

## REVIEW ARTICLE

Matheson Russell, *Husserl: A Guide for the Perplexed*

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This book is one of a recent series of “Guides for the Perplexed” largely devoted to “Continental” philosophers (but also including guides to Wittgenstein and Quine). It sets itself the task of presenting the interested student with a succinct introduction to Edmund Husserl’s philosophical work in its breadth and richness. Husserl (1859–1938) is a philosopher whose writings are in no little need of clarification to the uninitiated, a fact well known to those familiar with the work of the founder of the phenomenological movement. His influence is so far-reaching that much of the subsequent tradition now usually called Continental philosophy is scarcely intelligible without reference to it. Yet access to his thought is invariably hindered by a complex, dense terminology and a difficult style which is precise and scientific rather than instantly perspicuous (and usually further complicated by translation). The several “introductions” to phenomenology penned by Husserl himself, forever the “beginning philosopher”, present the reader with an ever-finer series of conceptual distinctions and ever deeper layers of analysis of consciousness and its acts – a further source of confusion for the non-expert. This book attempts to alleviate this confusion. Rather than recounting Husserl’s discoveries in their chronological order by means of extensive quotation of Husserl himself, Russell avoids any unnecessary discussion of the history and significant movements in his philosophical position. Instead, he produces a short, readable introduction arranged according to theme.

## STRUCTURE AND THEMES

The two hundred pages of *Husserl: A Guide for the Perplexed* make up eleven chapters divided into two parts. Each of these chapters deals with one particular theme in Husserl’s phenomenological research. The seven chapters of Part II are exclusively thematic, dealing with such matters as intentionality, time-consciousness and intersubjectivity. Part I prepares the way for these discussions by focussing as much on the *method* of phenomenology as on its “object”. Thus Part I, which is entitled “The Idea of Phenomenology”, begins (Ch. 1) with a discussion of the *Logical Investigations*’ famous critique of psychologism in logic. It then explains the difference between phenomenology and, for instance, empirical psychology with an examination of its character as an *eidetic* science (Ch. 2). The nature of a *transcendental* phenomenology is clarified (Ch. 3) by way of a discussion of Husserl’s relationship to and critique of Kant. Finally the phenomenological attitude itself is “achieved”, so to speak, in the last chapter of Part I (Ch. 4), which discusses the phenomenological reductions through a comparison with the Cartesian method of doubt.

Part II, which is longer by about three quarters, has a more episodic character. In this part there is still a tendency for each chapter to build on the last, but less sense of a continuous argument with an ultimate goal. This is suggested by its title “Phenomenological Topics”. The subjects with which the chapters deal can be taken from the chapter-titles: the structure of intentionality (Ch. 5); intuition, evidence and truth (Ch. 6); categorial intuition (Ch. 7); time-consciousness (Ch. 8); the ego and selfhood (Ch. 9); intersubjectivity (Ch. 10). Some of these are subjects which already appeared in the “methodological” deliberations of Part I, but

are now examined in more detail. The last chapter of Part II and of the book is a discussion of *The Crisis of the European Sciences* and deals with the concepts of genetic constitution and the life-world (Ch. 11). Finally there is a concluding one-page overview of the legacy of Husserlian phenomenology and a short guide to further reading.

### CRITICAL COMMENTARY

In adopting this thematic scheme for the sequence of chapters, Dr Russell wisely avoids unnecessary complications and generally lets himself speak for Husserl rather than attempting any detailed discussion of the passages from the primary sources. (Each chapter refers to the relevant texts and page numbers where appropriate, however, and occasionally gives references to the secondary literature in the chapter's end-notes.) As regards the readability of the result this strategy is entirely successful, and it seems to this reviewer that in warning the reader at the outset that "it is not easy to render Husserl's philosophy in more lively prose" (p. 1) Russell is too self-effacing.

