Husserl introduces publicly the term “phenomenological reduction” around the year 1907 (Hua XXIV, 211) to designate the methodological procedure that is necessary in order to gain access to the field of phenomenology, i.e., transcendentally purified consciousness. The demarcation of a proper field of inquiry for philosophy, distinct from and yet related to the fields of inquiry of the empirical sciences, addresses directly what has been called an identity crisis of philosophy beginning in the mid-nineteenth century in the wake of positivism and reaching well into the early twentieth century. Rather than construing philosophy merely as a second-order discipline that reflects on the methods and concepts of the sciences, as the (early) Neo-Kantians would have it, or as an ancillary discipline whose sole task is to organize systematically the deliverances of scientific research, as the positivists would have it, Husserl presents phenomenology as the breakthrough into a new intellectual space for philosophical questioning, one in which the problems of philosophy can be posed anew and handled in a truly scientific fashion for the first time in history.

One can legitimately argue that Husserl’s turn toward pure consciousness as the proper ground of philosophy and knowledge more generally is “not original” (Lavigne 2016, 36) in its historical context. Before and parallel to Husserl, key figures of empirio-criticism such as Richard Avenarius (1888; 1890) and the spearhead of the ‘philosophy of immanence’ Wilhelm Schuppe (1878; 1894) advocated for a return to pure experience or immanence as the necessary move to secure a foundation for philosophy and scientific knowledge. They both construed pure experience as a ‘domain’ free from all metaphysical assumptions that the philosopher must reach or attain in the first place. Husserl was undoubtedly influenced by both Avenarius and Schuppe on his path toward the discovery of the phenomenological reduction; however, what is original about Husserl and nowhere to be found among his contemporaries is the explicit reflection on the method that needs to be established and deepened in order to secure a genuine ‘standpoint of immanence’ (to echo a phrase by Schuppe), i.e., one that is truly free of metaphysical and naturalistic assumptions. One could therefore argue that the phenomenological reduction and the untiring reflection on its possibility and scope mark Husserl’s originality in the context of the various philosophies of ‘pure’ consciousness of his time. Husserl was very well aware of this point; therefore, as Sebastian Luft argues, he often refers to the reduction as a “pars pro toto for his mature philosophy” (Luft 2012, 5).

“Phenomenological reduction” is a shorthand term for a two-step operation that includes a moment of suspension of belief, the epoché, and a moment of leading back (reducere) the unities
of meaning found in the field of transcendentally purified experience (numbers, ideal logical relations, physical things, living bodies) to the manifolds of consciousness in and through which such unities are constituted, such as, for example, the manifold profiles of a physical thing. Precisely in light of this move from transcendent unities of meaning to immanent manifolds of consciousness, Husserl also dubs the phenomenological reduction “transcendental reduction” or, more rarely, epistemological (erkenntnistheoretische) reduction (Hua II, 37; 43), i.e., a leading back of transcendent unities of experience (things, numbers, other subjects, cultural artifacts, institutions, etc.) to the transcendental conditions of possibility of their constitution in the immanence of conscious experience. Such transcendental conditions of possibility are not, as in Kant, a set of a priori principles but rather the factual lived-experiences in and through which transcendent objects manifest themselves to a subject. The cup on my desk is one transcendent unity of meanings (‘cup’, ‘white’, ‘hot’, ‘smooth’, ‘fragile’, and all the properties pertaining to it in their interrelation) that manifests itself in and through an immanent manifold of appearances in my consciousness. This manifold of appearances and the (pure) consciousness in which they inhere are transcendental, i.e., they make the cup as transcendent unity possible in the first place. If I didn’t have a manifold of appearances flowing in my consciousness, no cup as a transcendent unity would be possible or even conceivable. Therefore, Husserl talks of a constitution of objects in consciousness. Studying the essences of appearances and the laws governing their orderly interrelation, as well as their object-correlates, is the task of phenomenology as a science.

