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Life-world

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Life-world (Lebenswelt) is the world directly experienced by the intentional life of the subjectivity. The life-world, as such, is “our” world, i.e., my own world and the world of others in the everyday life. As such, it is the ground and the horizon of every subjective life; it is also the world that is presupposed by every practical or theoretical activity.

The concept of life-world is one of the more ambiguous and complicated in phenomenology. Nevertheless, the concept of the life-world remains crucial to show how consciousness is embedded in a world of activities, meanings, judgments, and theories that are socially, culturally, and historically constituted. Under this perspective, the phenomenology is not only the methodic study of the various structures of the transcendental ego, but also the analysis of an experience in context, lived in a pre-found world.

23.1. The project of a phenomenological science of the life-world

Life-world is a key notion of Husserl’s late philosophy, even if Husserl first used the concept of the life-world in the 1920s. Husserl did not invent the term. It was already present in Georg Simmel’s or Rudolf Eucken’s writings. The proximal source of the Husserlian conception of life-world is actually Richard Avenarius’s “natural concept of the world” (natürlicher Weltschiff). According to the founder of empirio-criticism (with Ernst Mach), there is a “pre-found” world of experience that precedes every conceptualization or every theorization. In his *Critique of Pure Experience* (Kritik der reinen Erfahrung) (Avenarius 1890), Avenarius argues that we encounter things in a constant stream of changing appearances. By means of a “principle of co-ordination”, we may experience consistency in this “natural world” and attach significances and values to things. We may also experience this world as the world of others as having similar experiences to ourselves and sharing them. In this sense, the “natural concept of the world” discovers the basic structures of experience. It clearly has a critical function, as it gives us a chance to remedy to various metaphysical falsifications.

In his *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* lecture course of 1910/1911 (Husserl 2006, §§8–10, 12–28), Husserl takes up this concept again. The “natural concept of the world” is “the world in the natural sense” or “the world of the natural attitude”. It may be seen as “that infinite object of the natural and psychological sciences” (ibid., 15) but, in fact, it is the world of an experience that is always found in advance, always already here. In the second book of his *Ideas Pertaining
to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy (Husserl 1989), Husserl uses the term “life-world” to name on one side the “personal” and socio-historical world thematized by the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften), and on another side the descriptive a priori of a transcendental-aesthetical world conceived as an essential, universal, and intuitional structure. This ambiguity remains in the 1920s, for example in the lecture courses Nature and Spirit (Natur und Geist, 1919, 1921/1922, 1927) and Phenomenological Psychology (1925–1928) (Husserl 1977, Hua XXXII, and Hua-Mat IV).

Facing new types of challenges, Husserl’s late philosophy opens new dimensions to the concept of life-world. This also gains new significations. In his Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, Husserl shows that the advent of modern objectivism was the beginning of the crisis of the European sciences and reason. Due to its forgetfulness of the life-world, modern science has lost its significance for life. For this reason, it seems urgent and necessary to recover the life-world as a “meaning-fundament” for the objective sciences. Moreover, it is the only way left to reveal the internal teleology of life and the ethical responsibilities of the subject.

Husserl sees the life-world as a “new dimension” of subjective life (Husserl 1970, §32, 119) that has “remained hidden through the ages”. Life-world must then be rediscovered and explored because it has been forgotten and is still not well understood. Life-world appears prima facie obscure and unintelligible. It is the name of “a set of world-enigmas which were unknown to earlier times” (Husserl 1970, §2, 5) and finally recognized as “the enigma of the enigma” (Husserl 1970, §5, 13). As such, the concept of life-world remains, without any doubt, as one of the most equivocal concepts of phenomenological tradition. According to Husserl, this concept was more a “title” (Titel) covering a large variety of questions (Husserl 1970, §34, 124): it is, in fact, a “universal problem for philosophy” (Husserl 1970, §34, 132). Consequently, the aim of Husserl’s late philosophy is the correct comprehension of the essence of the life-world. Husserl sees the life-world of everyday life as a valid subject for a “scientific” investigation, in a renewed sense. In other words, he calls for a specific philosophical science of the life-world, that is, the phenomenology of the life-world.

The first step of this methodical research on the life-world is a regressive inquiry conceived “as thoroughly intuitively disclosing method, intuitive in its point of departure and in everything it discloses” (Husserl 1970, §30, 115–116). Life-world is the world of things taken for granted, a sedimented ground that is always pregiven, found in advance, and which must be analyzed by an intentional description. This pregivenness (Vorgegebenheit) of the life-world shall not be interpreted as a pure antecedence, as if the life-world was always here before every theorization. The pregivenness of the life-world is not only a matter of temporality. It refers to a constitutive presupposition implicated in every donation of a phenomenon. What is given is necessarily grounded in an experience that was already there. The pregivenness discovers its priority in the constitutional process of the intentional consciousness. For this reason, life-world encompasses all the mundane conditions of constitutional activity, all that is presupposed in the subjective life and in its relationship with the world.