The book's main success is in the "liveliness" of this introduction to phenomenology. It succeeds in presenting phenomenology as it should be presented: as befits a science that is descriptive and based upon intuition, not on symbolic chains of inference. For the most part the examples used to illustrate Husserl's concepts are not Husserl's own – another instance of the book's comparative independence of the original texts – but are freely invented (some of them referring to the author's native city, Sydney). Because the book does not force itself to dissect and analyse Husserl's own formulation of phenomenology's solution to the problem at issue at any given point, its explanations are straightforward, clear and concise.<sup>1</sup> As the chapters are only in the order of sixteen pages long each, Russell is not able to waste words; nor does he. In what seems to be a concession to the demands of scholarship, the German equivalents of key terms are on occasion given in brackets, such as when a concept is mentioned for the first time (although the book does not venture beyond a discussion of the translated works). In the case of some of the more obscure terms this practice appears a little pedantic and could have been abandoned as unnecessary.

Although thematic, each chapter is so framed as to deal more or less directly with one section of a particular work of Husserl's. Hence the source material for Chapter 1 is drawn from the "Prolegomena" to the *Logical Investigations*, and Chapter 10, on intersubjectivity, for example, is based upon the Fifth *Cartesian Meditation*. The number of works dealt with in this admittedly partial and piecemeal fashion is surprisingly large: not only the *Logical Investigations*, the *Ideas* and the *Cartesian Meditations*, but also *The Phenomenology of Inner Time-Consciousness*, *The Crisis of the European Sciences* and the essay "Kant and the Idea of Transcendental Philosophy". In no case does Russell pretend to explain the *whole* work; it is merely used as a tool with which to attack the given problem that the chapter addresses. In spite of what the author suggests on p. 5, the style of this "guide" is not so much to offer "commentaries" as to help the reader to discover phenomenology by directly philosophizing with Husserl. Obviously, it is open to the interested reader who wishes to learn more about the subject to turn to the corresponding primary text (as the author recommends at the end of the book: p. 199).

Partly because of the enforced brevity with which the book treats its themes, the reader will look here in vain for handy definitions of the myriad series of key terms that make up Husserl's philosophical language. It is evident that the objective of the book is to make clear the sense of only the most important concepts of phenomenology, not to specify every precise distinction between different stages of eidetic-phenomenological reduction, for instance. For the most part, differences between early and

late Husserl are hardly even mentioned (except in Chapters 9 and 11). These seem to have been the results of a conscious decision to make the occasional simplification to the material for pedagogic reasons. It is possible that this leads in some cases to the sacrifice of strict accuracy; indeed, in the last chapter Russell confesses to some of the difficulties inherent in dealing with a philosopher “whose thought refused to stand still” (p. 180) and the resulting “blurred” picture of his philosophy that the attempt inevitably produces. In an introduction to Husserl of this modest size, however, these decisions appear to have been entirely justifiable.

The book, one might say, appropriately attempts a “presuppositionless” introduction to phenomenology for the benefit of its primary audience, who can be assumed to have had no prior acquaintance with Husserl. It does not assume that the reader has an grasp of even basic terms such as intentionality, intuition or essence (or “phenomenology” itself). On the other hand, the assumptions that the book *does* make seem wholly justified: some broad philosophical background is taken for granted (as seems a reasonable expectation of a reader who wishes to learn Husserl’s philosophy), so that Russell can explain elements of phenomenology by reference to Descartes and Kant, who are not thought to need their own introductions. Some prior familiarity on the part of the reader with the rudiments of logic and its traditional problems is also advantageous.

