

# Husserl's Life-world and some critical Reflections

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## ABSTRACT

I intend to make certain observations on Husserl's notion of the Life-world. Husserl seems not to be absolutely clear on the idea of the Life-world in the sense that he never explicitly and clearly explained it. He seems to play with different senses of the Life-world. Does Husserl conceive of the Life-world as a full-fledged cultural-historical world or does he conceive of it as a bare perceptual-natural world? There is a good deal debate and Husserl scholars are divided on this.

A second and related issue may be taken up. In so far as the Life-world is understood as the concrete world of human experience, Husserl maintains unquestioningly that it is relative to a specific inter-subjective community but he also speaks of 'content with other human beings.'

There is a plurality of Life-worlds. Once the plurality and relativity are admitted the question of truth poses a problem. How do we account for the truth of the knowledge of objects encountered in the world? Further how would Husserl accommodate relativism within his essentialistic framework? Indeed Husserl's Life-world has generated the some kind of puzzlement and controversy regarding the relativity and plurality of it, as has been generated by Wittgenstein's concept of the form of life. The controversy in this regard between Garver (only one format life) and Hacker (many forms of life), is strikingly parallel to the Iso Kern-David Carr controversy regarding the Life-world. At this stage we can provide only tentative answers to these critical questions.

**Key words:** Observation, Explicitly, concrete, Life-world, inter-subjective, Plurality, relativity, essentialistic, relativism.

## Husserl's Life-world and some critical Reflections

### Section I

In what follows I intend to make certain observations on Husserl's notion of the life world. He seems not to be absolutely clear on the idea of the life-world in the sense that he never explicitly and clearly

explained it. He seems to play with different senses of the life-world. Does Husserl conceive of the life-world as a full-fledged cultural-historical world or does he conceive of it as a bare perceptual-natural world? There is a good deal debate and the Husserl scholars are divided on this.

David Carr<sup>1</sup> argues that Husserl vacillates between the two conceptions. Another Husserl scholar, Iso Kern<sup>2</sup> draws a similar distinction and maintains that while in Husserl's early writings (that is, before 1920) the notion of a pre-theoretical world of natural experience is dominant, in *The Crisis*, the life worlds are many rather than one and are relative to the various cultural contexts. G. Soffer<sup>3</sup> says that neither of these views is correct. Husserl in numerous passages of *The Crisis* does distinguish between the two senses of the life-world and also indicates their relation. Which of these is Husserl's position is not easy to say, for Husserl could not finish his project-Part III of *The Crisis*.

A second and related issue may be taken up. In so far as the Life-world is understood as the concrete world of human experience, Husserl maintains unquestioningly that it is relative to a specific inter-subjective community but he also speaks of 'content with other human beings.' He says,

...in our continuously flowing world-perceiving we are not isolated but rather have, within it, contact with other human beings. Each one has his perceptions, his personifications, his harmonious experiences, devaluation of his certainties into mere possibilities, doubts, questions, illusions. But in living with one another, each one can take part in the life of the others. Thus in general, the world exist not only for isolated men but for the community of men; and this is due to the fact that what is straightforwardly perceptual is communalized.<sup>4</sup>

There is a plurality of life-worlds. Once the plurality and relativity are admitted the question of truth poses a problem. How do we account for the truth of the knowledge of objects encountered in the world? Further, how would Husserl accommodate relativism within his essentialistic framework? Indeed Husserl's life-world has generated the same kind of puzzlement and controversy regarding the relativity and plurality of it, as has been generated by Wittgenstein's concept of the form of life. The controversy in this regard between Garver<sup>5</sup> (only one from of life) and Hacker<sup>6</sup> (many forms of life), is strikingly parallel to the Iso Kern-Daavid Carr controversy regarding the life-world. At this stage we can provide only tentative answers to these critical questions.

With regard to the relativity question we can say that relativity does not mean total breakdown in communication. One may not participate in the life-world of another but this does not suggest that he cannot understand the goings-on in the life-world of others. We may also note that social conventions and practices differ from one community to another. That need not particularly disturb us. These conventions, which have become a practice with us, are accepted unreflectively. They have a social role to play. They help smooth relation to other, making certain activities more predictable and easier for performing and participating. They make it possible for one to relax in various social situations and reduce tensions.

