

Edmund Husserl and the Crisis of Europe

Caitlin Smith

I

EDMUND HUSSERL (1859-1938) was the last great European rationalist, albeit a unique and even paradoxical one: the father of phenomenology but also of existentialism; the Cartesian whose researches in the end eviscerate the cogito; the mathematician-logician whose ultimate concern was spirit. The final phase of his thought, like the final phase of his life, unfolded in Nazi Germany in the years just prior to the Second World War. The memory and shadow of the Great War of 1914-1918 were still fresh, the essential historical meaning of which had yet to be understood, and which could never be understood:

...if history has nothing more to teach us than that all the shapes of the spiritual world, all the conditions of life, ideals, norms upon which man relies, form and dissolve themselves like fleeting waves, that it always was and ever will be so, that again and again reason must turn into nonsense, and well-being into misery. Can we live in this world, where historical occurrence is nothing but an unending concatenation of illusory progress and bitter disappointment?¹

Husserl was to suffer persecution at

CAITLIN SMITH is pursuing doctoral research in philosophy at the Pontificia Università della Santa Croce in Rome.

the hands of the Nazis (and even at the hands of his erstwhile disciple Martin Heidegger) but his death in 1938 spared him the fate of his fellow Jews. And like so many German Jews, Husserl was thoroughly assimilated, more German than Jew, the product of high German intellectual culture, the “Good European” profoundly concerned with the destiny of a contemporary Europe dominated by Heidegger on the one hand and the Vienna Circle on the other; the rationalist offended, astonished, and challenged by the philosophical irrationalism, skepticism, and mysticism of his day and among his own disciples. The question for Husserl was the meaning of the crisis of European man, particularly of reason and of reason’s greatest accomplishment, European science since the Renaissance.

There are only two escapes from the crisis of European existence: the downfall of Europe in its estrangement from its own rational sense of life, its fall into hostility towards the spirit and into barbarity; or the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy through a heroism of reason that overcomes naturalism once and for all. Europe’s greatest danger is weariness. If we struggle against this greatest of all dangers as “Good Europeans” with the sort of courage that does not fear even an infinite struggle, then out of the destructive blaze of lack of faith, the smoldering fire of despair over the West’s

mission for humanity, the ashes of great weariness, will rise up the phoenix of a new life-inwardness and spiritualization as the pledge of a great and distant future for man: for the spirit alone is immortal.²

Against this dramatic backdrop and within this chilling context, Husserl delivered his famous Vienna Lecture before the Vienna Cultural Society on May 7 and May 10, 1935, with the original title “Philosophy in the Crisis of European Mankind.” It was to become the seed of his last great work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936), which would codify phenomenology as the last great manifestation of German idealism, and in which Husserl introduces a new method, one that is teleological-historical and phenomenologically grounded. Such a method of historical reflection is possible only if history is treated (like the world) symbolically and eidetically.

The strangeness of Husserl’s lecture is in what is left unsaid in his discussion of science, but which really lies at the inner heart of the text, and which requires so much caution in approaching it: the problem of evil, which in the end is the problem of God.

The Vienna Lecture is Husserl’s radical attempt to breathe life into the question of the crisis of European science. Husserl’s treatment of the crisis lies within the boundaries of philosophy conceived as a universal science. It must be made clear, early on, what Husserl means by science: by no means is it positivism. It is not a science frozen by the boundaries of naturalism. The supposed success of the positivistic sciences is actually its failure, for science of this sort has failed to grasp that which is its natural entelechy, namely, the world of consciousness and the question of the meaning of man. When the exact sciences lost sight of their rootedness in the spirit, they have indeed marked their failure:

It was not always the case that science understood its demand for rigorously grounded truth in the sense of that sort of objectivity which dominates our positive sciences in respect to method and which, having its effect far beyond the sciences themselves, is the basis for the support and widespread acceptance of a philosophical and ideological positivism. The specifically human questions were not always banned from the realm of science: their intrinsic relationship to all the sciences—even to those of which man is not the subject matter, such as the natural sciences—was not left unconsidered. As long as this had not yet happened, science could claim significance—indeed, as we know, the major role—in the completely new shaping of European humanity which began with the Renaissance. Why science lost this leadership, why there occurred an essential change, a positivistic restriction of the idea of science—to understand this according to its deeper motives, is of great importance for the purpose of these lectures.³

For all its successes in the material sphere, how is it that science has so little to say of human-spiritual existence?

