

A reading of Husserl's "life-world" against the loss of history in the context of postcolonial Aboriginal Australia.

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Abstract: Recently, Husserl's phenomenology of the "life-world" has been given special emphasis in those areas of the social sciences that are concerned with the crisis of values and meaning in our contemporary world. Husserl conceived the concept of "life-world" as a final introduction to his system of transcendental phenomenology, the project of a lifetime. As Husserl puts it in *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (7), phenomenology is not only the act of "sense-investigation" (*Besinnung*), but also the universal "coming to self-awareness" (*Selbstbesinnung*) of humanity in a reflective manner, and herein precisely lies humanity's responsibility towards itself. Husserl expected phenomenology to be the ultimate universal science, destined to ground all human achievements in the soil of the "life-world" (33-34). But can Husserl's phenomenology accomplish this task effectively outside the horizon of Europe, and outside the context of a critique of modern science and technology? So as to try to answer this question, our aim will be to introduce some key concepts and notions that characterize Husserl's phenomenology of the "life-world" or philosophy of genesis in the context of Aboriginal identity in Australia. For this purpose, we will offer a reading of Sally Morgan's *My Place*, an autobiographical novel which narrates the personal quest of a woman of Aboriginal descent to find her roots and identity in a Westernized world. In the course of our analysis, we will describe in what ways some of Husserl's notions related to the life-world are hindered in postcolonial contexts, and whether a phenomenological analysis can provide a means of reconciliation. Finally, we will also ask ourselves about the possibility of a phenomenological idea of history that respects the idiosyncracies of historicity.

Keywords: Husserl, Sally Morgan, phenomenology, lifeworld.

Introduction

In a text entitled *The Crisis of European Humanity and Philosophy*, written in 1935 Husserl says that the crisis of the European sciences is the result of the mathematization of nature in the natural sciences. Inspired by the method of the natural sciences, natural psychology and historicism reduce nature to mere facts, and lead to scepticism. They fail to see that they are themselves as sciences the result of a spiritual process of investigation, applicability and thematization that acquires its sense and legitimacy

within the context of a particular way of life, that of an individual or a community. Husserl calls the internal unity of these spiritual performances "life-world".

When as a result of the influence of the natural sciences, the life of the spirit is objectified, or the psychic is reduced to its physical properties, then humanity is alienated from itself, because its destiny and being is no longer in its hands. It loses all freedom and responsibility. This is what we mean by "loss of history" in this text. In a certain way, both Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and *My Place* can be read as pharmakons to heal Europe from the crisis of the sciences that led to World War II, to the crisis of the environment that we suffer today, to the dispossession and oppression brought about by colonization, immigration and poverty, that is, to an existential crisis at all levels. The first Chapter of *My Place* is precisely entitled "The Hospital". Hospitals are a product of modernity, they reduce the person to its physical body, which can be studied by means of physics and chemistry, by means of the natural sciences. Sally's father is in hospital because of the psychological traumas he went through during World War II. As Sally will recall later in the book, it is hard for people to understand that you can be broken "inside". Sally tells us that she feels terribly uneasy and confused in the hospital: "I was full of secret fears." (Secret in the sense of "unknown". Secrecy is the possibility of consciousness.)

Philosophy as strict science and worldview philosophy

In this context, it seems suitable to recall a distinction that Husserl makes between worldview philosophy and scientific philosophy in his book *Philosophy as Strict Science*. That will allow us to inquire whether and, if so, in what way life-world philosophy differentiates itself from worldview philosophy.

Worldview or *Weltanschauung* philosophy is a cultural and epochal philosophy. It contends that all scientific human achievements are the result of a spiritual process that takes place in time. Therefore, no science and no philosophy as science can claim universal and objective validity and legitimacy. A proof of that is the continuous refutation of the findings of the natural sciences. But Husserl contends that this argument aimed at invalidating the objectivity of science is wrong, because you cannot question the rationality of mathematics, for instance, from a historical standpoint, in the same way that mathematicians cannot do mathematics analysing the history of concepts. Mathematics is a logical process independent of cultural or contingent factors.

Worldview philosophy uses the result of the particular sciences and gives form to a metaphysics that tries to give an answer to the mysteries of life and death. Its ideal is the cosmopolitan man, the virtuous man. This ideal is an idea which is practically accomplished, and changes with time and it depends on culture. Philosophy as science, on the other hand, does not take place in time. The man of science is the man of infinite tasks, because once the man of science has cleared up and established a new region of study in the scientific sense, this region stands as an idea to be investigated by the new community of scientists *ad infinitum*.