It is artificial to treat different cultures as self-contained system. A fully individual culture is at best a rare thing. Cultures, sub-cultures, fragments of culture constantly meet with one another, exchange and modify practice and activities. Social practices could never come forward with a certificate saying that they belong to genuinely different cultures, so that they were granted immunity to alien judgments and reactions. It is true that when a society is exposed to another culture, it is a 'confrontation'. The new situation requires the society to confront it, to see beyond its existing rules and practices. People can and must react when they are confronted with another culture. They do so by using their existing notion. The components of a given culture can always stretch beyond the boundaries. However, the possibility of surmounting the boundaries is a matter of hope and aspiration. Even if there is no way in which divergent belief-systems and practices can be brought to convergence by independent inquiry or rational argument this fact will not necessarily imply relativism. Each outlook would still be making claims it intends to apply to the whole world, not just to that part of it which is its 'own' world. In this connection we may refer to Paul Taylor's article 'The Ethnocentric Fallacy'<sup>7</sup>. Taylor's argument is especially concerned with moral relativism. Nevertheless, it has relevance for our purpose. Let us state briefly Taylor's argument. He says that if someone's moral convictions are relative to a particular society then there is the danger of committing the 'ethnocentric fallacy'. For example, if we assume that the moral code of the liberal western society is the only genuine morality, the only true morality, then it becomes nonsensical to talk about alternative moral codes, even though we must recognize that other societies in the history of civilization have been able to function on the basis of other codes. Thus the argument from relativity may be given an interpretation according to one's own advantage, namely, that one's own view of the world is true and of another's false. So what relativity shows us is that we have a complexity of reaction to social customs, practices, approaches and attitudes. Relativity, as we have already said, does not mean breakdown of communication. So even if there are many life-worlds that fact is not after all an unbearable state of affairs.

Is there any link between these two conceptions, namely Husserl's life-world and Wittgenstein's form of life? Before taking this comparison let us say a few words on Wittgenstein's notion of the form of life. The expression 'form of life' was coined and used by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is the given and has to be accepted as such. It consists of the activities, practices, behavior, ideals, and beliefs of a community. It is the foundation of all that we claim to know. Our doubts and enquiries have their explanations in the form of life. Our beliefs are simply embedded as certainties in our practices, that is, in our actions and understandings. For example, the belief that the earth exists for there are physical objects in neither justified nor unjustified. It lies within a practice like our life. Even if we give justification can be given. We have reached the rock bottom and no further evidence can be produced. The end is an ungrounded way of acting.

We may now state the affinity between the notion of the form of life and that of the life-world. We know that according to Husserl the life world is pre-given, pre-theoretic and ultimate foundation of all our theoretical enterprises and social communication. Wittgenstein's form of life is also the pre-theoretic, ultimate ground on which mastery of any language game depends. That the form of life is pre-theoretic and beyond justification becomes clear from the *Philosophical Investigation* where he says, "When the rock bottom is reached, the spade is turned back." Again, "what has to be accepted the given, is a form of life"<sup>8</sup>. On this account, justification of claims is unavailable outside the framework of a practice. Secondly, all theoretical truths-logical, mathematical and scientific-find ultimate validation in evidences grounded in the life world. Similarly, the most basic concept of logic and mathematics like 'being the same', 'difference', 'identity', etc. are rooted in the form of life. They are not based on common agreement; they are agreement in form of life.

To turn to the question of truth now. It can be discerned that life-world truths have some amount of inexactness, and they are situational critique of Husserl's earlier 'absolutist' conception in the *Prolegomena*, according to which the absolute conception is the one 'we all' intend *whenever* we talk about truth. Still it may be argued in favour of Husserl that even in the case of life-world truths three basic phenomenological criteria are fulfilled

1. They are derived from experience;
2. Their formal consistency can be demonstrated; and
3. The concept can be given, fulfilled in intuition

## Section II

It has been claimed that, Husserl evolved a radical historicism in *The Crisis*. This is announced decades ago by Merleau Ponty<sup>9</sup> and more recently by David Bell<sup>10</sup> and James Edie<sup>11</sup> among others. Their claim is that Husserl's notion of the meanings constituted in experience changed. He came to see that the constitution of meaning was, first and fundamentally, set in the *Lebenswelt*. And second that the meaning fundamentally and basically constituted in the *Lebenswelt* are all given to us from historical, cultural, and social settings. In other words, though we may 'put' the world together, although we may 'constitute', we use, as *ingredients* that which our time, our society, our culture give us. Thus even though there may be some transcendental function of constitution which is characteristic of reason, or more generally the characteristic of any form of cognition, and which is time escaping, time-less, (consciousness as viewed in phenomenology is an ideal, timeless realm) the 'material' constituted is always temporal, historical, finite and contingent. Constitution is no longer an accomplishment; constitution is accomplished by 'we', and not by 'I'. Thus any adequate account of this world and our experience of it must be historical, which is but another way of stating the historicist thesis.

Further, if we were to explore in more detail the specifics of how we constitute the *Lebenswelt*, which is our own, we would have to understand the insertion of tradition and historical 'pre-judgment/prejudice' into our lives as well as the configuring role played by expectation. In other words we would need to make sense of our actual existential situation, we would move our phenomenological investigation from the 'view from nowhere'<sup>12</sup> to the inescapable conditions and restriction set on us by the undeniable and non-ignorable fact that we are creatures of time and place, and hence, creatures bounded by history and finitude. The transcendental ego has become the existential subject. This is the claim of Bell and Edie.