The life-world, as a pregiven, pre-found world, should not be confused with the world of the natural attitude. In the natural attitude, we take every object of consciousness as if it were a factual item. The natural attitude relies on what Husserl calls the “general thesis” (Husserl 1982, §30, 56), i.e., the unreflected and naive belief in the existence and transcendence of the world. The general thesis is the positing of the world as independent of my experience, as extending in space and time. The content of this general thesis is the following one: “The world is”. The world, as a correlate of the natural attitude, is then viewed as a “natural surrounding world” and as a “nature” existing independently of every subject. According to Husserl, a phenomenological
“Epoché” remains necessary if we want to rediscover the world anew. To put the natural attitude out of action, we have to bracket the general thesis of the actual world. Under this condition, the phenomenological thematization of the life-world becomes possible. For this reason, the life-world is not the natural world as a correlate of the natural attitude, but the ground and the horizon of transcendental subjectivity. The life-world is a common, subjective structure underlying the natural attitude.

Consequently, the life-world includes in itself the natural attitude and the world of science based upon it. Thus, life-world is the realm of a pre-scientific life that is at the foundation of theory and sciences. In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl argues that the life-world exists before every scientific or philosophical theory that takes it as an object of reflection: “The life-world was always there for mankind before science, then, just as it continues its manner of being in the epoch of science” (Husserl 1970, §33, 123). The world conceived by sciences always presupposes a life-world. This is not only a question of historical genesis, as if the life-world were always here, but a constitutional presupposition. That is the reason why the pre-scientific life-world is what is left to appeal to when a crisis or a conflict occurs in sciences. We have a common world that is the object and the result of specialized pre-scientific interests and motivations arising from our subjective projects and vocations. The life-world is from the outset a practical world made by our individual and collective actions. As Husserl argues in his last work,

> the lifeworld [...] is always there, existing in advance for us, the “ground” of all praxis, whether theoretical or extratheoretical. The world is pregiven to us, [...] always somehow practically interested subjects, not occasionally but always and necessarily as the universal field of all actual and possible praxis, as horizon.

(*Husserl 1970, §37, 142*)

The discovery of the existence of the life-world may provide a critical insight into the processes of scientific naturalization and idealizations of the life-world. According to Husserl, the life-world plays the role of a meaning-fundament (*Sinnesfundament*) that has been forgotten by every scientist and every philosopher. In contrast, the world of science may now appear as a “garb of ideas” (*Ideenkleid*) or as a “garb of symbols” (*Kleid der Symbole*) (Husserl 1970, §9, 48). The so-called objectively scientific truths conceal the life-world that they presuppose in their methodical constructions. They have made us blind to the very nature of the world that surrounds us. According to Husserl, the crisis of sciences and, within it, the crisis of reason originate in this structural oversight of the reality of the life-world.

### 23.2. The life-world as a perceived, intuited world

A new philosophy of the life-world may now appear as an alternative to the naturalistic stance taken by modern sciences and modern philosophy. Nevertheless, the life-world can’t be the theme of any particular scientific research project. It has to be the specific theme of a phenomenological research unveiling the universal *a priori* structures of transcendental subjectivity. Among these structures, the perception is of some significance. Life-world is “the only real world, the one that is actually given through perception” (Husserl 1970, §9, 49). The pre-scientific life-world, as manifested in our according intuitive acceptance, is a world of perceived bodies and a world in which I live as a living body. Husserl points out that, from the perspective of the knowledge theory, the life-world is given “in everyday sense-experience” (Husserl 1970, §9, 23). More specifically, it is the “everyday surrounding world” (Husserl 1970, §28, 104), the
“world of sense-intuition” (Husserl 1970, §28, 106). Husserl borrows from the philosophical trend of the Lebensphilosophie the opposition between concepts and intuitions. The life-world is, in principle, completely intuitive and intuitable. In contrast, the logical substructions and the mathematical idealizations are “nonintuitable” (Husserl 1970, §34, 127). The cardinal role of the perception must be stressed, as the perception, according to Husserl, “is the primal mode of intuition (Anschauung); it exhibits with primal originality, that is, in the mode of self-presence” (Husserl 1970, §28, 105). Thus, the experience of the life-world is immediate and vivid. That is the reason why the life-world, says Husserl, is lived “in the plain certainty of experience, before anything that is established scientifically, whether in physiology, psychology, or sociology” (Husserl 1970, §28, 105). As Husserl puts it in the §34 of the Crisis, “the life-world is a realm of original self-evidences” (ein Reich ursprünglicher Evidenzen) (Husserl 1970, §34, 127). The “self-evidence” refers here to the presence of the thing in itself, in a fulfilled intuition experienced in the accomplishing life of the subject. The recognition of the validity of these self-evidences plays a critical role in the identification of the hidden sources of the self-evidences of objective-logical accomplishments. In a way, this “self-evidence” of the life-world is so strong that it remains in the natural attitude as a presupposition immediately accepted by everyone. The life-world encompasses all that is “taken for granted” (selbstverständlich). Therefore, Husserl points out that the life-world is characterized, as a whole, by “the naïve obviousness of the certainty of the world (die naïve Selbstverständlichkeit der Weltgewißheit), the certainty in which we live” (Husserl 1970, §25, 96).