Husserl specifies that the distinction between worldview philosophy and philosophy as science is a modern distinction, and even though they certainly influence each other,

this distinction is final and there is no way back. It cannot be undone. It is not possible to go back to a time where worldview philosophy and science in the strict sense are part of one and the same phenomena.

The question we want to ask ourselves is why and in what sense life-world phenomenology can give rise to a scientific philosophy. It is very intuitive to define the concept of "life-world" as a cultural concept, and as coextensive with that of worldview philosophy. But it seems clear that Husserl wants to retain the best of the scientific model of the natural sciences *and* worldview philosophy in his transcendental phenomenology.

In *Crisis*, Husserl makes of the concept of life an absolute value, relating it to the idea of philosophy and of humanity. "Life-world" is a spiritual concept, independent and autonomous from the physical world. That is the reason why it is useless to try to understand the spirit in terms of the natural sciences. On the contrary, the natural sciences are the result of a spiritual performance, and their sense and legitimacy can only be found within the sphere of the spirit. But what distinguishes life-world phenomenology from worldview philosophy is that phenomenology investigates the unconditional elements and laws of the spirit as they are in themselves. This autonomy of the spirit forms the spiritual figure of Europe and its freedom to shape its existence according to the idea of reason. This is why all Indians, says Husserl, and by extension we might add all Aborigines want to become European, because in their becoming European they can make of the preservation and investigation of their cultural and spiritual identity an infinite task.

Life-world phenomenology and the loss of history of the Aboriginal peoples

It is not a rational matter but a matter of casualty that I found myself preparing this conference during the celebration of World Youth Day in a Café Sydney. But I think that if it hadn't been for this fortuitous event I would not have paid that much attention to Chapter 16 of *My Place*, entitled "What people are we". The Chapter is divided in two parts. In the first one, Sally behaves in what Husserl calls the natural attitude: Sally just accepts the facts of the world as they are, its world beliefs, its objective validity, etc. But in the second part, Sally performs what Husserl calls a phenomenological reduction. This Chapter also represents a turning point in the book.

First, the chapter begins when Sharon, a friend from Sally at school asks Sally out to a youth meeting at a Church nearby. You may recall that Sally initially refuses, but her friend Sharon insists that there won't be any religious stuff, just some gathering together and some Chinese food. Sally ends up going and taking her friends along with her. But after eating, a MrMcClean gives a talk to the kids, much to Sally's dread. Sally soon goes absent-minded, and this is what happens:

Suddenly, there was someone talking to me. I knew it wasn't MrClean. I looked around in a furtive kind of way, trying to see who it was. All eyes were fixed on the speaker, there was no one new in the room.

'Who are you?' I asked mentally.

With a sudden dreadful insight, I knew it was God.

'What are you doing here?' I asked. I don't know why I was surprised. It was a church hall, after all.

It had to be Him because the voice seemed to come from without not within, it transcended the reality of the room. I couldn't even see my surroundings any more. I was having an audience with Him, whom I dreaded. The mental images that I had built up of Him so far in my life began to dissolve and in their place came a new image. A person, overwhelming love, acceptance and humour. What Nan would call real class. In an instant, I became what others refer to as a believer.

I joined the local youth group after that. 102.

What I want to retain from this passage, is that Sally turns into a believer, and that the qualities she ascribes to God are those that Nan would term "real class": infinite love, acceptance and humour. A symbiosis of aboriginal and western values seems to take place. Also I want to point out that in *Crisis* Husserl is aware that the event of a monotheistic religion that is rationalized in the form of logos is intrinsic to the spiritual figure of Europe, and he links worldview philosophies to mythical religions, and scientific philosophy to the religion revealed in the form of logos.

After this episode Sally cancels her unquestioned belief in her feelings and in the way she relates to the world. She carries out a phenomenological reduction, she realizes that the world in which she lives is not an objective world, but the result of a spiritual performance. This is how the second part of the Chapter starts: "It was about time that I began to analyse my own attitudes and feelings." We can also argue that it is thanks to this change of attitude that Sally is eventually able to set for herself the task to investigate into the history and life of her Aboriginal heritage.

It is also worth noting that Sally's new attitude comes about "in an instant". In somewhat the same fashion in which Kierkegaard says that "the instant of decision is madness", Sally's decision is mad because it does not take place in time. The instant that separates her old self from her new self is not in time: it separates two heterogeneous times and ways of life. One cannot account for the other. There is no rational explanation, if we are to believe what the text says literally, as to why Sally turns into a believer. Or, is there? Why does one need to believe?