The first occurrence of the term ‘phenomenological reduction’ in Husserl’s published work is in chapter four of the second section of Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy (Hua III/1). Here, Husserl speaks of a set of phenomenological reductions that are necessary in order to delineate the proper field of inquiry of phenomenology. In order to do so, the phenomenologist has to become aware of her immersion in the natural attitude, i.e., the naïve attitude common to both everyday life and science that takes the being of the world for granted (see Staiti 2015). By contrast, phenomenology begins where the naïve positing of being that characterizes the natural attitude is suspended via epoché, and consciousness is thus no longer viewed as an empirical fact woven into the causal-inductive regularities of nature (natural sciences), or as a product of its historical-cultural milieu (positivistic human sciences), but as the field of manifestation in which the right of our claims about being and non-being of things in the world becomes accessible to phenomenological scrutiny. Instead of presupposing the being of the world, i.e., carrying out intellectual operations on a dimension of being that is always already ‘posited’ as such (Straiti 2016), the phenomenologist suspends being and studies the processes of constitution in consciousness that make it possible for an existing world to be there for us in the first place. Together with the being of the world, the phenomenologist has to suspend all the sciences that lay claim to various provinces of worldly being, such as ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ (Hua III/1, 122), the formal and material eidetic sciences that lay claim to domains of ideal being, such as the spatial shapes of pure geometry (Hua III/1, 126–128), as well as, at least temporarily, all claims about a transcendent God and a pure or transcendental ego as distinct from the stream of its experiences (Hua III/1, 124–125). The only domain of being that remains ‘unaffected’ by the decision to suspend all naïve posittings of being is thus pure consciousness (as a residuum of the reduction), whose essences are the proper subject-matter of phenomenology as a new science.

In addition to the phenomenological reduction, Husserl speaks occasionally of an eidetic reduction (Hua III/1, 6; Hua IX, 284, 321; Hua XIV, 37, 307; Hua XXV, 123), i.e., the leading back of an individual to its corresponding essence(s), such as, for instance, leading back a perceived triangular shape to the essence ‘triangle’ or an individually occurring act of perception to the essence ‘perception’. The phenomenological and the eidetic reduction are thus individually
necessary and jointly sufficient to define the method of phenomenology; however, unlike the phenomenological reduction, the eidetic reduction is not a move from transcendent unities to immanent manifolds, but rather a move from factual unities (individuals) to ideal unities (essences), i.e., from the domain of empirical being to the domain of ideal being (see Lavigne 2009, 18–21). While this sense of reduction is consistent with the scholastic notion of *reductio* and is thus less idiosyncratic, it designates a methodological procedure that only bears a family-resemblance relation to the phenomenological reduction as described above (i.e., the move from a domain of being to another), thus possibly introducing an equivocity in Husserl’s usage of the term (see Lohmar 2002, 755). In order to avoid confusion, it is therefore advisable to speak of ‘reduction’ only with respect to the phenomenological reduction and refer to the intellectual operation that constitutes essences more generically as eidetic method, eidetic procedure, or, more simply and in Husserlian idiom, eidetic intuition.

Later in life Husserl continued to work to better understand both scope and philosophical status of the phenomenological reduction. This was at least partly motivated by the cold reception of the phenomenological reduction by Husserl’s contemporaries and students. Philosophers practicing or working in dialogue with empirical psychology thought that Husserl was exaggerating the importance of the phenomenological reduction and the ensuing difference between phenomenology and psychology. For instance, in a critical discussion of *Ideen* August Messer argues: “I recognize that in light of its characteristic ‘bracketing’ of all positing of reality, phenomenology must be distinguished from psychology […]; however, this distinction has a merely theoretical significance; it fades into the background where the praxis of research is concerned” (Messer [1914] 2018, 251). In a similar vein, Henrich Gustav Steinmann accuses Husserl of an “exaggeration that seeks to attribute metaphysical truth to the basic methodological fiction at the foundation of phenomenology” (Steinmann [1917] 2018, 281). On Steinmann’s construal, the phenomenological reduction is nothing more than a methodological fiction that, as such, proves nothing about the status of consciousness in its relationship to natural reality: “There is only one consciousness and it is either absolute or bound up with the real world” (Steinmann [1917] 2018, 280). The fact that one can methodologically suspend the being of the world and turn to investigate consciousness as ‘pure’ does not mean that consciousness is in fact independent of the being of the world. To counter these objections Husserl has to show that the phenomenological reduction has more than merely ‘theoretical significance’, that it must be upheld in order for phenomenology to be possible as a philosophical science, and that, *contra* Steinmann, it reveals something fundamental about consciousness and is thus unlike a pair of colored glasses that make consciousness appear as if it were independent of the being of the world, while it in fact isn’t.