The success of the scientific attitude had been based on the exactness of its sciences, going beyond the merely intuitive and limited empirical procedure that characterized pre-modern Aristotelian science to reach a kind of exactness that is a true unity, “a true revolution in the technical control of nature.”⁴ But this exactness is not to be confused with positivist reductionist objectivization, which is but a misunderstanding of science as a derailment of the ideal of a humanistic science. Positivism attains an inauthentic worldless exactness where all things are to be seen as mere objects and therefore, as objects, can now be subjected to “systematic approximations, in terms of its unconditionally universal elements and laws.” We must pay close attention: this is where Husserl comes in, with the reassertion of the world of universal elements and laws, which are universal *but*

only because of their rootedness in *lebenswelt-worldhood*. This is the strange uniqueness and integrity of his idealism. The misguided rationalism of the earlier rationalists, holding up the merit of its “scientific” success, has not gone far enough; it has left out the world. More precisely, positivism has missed the very point of science, it has left out the transcendental character of the “I,” and this is the key to Husserl’s unique idealism (and yet, as we shall see, the paradoxical result of his doctrine of intentionality). The scientific attitude of the earlier rationalists led to a kind of positivism not concerned with the broader questions of philosophy; narrowing its scope away from the arduousness of philosophy has been its superficial success. The reductionist objectivization of the world allows for “clear and distinct” but nevertheless uncritical knowledge, and therefore of no bearing on the origin of knowledge in a universal science. Husserl never wavers, that when it comes to man we are in the treatment of a different kind of being. The knowledge of nature can be scientifically “objective” only insofar as the methods and the questions are positivistic, but the humanistic disciplines must frame their questions differently, in such a way that they account for the intimate human subjectivity which escapes reduction to measurable facticities.⁵ Husserl’s criticism of the humanistic sciences (specifically psychology), and the reason for their failure when compared to the other sciences, is precisely their positivistic approach. The failure of the humanistic sciences is that they ape the rules of natural science in their endeavors. Rather should they lead. This failure of scientific reason to understand itself is what led to the nineteenth-century philosophic dualistic impasse between equally naive materialist realisms and subjectivist idealisms, and from there to the twentieth-century crisis of alienation and therefore to the crisis of European man:

Blinded by naturalism (no matter how much they attack it verbally) the humanists have totally failed even to pose the problem of a universal and pure humanistic science and to inquire after a theory of the essence of spirit purely as spirit which would pursue what is unconditionally universal, by way of elements and laws in the spiritual sphere with the purpose of proceeding from there to scientific explanations in an absolutely final sense.⁶

For Husserl the “surrounding world ...the locus of our cares and endeavors” is where we come to knowledge of ourselves by stepping outside the self-centric natural world of custom and into the free world of the spiritual sphere. The man who understands spirit as spirit need not ask for any other explanation but a spiritual explanation. When the “surrounding world,” the spiritual structure of our present and historical life, is illegitimately weighed down by a naturalistic interpretation, by artificial and inappropriately applied exactitudes, we have leapt into the realm of absurdity and alienation, and are only one step away from barbarity. This absurdity makes the very spiritual nature of the surrounding world alien to its own spirit, and with this alienation comes the crisis of European man. Husserl deftly understands that the error of the human sciences was to disjoin the central thrust of human life, its unity of spirit, from man. The forgottenness of man, the loss of his natural spiritual entelechy, happened when man as a historical being attempted to explain his spiritual occurrence in a “natural-scientific way”: this very forgottenness has given rise to and continually spreads the crisis of European science as the crisis of European man. Until our entelechy is redirected to the realm of the spirit, man’s barbarity will thrive in a naturalistically closed society run astray from its potentiality to be brought up into the true scientific attitude of a genuinely open society. “Blinded by naturalism,” this illegitimately

closed society has locked its door to the real surrounding world of spirit into which it must enter to be fully human as a community of human knowing. In other words, natural science as it has developed historically and teleologically has never truly transcended the closed society; it has instead lived within it while subverting it, reducing and ridiculing while never elevating its traditions and myths.