If Sally can set up for herself the study of her Aboriginal past and culture as an infinite task, it is because it has previously been lost. Aboriginal peoples have lost their history not only in the historical sense, but also in the existential sense: their culture and tradition is no longer the means by which they "are" in the world. Worst still: it is repressed, denied by mainstream "white", "Western" Australia. More specifically, the European worldview metaphysics labels everything related to Aboriginal Australia as animal, inferior, irrational, that is, primitive.

Just before Sally decides to analyze her own behaviour and attitudes, the Dean tells Sally that he wants her to stop being friend's with his daughter. The reason is Sally's Aboriginal background, to which the Deacon refers to somewhat indirectly with the expression "bad habits", and, paradoxically, by an appeal to "understanding", as if raional matters had anything to do with worldviews. Sally's witty comments and sense of humour do not diminish the cruelty of the episode:

One night, one of the Deacons of the church asked if he could talk to me. I was friendly with his daughter and he seemed like a nice man, so I agreed.

'You and Mary are having quiet a lot to do with one another, aren't you?' he asked.

'I suppose so, but we're not best friends.'

'No. I know that, but you see a lot of each other at Youth Group and church.'

'Yeah.'

'Well, Sally', he smiled, 'I want to ask a fvour of you.'

'Sure, anything.'

'I'd like you to stop mixing with Mary.' He smiled his charming smile again.

'Why?' I was genuinely puzzled.

'I think you know why'.

'No, I don't'.

'You're a bad influence, you must realize that.' Believe or not, that was one part of my character I was unaware of.

'What do you mean?' I wanted him to spell it out.

'This is Mary's leaving year, the same as yours. I don't want her mixing with you in case she picks up any of your bad habits.'

Aaah, I thought. He's heard about my truancy.

'What about after Leaving?' I asked meekly. I sensed there was more to this than just that.

'No. I don't think so. Really, it'd be better if you broke off your friendship entirely. You do understand, don't you', he said in an incredibly chrming way.

'Oh, I understand', I replied. I was amazed that he could have such a charming manner and yet be such a dag.

'Good girl, I knew you would'. He was relieved. 'Oh, by the way. I can count on you not to say anything to Mary, can't I? You'll find a way of breaking things off between you, won't you?'

I nodded my head, and he walked off.

I was hurt and disappointed. He was a deacon, I'd looked up to him. I was lucky I had my pride, it came to my rescue yet again. I didn't need people like him, I decided. 102-103

This passage is an example of the existential gap opened up by Western metaphysics, or worldview philosophy, in primitive and Aboriginal cultures in general. The Deacon and Sally do not talk from person to person. There is a loss which has nothing to do with science, but with cultural prejudices.

Conclusion

We started this paper recalling how Husserl conceives of his transcendental phenomenology as a means to heal Europe of the objectivation of all areas of life that the natural sciences were carrying out and to free humanity from oppression and prejudice. Europe and the natural sciences are not scientific enough, they are not aware that all human achievements are the result of a spiritual performance that gives them validity and legitimacy. Then, we used Husserl's idea of reason in the phenomenological sense to describe Sally's self-reflective attitude against the racism and oppression that her own people and culture suffered after colonialism. Both the natural sciences and worldview philosophies are dependant, in this way, from an unbiased, rational and unprejudiced phenomenological method that would materialize the genuine idea of Europe and which universality would be extended in benefit of all peoples and cultures.

The question is whether Husserl can in fact distinguish worldview philosophy and science, and then continue to make this distinction dependant upon a reflective attitude which he founds upon life-world phenomenology. Does an anthropological philosophy sustain Husserl's entire enterprise, as the *Kaizo* texts suggest? If so, then science and worldview philosophy should be checked by life-world phenomenology, in which way life-world phenomenology would have no positive content in itself. Then, all the a priori analyses of essence would be aimed at checking the foundational basis of the natural sciences and worldview philosophies respectively, so that essence would have to be understood differently if we are analysing the concept of life in biology or as a cultural value. But this purely methodological approach to phenomenology gives up an analysis of the a priori forms of consciousness in the form of empathy or measure in space-time or else as a basis to the rational investigation of the spirit. Shall we give up this form of rational investigation? There is also a terminological problem: can a purely methodological phenomenology still be called a phenomenology? A life-world phenomenology? That would give rise to an anthropological phenomenology that is purely methodological, which is contradictory. This last move reminds us of Heidegger's existential philosophy. But to continue in that direction would take us too far from the Husserlian questions on culture.

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