Anyone who reads *The Crisis* chapter dealing with the *Lebenswelt* will have to agree that the notion of layered, additive, genetic, historically, developmental meaning is the operative view of constitution in the *Lebenswelt*. This is not controversial. The controversy concern the structure of that meaning-is it purely factual, historical, contingent and the source of the meaning? Again is it merely factual, historical, contingent? If the meaning that make up the intelligibility of the world, must be traced back to their founding in the *Lebenswelt*, and the structures and content of meaning in the *Lebenswelt* are merely contingent and accidental and their source is only historical and incidental then there is a radical

historicism that easily outstrips Dilthey, and introduces a degree of contingency into intelligibility that over radicalizes Heidegger's presence. In such a case, we could have to look to a Nietzsche, a Foucault or a Rorty to find a position as thoroughly free of the type of necessity Husserl had previously advocated for this entire career. But from what we have said is far, we think it is rather that the 'radical historical Husserl' is the more difficult interpretation to sustain. Indeed Paul Ricoeur poses a question that occurs to all thoughtful readers a Husserl who come to *The Crisis* after studying his earlier works, namely: How can a philosophy of the cogito, of the radical return to the ego as founder of all being, become capable of philosophy of history? <sup>13</sup> So the question is not "is there a developmental structure to the *Lebenswelt*?" It is not enough to say that they are historical, one must figure out what 'historical' means for Husserl.

Historical does not mean contingent, accidental which is the view of Heidegger. Husserl objects against it in "The Vienna Lectures" and in *The Crisis*. In Husserl's *Crisis* to say 'all is historical' is readily to say that constitution is genetic and not just static. Secondly, there is a domain, which is the origin of all forms of meaning—that is the *Lebenswelt*. But the point of origination is bound to an a-historical necessary pattern, which is the essence of reason, which is followed or exemplified or instantiated by the temporal, historical genesis of meaning. The necessary patterns of development are not the kind that Kant claimed since there are not empty forms or concepts waiting to be filled with sensory content. Rather what we see in historical genesis is a dynamic pattern inscribed in the structure and meaning of reason itself. At bottom, human existence can't be held only within the narrow sphere of science and philosophy, or even of pure consciousness, rather it embraces such aspects as the religious, the aesthetic, the ethical, the political, the practical, the technical and others. Human existence is first and foremost existence in the life-world. Thus it is natural that reason has to exert an active influence on those aspects as well. Through putting forward the concept of the *Lebenswelt* Husserl still tries to reduce European man primarily to the philosophical and scientific life and thus regards the life-world as one that is of significance, first of all in the field of epistemology and scientific knowledge. As a result, the other more practical fields of human existence along with the active role of reason seem to vanish over the horizon of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, which is mainly concerned with pure consciousness.

Schools of irrationalism as Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's voluntarism, Bergson's philosophy of life, Heidegger's and Sartre's Existentialism and so on reality undermined not only modern rationalism but also the rational spirit itself. Of course, there is neither absurdity nor error in rationalism itself as the essence of human beings, but when rationalism places special stress only on the rational, namely the

universal and necessary aspects of human existence, and overlooks and even dismisses the significance of its sensual, individual and contingent aspects, rationality itself becomes one sided and even an evil. It is to be noted that not only would human existence be fragmentary without the latter aspects as intrinsic constituents, which can't be simply reduced to and neglected by the rational but they also have become more and more important in the real and daily life of European man since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the final analysis it is the especially historical situation that gives rise to the irrationalist reaction. The significance of the irrational opposes the rational not only in the field of scientific knowledge but also in the more practical fields of human existence and thereby attempts to deconstruct reason as the center of western life.

In the *Lebenswelt* Husserl seems to exercise a reduction. The life-world is by no means immediately accessible as such to the average person in the 'natural attitude', specially insofar as he has come under the spell of the scientific interpretation of the world. As Husserl sees it, a peculiar kind of first reduction, a suspension of science, is indispensable in order to get sight of the life-world and its structures. In other words, even the study of the life-world is already a type of phenomenology, though this may still be a 'mundane phenomenology'. The first step towards a discovery of the characteristic features of the life-world would be thorough inspection, analysis and description of the life-world as we encounter it. Husserl has made some such studies in the field of perception and other intention acts, Nevertheless, Husserl was always aware of the significance of 'fringes' or as he called them "horizons" for the phenomena as the essential features of their make-up.

Herbert Spiegelberg in his *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*<sup>14</sup> opines that the reduction of various levels has to be traced to the structures of the life-world which will function as a sound basis proper guide of Husserl phenomenological reduction.

## Notes and References

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