The door to the meaning of the lived world has been locked: Is it possible for it to be reopened? Can we overcome this crisis of science, as the crisis of European man, and regain the infinite possibilities and intentional infinities within the consciousness of our surrounding world? In other words, can we fully enter the open society? How must we rectify the crisis of European man? The scientist, who broadens his scope, refusing positivistic reductionist objectivization, has begun to enter the open society, but the scientist must be a philosopher to gain full access; the scientist must ask the genuine questions of human existence, relearn his Greek heritage and therefore ask the questions of human existence in a way that befits human existence. Humans are not objects separated into categorically positivistic divisions; for science to be science, to be really real, it must reach beyond the realm of factic assertion and rejoin its origin as a universal science. This European unification of man or "European supranationality aims at an infinitely distant normative shape, but not one that could simply be read off the changing succession of shapes by a morphological observation from the outside. The constant directedness towards a norm inhabits the intentional life of individual persons, and thence the nations with their particular social units, and finally the organism of nations bound together as Europe."⁷ This single nation is not built upon factic assertion but upon a transformation of humanity, "a new sort of humanity, one which living in finitude,

lives towards poles of infinity."⁸

II

The questions now are whether Husserl has properly diagnosed the crisis and whether his proposed therapy is curative. For all his sincere talk of the Greek ideal, it is Spirit *qua* Spirit and not Being *qua* Being that is his concern. Is this a distinction without a difference or does it beg the question that he is participating in a great and vast idealism whose attempt to regain the world is doomed at the start? At Being's core is mystery, at least insofar as we are completely dependent on Being for our knowledge of it. It is this total mysterious dependence that frustrates all rationalisms and idealisms. Our radical dependency led someone like Aquinas to an understanding of Being as something other than the "I," encountered only in the world; that this other participates, without reduction, with the "I," in a kind of mutual transcendence. The world of Being, the world of otherness, for Aquinas is necessary for knowledge: so much so that even self-knowledge requires the world. In a way mysterious and profound, the human intellect by its own being comes to be the known thing. And yet if this is the starting point for Husserl as well, a start within the world, how can an Aristotelian intentionality as such end in idealism? The question of the possibility of beginning in intentionality and ending in idealism may shed light on Husserl's embrace of the Renaissance ideal and his need to envision philosophy as universal science.

What stands between Aquinas's Aristotelian intentionality and Husserl's intentional starting point is far more than 700 years and is perhaps the start of his embrace of the Renaissance ideal, namely the cogito. The cogito is a methodic isolation of the thinking self from the world, though within the world; it is an exclusion of the world from thought. How does

classical intentionality grounded in a world that cannot be reduced, that is trans-subjective, blend with the isolationist subjectivism of the thought-centric cogito?

Husserl wanted the fruits of an idealism, a humanity noble in its clarity and communion of ideas, but he also wanted the world. Idealism and its science had not gone far enough, it did not have the world; perhaps it had a mathematized *res-extensa*, but it did not have the phenomenological "lived-world." To maintain the lived-world is to maintain the dependency that man has for being, the intentional other, as the world. Without a dependency, man has lost the unique union of the world and the subsequent knowledge that only arises from such a union. Again, without dependency all man has is a world of positivistic facticity, an illegitimately closed society entering barbarity.

For Aquinas, I do not as a knower constitute the world, I constitute my knowledge of the world. For Husserl, this is a naïve realism, and does not lend due justice to the "I"/ego and to existential man, or explain self-knowledge. What it does give, though, is a kind of dependency. For Husserl, I constitute the world but I am dependent on that which I constitute for my knowledge. His intentionality asserts a dependency that gives man the background for which his ideas may reverberate from spirit to spirit and back, all within the noetic framework of the "I." The world, "the surrounding world," his life-world is the intentional other, it is that which we are dependent upon for knowledge but that which we have ultimately constituted. For Husserl, this intentionality encompasses the primacy of self-knowledge and thus does not fall prey to what he believes is a kind of naïve realism: it is naïve to explain self-knowledge by a dual transcendence with the other, with neither being primal. Being *qua* Being asserts the other as real: this is so-called naïve realism.