If in fact, as is suggested here, the book’s intention is to remain conceptually and terminologically “presuppositionless”, the main criticism that can be made against it is that some of the chapters end up presupposing too much. On occasion the earlier chapters depend on concepts first addressed only in later chapters. This is the result above all of the order of the chapters and their division into two parts. The chapters of Part I take the reader all the way from the critique of psychologism to transcendently reduced subjectivity, a difficult path that could have been made considerably easier by the timely introduction of some of the fundamental phenomenological concepts that come to be discussed only in Part II: intentionality, evidence and the pure ego, among others. For the same reasons the fundamental motivation and the goal of this phenomenological journey are somewhat obscure at the outset. Again, because the concept of evidence in the Husserlian sense is not explained until Chapter 6, it seems that some of the sense of the phenomenological reductions, discussed two chapters earlier, goes missing along the way; Russell does not yet have the tools at his disposal to explain the reduction to the pure *Erlebnisse* as the sphere of adequate evidence, for instance.<sup>2</sup> If nothing else, this might have helped to clarify the important distinction between transcendental phenomenology and empirical psychology. Insofar as one can judge the situation of a “naïve” reader coming to the book with no background in phenomenology, it is not really possible to appreciate *what* phenomenology *is* in the full sense – the primary theme of Part I (as stated on p. 4) – until at least the earlier chapters of Part II have also been read. (Such is the inevitable drawback of a philosophy that demands the mastery of an entirely new method!)

It must be emphasised, however, that this criticism has to do not with any *failure* of which the book can be accused, but with its *success* – at carefully avoiding much of Husserl’s complicated jargon (except where the jargon itself comes to be defined and explained). At the same time, some of these difficulties in the presentation could conceivably have been overcome with a slightly different arrangement of chapters. In the early chapters Russell seems more or less to follow the order taken by Husserl in *Ideas I*, from the natural attitude (the home of psychologism), via the elucidation of the distinction between sciences of essences and of matters of fact, to the winning of the phenomenological attitude, which prepares the way for the properly phenomenological themes treated by Russell in Part II. Perhaps in this case Husserl does not set a particularly good example! To the uninitiated student, the complications and obscurities of the transition from the natural to the phenomenological attitude probably first obtain clarity and become comprehensible in practice only by way of a familiarization with phenomenology’s “thematic” achievements (to which, to be sure, that difficult “methodological” process is the necessary precondition).

For these reasons, it occasionally appears that Part II suffers from the slight weakness that some of the impetus driving the transition in Part I from one “methodological” chapter to the succeeding one (which builds on its results in each case) dissipates once the reader has reached the chapters of Part II. On the other hand, a few of these later chapters, considered individually, are arguably the strongest in the book. Chapter 8, on time-consciousness, is perhaps the best example. To do justice to the intricacies of Husserl’s analysis of the retentive-protentive structure of the temporality of constituting consciousness in fifteen pages, even in a very broad, introductory manner, would seem a near-impossible task. Yet in this chapter the book deals with

such a potentially confusing subject with characteristic lucidity and in such a way as to give the reader a clear sense of the subject's importance. As elsewhere in the book, Russell's strategy here is very much reconstructive rather than interpretative, a strategy that this chapter shows off to particularly good effect.

### CONCLUDING REMARK

Perhaps the greatest service an introduction to phenomenology can do the beginning student is to fire his enthusiasm to read Husserl for himself, and to be confident to do so forearmed with the necessary basic understanding of the methods and main objectives of Husserlian phenomenology. *Husserl: A Guide for the Perplexed* does not try to add groundbreaking new insights to the secondary literature. Rather, its "modest" intention would seem to be to prepare new readers for the serious study of Husserl. This necessary initiation into phenomenology has rarely been made more readable or engaging than it is here. These qualities make this survey of Husserl's phenomenology a very recommendable introduction.

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NOTES

1. On the other hand, the following stands out as a rare instance of an example likely to lead to confusion, in a book whose illustrative examples are as a rule well chosen. Discussing the concept of an empirical law, Russell writes (p. 13): “The discovery of an anomalous case invalidates [such a] law. Thus ... it is not an *empirical* law of thinking that ‘not  $\sim A$ ’ follows from ‘A’ if, as a matter of fact, sometimes ‘not  $\sim A$ ’ *does not* follow from ‘A.’” This example is meant to show that logical laws cannot be understood as empirical laws of psychology, i.e. of actual inferences of thinking subjects. The second sentence should presumably be corrected to read “... if, as a matter of fact, sometimes *the inference* ‘not  $\sim A$ ’ is *not drawn* from ‘A.’”
2. To be sure, there is a brief remark about *Evidenz* on p. 55; however, the fact that this reference precedes Chapter 6 reduces its explanatory value at this point.