Husserl’s students, such as Roman Ingarden and Edith Stein, found the reduction to be inevitably bound up with a kind of transcendental idealism that they shunned. Accordingly, they set out to articulate something like a ‘realist’ phenomenology without reduction, as early phenomenologist Herbert Spiegelberg presents the view years later (Spiegelberg 1973).

Husserl began to think that such cold reception was due to misunderstandings, but also to a certain pedagogical deficiency and unclarity in his early presentations of the phenomenological reduction. His ensuing attempts to strengthen and defend the necessity of the phenomenological reduction can be roughly categorized as follows: (1) an account of the possibility of the phenomenological *epoché* and reduction through a study of the conscious acts through which the reduction is implemented, i.e., a phenomenology of the phenomenological reduction; (2) an effort to connect the discovery of the phenomenological reduction to the history of Western philosophy; (3) a consideration of the pedagogical difficulties connected with the performance of the phenomenological reduction and a motivation of the necessity of its execution; (4) the
endeavor to dispel the charge of solipsism and show that the scope of consciousness revealed by the phenomenological reduction is intersubjective.

(1) Husserl focuses his attention on the peculiarities of reflection, and on the phenomena of intentional iteration and implication in acts of presentification (imagination, recollection, expectation, empathy). It is an essential characteristic of reflection to make it possible for the reflecting subject to thematize the belief of an act reflected upon without necessarily participating in that belief (Hua VIII, 97). The phenomenological epoché draws on this essential feature of reflection that enables the phenomenologist to retain the naïve belief in being characterizing the natural attitude but in brackets, as it were, i.e., without participating in that belief. Moreover, the suspension of being required by the epoché can stretch into past, future, and alien experience thanks to the essential features of presentifying iterability (I can imagine to recall an expectation of a certain object) and implication (when I experience another experiencing X, the intentionality of my experience can be redirected toward X, thus ‘stretching into’ the intentionality of the other’s act, as it were) (see Hua VIII, 123f.). This means that although it is accomplished in a single act occurring in a definite moment of the streaming life of consciousness, the suspension of being required by the phenomenological reduction can extend to encompass the totality of this life. Therefore, the phenomenological reduction is not an act that confines the philosopher to the point-like immediacy of a momentary experience, as one might be inclined to think, but rather opens up a genuine field of inquiry that encompasses the totality of subjective life.

(2) Husserl’s endeavor to connect the phenomenological reduction to key moments in the history of philosophy is documented in the lecture course on a critical history of ideas (Hua VII) and in the Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology (Hua VI). While he never attenuates his understanding of the phenomenological reduction as a genuine breakthrough and as the discovery that finally put philosophy of the path of becoming a science, Husserl sees important precursors of phenomenology in early modern thinkers such as Descartes and Hume, as well as Kant. Far from being an idiosyncratic method, the reduction is thus presented as the philosophical device that fulfills the “secret nostalgia” (Hua III/1, 118) of all modern philosophy in its struggle to ground objectivity in subjectivity.