Spirit *qua* spirit has the dependency of

the "I" but does not fall into this naïve realism because it never steps outside of the "I." For Husserl, the intentional move outside oneself is actually to embed oneself deeper into the "I". The spirit cannot be classified like objective being, it has replaced Being's mysterious and participatory nature as the irreducible other, with an autonomous spirit. This is a distinction with a radical difference, and cannot lay claim to the same dependency that man and real otherness share. The "I" as spirit is the "I" transcendent to its deepest origin as an autonomous self-thinking thought. This is the transformation from Phenomenology to Transcendental idealism. Husserl has expanded the cogito to include the world but at the price of its reduction to a product of consciousness and the loss of its irreducible metaphysical otherness.

III

The structure of Husserl's lived-world (*Lebenswelt*) is strangely akin to Bergson's. Henri Bergson (1859-1941) is Husserl's exact contemporary, and as a French Jew is as broken as Husserl by Europe's decline into barbarity. (The intellectual-philosophical similarities in interests and, to some degree, in method and conclusion, have yet to be explored in adequate depth.) Bergson's last major published work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932), in which he describes and distinguishes the open and closed societies, can help ground an understanding of Husserl's world of the natural attitude (custom and *nomos*) and that of the open world of the scientific-philosophic attitude or spirit. For Bergson, where the closed society or morality is purely social, the open is human; the rule of the closed is to love a few, excluding others, the impetus of the open is to love all; the closed is natural where the open is supernatural or mystical; the closed is static, the open is dynamic; the closed works

through pressure, compulsion, or necessity, the open works through attraction or aspiration or freedom; the closed insures society's self-preservation, the open drives human progress; the closed requires a universal acceptance of a law, the open a common imitation of a model; the closed is infra-intellectual (*tradio*), while the open is supra-intellectual (*ratio*); the characteristic feeling of the closed society is well-being/security, that of the open society is joy. Let us clarify that at first glance, for Husserl, these two societies are not opposed to each other; rather the birth of the open society, of the scientific attitude and the application of its insights, is seemingly traceable to the natural phenomenon of the closed society, the society of tradition.

The open society of reason is a breakthrough not a breakaway, a reorientation not a revolution.⁹ But the question will be, even though the two societies are not opposed to one another, are they actually (in the end) existentially compatible for Husserl? Can both societies thrive simultaneously, indeed symbiotically, or will the closed society, by virtue of the autonomous structure of transcendental reason, become subsumed and/or displaced by the spirit and society of the scientific attitude? Let us ask: if Husserl is in his own way an idealist, can there be room for any other society than that of the "spirit," that of the "I"/ego? The question of the balance between these two societies and their mutual survival in confrontation with one another is, once again paradoxically, the question of the legitimacy of Husserl's notion of intentionality, that very notion which permits him to have a world, in contrast to the older idealisms which are mired not in subjectivity but in subjectivism.

If the autonomous spirit (the transcendental ego) is not acknowledging the same ontological dependency one encounters in a real world constituted by the real existential confrontation with

real being in the world, then is the ideal of philosophy as universal science a distinction without a difference from the grand idealisms of Hegel and his followers? What was happening in Europe in 1935 if not a struggle between left-wing Hegelianism (the Bolsheviks) and right-wing Hegelianism (the Nazis)?

Where could Husserl's dependency ever manifest itself if the closed society, if the society of tradition and myth, has been supplanted by the attitude of science, *i.e.*, the open society? More precisely: how can the autonomy of the Ideas and *theoria* of the Ego maintain a dependency beyond *theoria*? Has not its very autonomy frozen any possibility in the very belief in that dependency? For is not belief of that sort rooted in the integrity of the closed society? Was the Renaissance ideal really a continuation of the Greek ideal as Husserl thinks it was, or was it a break from a Greek ideal which not only included an authentic closed society but found therein the matter for its thinking precisely as philosophical and as scientific?

