chain linking scientific “abstractions” to their initial “activation” in experience has become way too long, resulting in the unhappy situation that we no longer understand the relation of our science to our everyday life in the lifeworld. This leads to the “Crisis of the Sciences.”
problem is thus not that scientific discoveries are invalid, but that their validity has not been clearly justified in relation to the lifeworld. Husserl worries that, in taking the world of science as the primary world, we overestimate the proper bounds of such disciplines, and thus are tempted to think that the natural sciences are the only answer and the answer to all our problems. His response is not to oppose science with some other specific discipline (this would just start the problem over again), but to insist that there is an absolutely primary science, a “first philosophy,” which underlies natural science. This is, of course, his own “science,” phenomenology, i.e., the philosophy of the lifeworld.

But, as many of Husserl's own students pointed out, the problem is that only a certain type of person is going to be able to realize this: the person who can undertake the reductions and see things from under the epoché. For we cannot recognize the difference between the world of science and the more fundamental lifeworld as long as we remain stuck in the “natural attitude.”

III. The objection from Heidegger and Sartre: Essences? OK, but don't forget about existence.

While they find many important insights in Husserl's the notion of the life-world, it is this just-mentioned claim that Heidegger and Sartre will question. While they do not deny that there is more to experience than the empirical scientific world of microscopes and atoms (they understand the insight underlying Husserl's turn to the lifeworld), they think that Husserl has “reduced” far too much. On their view, Husserl's insistence on “bracketing” being or existence overlooks an important and irreducible aspect of our experience: the brute fact of our existence; the fact that we live in a real world; that sometimes things don't work out; that people die, that things are sometimes boring and painful, and above all, that life is uncertain. Heidegger calls this the “thrownness” of our existence: we are thrown into a world which was not of our making, and which we never fully comprehend. Our being “is an issue for us.” This is just what it means to be-in-the world. From the perspective of Heidegger and Sartre, since Husserl insists that philosophy begins at the level of certainties and “transcendental consciousness,” his conception of philosophy cannot account for all the uncertainties that characterize our existence. On their view, Husserl cannot explain phenomena like what Kierkegaard called “angst” [What was that again?]. Since his philosophy is couched in terms of certainties and essences, he cannot account for the fundamental uncertainty of actual human life, which can include experiences which suggest the ultimate meaninglessness of existence. These aspects of experience seem to Heidegger and the later existentialists a far cry from the “apodicticity” of Husserl's essences and Wesenschau.

But, as Prof. Flynn notes on the “phenomenology” handout, from Husserl's perspective, this view is just the result of the incapacity of thinkers like Heidegger and Sartre to move beyond the “natural attitude.” Since they are not working at the transcendental level in his sense, they are, according to Husserl, not doing philosophy but only psychology and anthropology, since their object of study is not consciousness but the human mind in the world (in the case of psychology) or humankind as existing in the world (in the case of anthropology). While they may be giving us some interesting analyses or literary exercises, they have not begun from apodictic certainty in Husserl's very strict sense, and thus from his perspective they cannot be engaged in genuine philosophy (i.e., phenomenology). While the existentialists and Husserl agree about many things and have many similarities, they disagree over this very fundamental point. To characterize this disagreement in simplified philosophy 101 terms, they disagree on the question, “What comes first, essence or existence.” This is a question you'll have to decide for yourselves as you leave Husserl and begin to read these later authors in the next section of the course.