The life-world is primarily a perceived world, which means that I am an integral part of it as a perceiving subject and as a living body. Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty after him, have focused on the specific role of the body in our constitution of the life-world. Our only way of perceiving the world around us is through our five senses and through the various positions and moves of our body. The kinesthesia of the living body anticipate and open constantly new possibilities of perception. Against the familiar dualistic conception body–soul, the body is not a tool or a complex of organs. On the contrary, the living body is the very origin of my experience of the surrounding world. In the common experience of the life-world, the “soul” or consciousness cannot be separated from the body: I have a pre-objective consciousness of my living body. Furthermore, I have a pre-objective consciousness of intersubjectivity, as I perceive immediately the other bodies as living bodies and as subjects.

23.3. The life-world as the world of everyday life

Husserl points out that the life-world is to be understood as the world of everyday life. As such, the life-world is once again distinguished from the objectivism of modern sciences. The objective and naturalized world of science obscures its own origin in the life-world. Thus, the everyday life may seem devoid of any relevance from the scientific perspective. The life-world is, however, immediately and directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life, i.e., life lived day after day and day by day. More specifically, the everyday life refers to the practical world familiar to us. Husserl explains that the life-world is the world constituted in which we feel “at home”. The everyday life is not only the result of repetition but the world that is typically familiar or normal. We constantly rely on it for the efficacy of ordinary actions. The life-world has a specific cognitive style, as it is familiar to us through types and habits. The genesis of this familiarity may be explained by a genetic phenomenology that will unveil the significance of the unthematic reserve of our potential experiences. Indeed, what is familiar to us relies on the surreptitious work of passive synthesis, associations, and habituations. But, the phenomenological theory of the life-world takes into consideration the familiarity that life already has with
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itself. Therefore, the familiarity of everyday life must be understood as the result of a constant style of a common, normal life.

For this reason, the concept of life-world is not an empty abstraction but a general title for various contents. If the life-world is the world of everyday life, then it is made of various “objects:” living bodies, values, cultural objects, institutions. As Husserl explains in the Crisis, “the world of life […] takes up into itself all practical structures (even those of the objective sciences as cultural facts, though we refrain from taking part in their interests)” (Husserl 1970, §51, 173). The everyday praxis belongs to life in the life-world. For this reason, the life-world constitutes a sphere of social and cultural practices. In its concrete manifestations, the life-world exists as a life-world. As Husserl argues: “the world of which I speak, the world of which the Chinese speaks, of which the Greek of Solon’s time, the Papuan speaks, is always a world having subjective validity” (Husserl 1970, Appendix III, 325). The life-world is the only real world for an individual person or for a community of persons and due to this relativity, the life-world exists in countless varieties. That is not to say that the phenomenology of the life-world would lead to a mere relativism. On the contrary, this theory overcomes this risk as the plurality of cultural worlds is built on a general common structure.

23.4. The life-world between subjectivity and intersubjectivity

Even if the life-world always has social, historical, and cultural dimensions, its general meaning is valid for a specific subject. The life-world has its own general structures but those structures are the universal a priori structures of transcendental subjectivity. In that sense, Husserl notes that “prescientifically, in everyday sense-experience, the world is given in a subjectively relative way” (Husserl 1970, §9, 23). The life-world in the phenomenological sense is a universal basis for every mundane experience. We are finally returning to our starting point: the life-world is the world of a life that is not transindividual but refers to the life of a subject and to the potential life of all subjects. This is precisely what the objectivism of modern sciences had made us forgotten. The world that surrounds us is not a world of physical laws, causalities, and natural objects. It is only valid for a subject and it remains tied to subjectivity. The modern scientific objectivism cannot escape the universal correlation between objectivity and subjectivity. In the famous Appendix IV of the Crisis, Husserl reasserts:

the world is never given to the subject and the communities of subjects in any other way than as the subjectively relative valid world with particular experiential content and as a world which, in and through subjectivity, takes on ever new transformations of meaning.