Bergson never pitted the open against the closed society. Husserl does not intend to do so either, and yet the question remains whether he is not forced to do so, *malgré lui*, by his modernist rationalist Cartesian idealism? Husserl does not have in mind Aristotelian universal science when he makes the seemingly Aristotelian assertion that Philosophy is Universal Science. His idealism, by being outside the world as constitutive of it, demands a different kind of science, that of clear and distinct ideas, and thus it cannot be science in the classical sense, as a participant within the world communicating through the world to the highest Idea. Husserl, by equating this modernist form of universal science with philosophy, reveals that he had in mind a very different entelechy than that of the classical Greek thinkers, one redirected by Cartesianism. But the Renaissance ideal

is a radical break from the Greek tradition, when it confused the non-participatory classical philosophical science with the remote and isolationist modernist science.

Greek philosophy can be legitimately seen as the axial period (in Jaspers's and in Voegelin's sense) in which man was able to transcend his necessity and enter a realm in which he had a clear vision of the "surrounding world" and of free philosophical thought and Idea. It is true that the Greek philosopher in a way became a non-participating spectator, and that in exchange for his non-participation, he received a view of the Whole and hence universal knowledge was attainable.¹⁰ But universal science for Husserl calls into question his understanding of the non-participating spectator. The non-participating spectator of classic philosophy is not and cannot be man outside the world; he is not the man of clear and distinct ideas; he is not a man sacrificing his world to the mathematical systematization of the cogito apparatus. The non-participating spectator of Plato and Aristotle is the man of metaphysics and judgment; he is the man of intentionality. The non-participating spectator has climbed the ascent to the top of the cave and is preparing his descent. His metaphysical ascent, his descent back into the cave, and his stasis as non-participating spectator all occur within the world, by the world, and through the world. The difference between the philosophical non-participating spectator of Aristotelian universal science in the Greek understanding and the non-participating spectator for Husserl and the Renaissance ideal is one thing only, yet that one thing changes everything, the presence of the world or its absence! When Husserl, following Descartes, re-introduces the world, is it really the same world we began with? Does an idealism which constitutes the world really have the same world, the world of intentionality and

irreducible otherness? Can one ever really re-enter the world once one has left it behind by denying one's transcendent passage through the world, by the world, and in the world—by denying, in a word, the otherness of the Being of the world?

IV

Is not the aftermath and wake of this idealism precisely the crisis of European Man? And if in this wake we see, with Husserl, the barbarity of evil, are we not entitled to ask about the relation of idealism itself to the crisis of evil that he saw engulfing Europe in 1935 and that we see in other forms today? The system, the constituted world of idealism, has the Kantian intention of a noble society of intellectual thought for the sake of infinite intellectual ends. Because the intellect is good, the end will, of course, be Good, as idealism presupposes or posits. Husserl is lamenting in the Vienna Lecture that he cannot understand why the Renaissance ideal, the communion and sharing of ideas, has disintegrated into the present morass of European man. It is fathomless to him how this state could have actually come about. He makes the move to place blame on the positivist reduction that missed the goal of science, that lost the world. In a sense, he wants to return to the Renaissance humanistic ideal, in which man is the true center of the universe; his idealism is meant to accomplish this. But it is not enough to bring the questions of man and the world into his transcendental phenomenological idealism to salvage the good from the barbarous wreck of modern European man. On the contrary, this idealism is the very prolongation and the height of the barbarity of European man. Yes, we can lay claim that its intention was the opposite of barbarity, but the idealistic system in which Husserl's Phenomenology is housed is also the same system that can breed the kind of evil that is adept at

cloaking itself and walking among others. The shadows have been eradicated in the idealistic system, yet this to its detriment. The evil man who spreads the disease of barbarity goes unrecognized in idealism, because the proper otherness that reflects true but finite knowledge contained in a true lived-world has been lost to the shadowlessness of clear and distinct ideas of idealism. Every ideology is at its root an idealism. The ground for true, real intentional judgment has been lost and *thereby* moral virtues are lost and nowhere is there ground to root and spring a proper ethics.