(Husserl 1970, Appendix IV, 337)

Against the scientific view of an objective world without any perspective, Husserl rehabilitates the life-world as a subject-relative horizon. That is not to say that the life-world is nothing but a private and solipsistic world, or a world valid only for me. On the contrary, the life-world in the phenomenological sense is a world “for us all”. The structures of transcendental subjectivity are both individual and universal. Intersubjectivity, understood in a broad sense as an open and plural community of subjectivities, is not derived from transcendental subjectivity but directly implied by it. The phenomenological investigation of my own life-world will apply to all individual subjects alike. There is a universal sense of the world and this does not mean that the world is the same for all of us. The life-world is definitely a pluralized, diversified world and a world for us all, where we have to live together. In this sense, the phenomenological theory of
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the life-world offers an ethical dimension and the objective of Husserl's late philosophy is to remind us that we are sharing a world pregiven to us.

23.5. Ontological and transcendental approaches to the life-world

Conducting the project of a new phenomenological science of the life-world, Husserl has distinguished two main tasks (Husserl 1970, §§37, 38, 51): one of an ontological description of the life-world and one of a transcendental clarification.

The life-world ontology is a phenomenological investigation of the main structures of the life-world, structures that are common to the world thematized by modern sciences and to the pre-scientific world of everyday life. Revealing the invariant structures of the life-world, this phenomenological and eidetic ontology reveals the “universal life-world a priori” (Husserl 1970, §36, 140). In methodological terms, the life-world ontology relies on a regressive analysis and is carried out “without any transcendental interest, that is, within the ‘natural attitude’ (in the language of transcendental philosophy the naive attitude, prior to the epoché)” (Husserl 1970, §51, 173). The various aspects of the life-world that we have identified until now are relevant under this heading. In a certain way, the Husserlian posterity has explored the multiple potentialities of this task of an ontological description of the main structures of the life-world.

At this point, it must be stressed that Husserl has also conceived the task of a transcendental phenomenology of the life-world. Whereas the ontology treated the life-world as a synthetic totality, the life-world is now understood as a set of constitutive conditions of experience. This treatment of the life-world does not refer back to the natural attitude. It has to be analyzed from a transcendental interest. One the one hand, the life-world may be regarded as the horizon of experience. As such, the life-world is the general condition for the appearance of objects but it won’t appear as an object. The concept of horizon names this significant paradox: “The world is pregiven to us […] not occasionally but always and necessarily as the universal field of all actual and possible praxis, as horizon” (Husserl 1970, §37, 142). On the other hand, the life-world has the transcendental character of a “ground”, i.e., a pregivenness of the validity of the world constitutive of experience. Husserl points out that “the pregiven world is still valid as a ground” (Husserl 1970, §38, 147). The life-world, correctly understood by the transcendental clarification, appears as a primordial “ground”, as what is always pregiven to the subjective constitution.

23.6. Beyond Husserl

Husserl’s theory of the life-world was clearly influenced by Heidegger’s analysis of the Being-in-the-world (In-der-Welt-Sein) in the first division of Being and Time (Heidegger 1962). According to Heidegger, the Dasein is immersed in a world that is already there, and the Dasein exists not as a thing among things but literally as a “Being-there”. We are “thrown” into the world and this “thrownness” has remained unnoticed by metaphysics. Heidegger described then the mode of Dasein’s everydayness (Alltäglichkeit) grounded in a pragmatic and largely inarticulate understanding of things. We use things as “ready-to-hand” tools within the projects we are planning. For this reason, our relation to the world has to be characterized as a “concern”. This description of the Being-in-the-world was a phenomenological challenge that Husserl took up in his own theory of the life-world.

After Husserl, the phenomenological thematization of the life-world was further developed by Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty sees “the ‘natürlicher Weltbegriff’ or the ‘Lebenswelt’” as “the central theme of phenomenology” (Merleau-Ponty 1962,VIII). Giving up the Husserlian,
transcendental approach to the life-world, Merleau-Ponty’s analysis has famously focused on the role of perception understood as the origin of the world.

The concept of life-world also has a cardinal role in the philosophy of Alfred Schutz. His phenomenological analysis of the “structures of the life-world” opens toward an action-oriented perspective (Schutz and Luckmann, 1974). Based on a reflective analysis of the natural attitude, his description of the main structures of the life-world has stressed the importance of the paramount reality of everyday life.

References