Idealism does not allow for anything other, but it is this very Other that reveals lack, privation, and the absence of the Good: *i.e.*, evil. The European crisis is a crisis of the lost Being as the loss of the Other. In otherness alone can man acquire knowledge and, we must not forget, even self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is attained only in the confrontation with the Other. Before the metaphysical collapse is a moral collapse, and before the moral collapse is an epistemological collapse. It has been aptly said that "European man became a thinker after he ruined himself as a knower."¹¹ Husserl is standing in the ruins of a lost intentional grounding, he is in the aftermath and wake of the epistemological collapse, and he has not yet realized that this very epistemological collapse is the grounding of the moral collapse: in other words, that the epistemological collapse of idealism is the heart of the crisis of European science as the crisis of European man.

The lost Being is the question of the missing God. Where is God for European man? Not the Cartesian God, wherein matters of faith are exempted from methodical doubt and end up in the world of merely practical certitudes, or the realm of "hearsay" in Spinoza's sense, but the God who is dynamic, mystical and who drives human progress, the God who is immanent precisely because he is tran-

scendent. The search for the missing God brings us back to our analysis of the open and closed society and the question of survival for the closed society. We must now enter with renewed caution what has been called the realm of the cave.

The society of tradition and myth, the closed society, has been eradicated, displaced or subsumed into idealism so much so that the specific characteristics of the closed society are lost. For Bergson and all philosophers who start with the world by way of the necessary presupposition that *I am in the world*, have a kind of closed and open society. The philosophers who have not attempted to reground knowledge outside the world do not in their search for truth find such a conflict within the confrontation of these two societies. Nothing necessitates the loss of one to the other; the open need not subsume the closed to survive; the closed need not annihilate the open as was happening in 1935 when the Vienna Lecture was presented. Rather the confrontation between the open and closed societies with all of their conflicts and similarities is, for the philosopher of the intentional presupposition, the two poles, the hum and vibration of being. Therefore, both societies must maintain their natural confrontation and communion with the other. Is not the barbarity of 1935, the crisis of European man, but the revenge of a closed society run amok upon an illegitimately grounded open society that had locked the door to tradition and had locked the door to its proper life? We are now at the question of tradition in its traceable connection to God.

If we are to understand philosophers of the intentional presupposition, men like St. Thomas Aquinas, we are to understand that it is not naive to say we can reach God from anything, just so long as this anything is in the world. A piece of wood, the act of throwing a ball, the acts of ritual, pattern, tradition, the actions that form prayer, that form fear, these are

the wellspring of the closed society and the gift that is given to the open society. The man of the open society is like the man who, for St. Paul, can live outside the law only because he is honest. To live outside the law is not to discard the law (understood as the closed society), but to uphold it more and in a deeper transformational way. The man who lives outside the law is in essence the living epitome of the law. This is what is meant by saying that the human intellect, in a mysterious

way comes to be, in the process of knowing, the known thing. This mysterious way is the move of tradition as tradition into the open society. It is not a reductio of the closed society but a broadening of its form so as to become internal to the man and not merely followed externally by the man. The man in the open society is the true *boniform* of law, tradition, prudence, ethos, and virtue—man in the end as *deiform*.¹²

1. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston, 1970), 7. 2. *Ibid.*, 299. 3. *Ibid.*, 7, 270. 4. *Ibid.*, 271. 5. *Ibid.*, 295. 6. *Ibid.*, 273. 7. *Ibid.*, 276. 8. *Ibid.*, 277. 9. It is worth mentioning at this point that the language of “closed/open” is unfortunate, the former being far too eulogistic, the latter far too opprobrious, in tone and connotation. It has also been hermeneutically determinative, filtering our interpretation of historical forms from Plato to the present day. It is also far too dualistic, and while it is beyond the scope of this essay, one might well develop other analogies to express Bergson’s distinction while suppressing

the linguistically implied opposition. For example, it seems a more appropriate analogy to say that the two societies are a composite unity like body and soul, separate but in need of each other, mutually dependent, coming together in ontological association to make the unity we call a man. St. Thomas’s discussions on the unity of human nature would be an invaluable asset in developing this analogy. 10. Plato’s *Theaetetus* provides the best example of the Greek notion of the non-participating spectator and its role in the noetic process. 11. Anton C. Pegis, *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York 1948), xxiv. 12. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 12, 6, Resp.