(3) Husserl progressively recognizes that the introduction of the phenomenological reduction in Ideas was too abrupt (Hua XXIX, 425–426; Hua XXXIV, 122–124; Hua VI, 157), thus potentially misleading beginners into thinking that phenomenology is committed to solipsism and Cartesian foundationalism. While in Ideas Husserl insisted exclusively on the difference between phenomenology and psychology (Hua III/1, 5), he later introduces the notion of a genuine “phenomenological-psychological reduction” (Hua IX, 260) geared toward establishing a purely descriptive eidetic psychology, whose function is propaedeutic vis-à-vis transcendental phenomenology (see Staiti 2012). Phenomenological psychology is then presented as one of the paths toward transcendental phenomenology and it is associated with the work of precursors such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Franz Brentano, as well as with the attitude characterizing the Logical Investigations. It should be noted that for Husserl, however, such phenomenological psychology remains trapped in paradoxes due to its continuing permanence in the natural attitude and if coherently developed it must “by necessity” turn into a genuine transcendental phenomenology (Hua XXXIV, 125–139). It is in this context that Husserl begins to assess strengths and weaknesses of different paths to the reduction, traditionally identified as the Cartesian, the psychological, and the life-worldly path (see Kern 1962; Drummond 1975; Staiti 2010; Perkins 2017).
As for the charge of solipsism, the *locus classicus* for Husserl’s attempt to dispel it is the fifth Cartesian meditation. Here Husserl introduces what he calls a “reduction to the sphere of ownness (Eigenheitssphäre)” (Hua I, 124–129) that is necessary in order to reconstruct the complex intentional structure of our experience of other embodied subjects. While Husserl never gives up the methodological preeminence of the first-personal perspective, i.e., the necessity to start from one’s own experience, and proceeds from there to thematize other subjects (in this respect Hua talks about “solipsism in a good sense” in Hua VIII, 65), he intends to prove that this methodological preeminence does not trap the phenomenologist in a kind of intra-mental space that blocks all access to others. By contrast, properly understood, the phenomenological reduction is from the very outset an intersubjective reduction, i.e., one that discloses pure consciousness as an intersubjective community of subjects.

The reduction to the sphere of ownness or primordial reduction staged in the *Cartesian Meditations* has the purpose of making visible the appearance of other subjects within the narrow sphere of one’s own sensory experience. Husserl describes the reduction to the sphere of ownness as a “limitation of the describing and analyzing gaze to the dimension of a thing (and of whatever else is ‘valid’ as world) that is really perceived” (Hua XV, 129). Focusing exclusively on the flux of present sensibility, the primordial reduction creates the conditions to see how, as soon as something in one’s sensory field is apprehended as a living body, a transfer of sense on the basis of analogy takes place (*analogisierende Auffassung*: Hua I, 140), through which the living body is experienced as governed by another subject who henceforth counts as on par with myself. The reciprocity (I see myself as seen by the other) and iterability (I see the other as seeing others) of this experience, which Husserl dubs ‘empathy’, sets the basis for the constitution of an open community of reciprocally connected subjects, whose acts of consciousness jointly constitute the world as valid ‘for anybody’, i.e., as the correlate of a transcendental intersubjectivity, rather than a *solus ipse*.

In the 1930s Husserl’s research on the phenomenological reduction assumes at times ‘existential’ tones, stressing how the performance of the reduction inaugurates a new life for the phenomenologist, i.e., the access to a “dimension of depth” (Hua VI, 121) that is necessarily concealed to those living in the natural attitude. The awareness of one’s “transcendentality” (Hua XXXIV, 244) amounts to a transformative experience (Hua XXXIX, 215), one that Husserl often compares to an “awakening” (Hua XV, 389–390). The transcendentally awakened human being is aware of its “ontological dignity” (Hua XIV, 257) vis-à-vis the rest of nature and has thus definitively overcome the debasing picture of human life delivered by naturalism. Thus, as Edith Stein argues in one of her manuscripts, without being itself a *Weltanschauung*, via the phenomenological reduction Husserl’s phenomenology also assumes a ‘weltanschaulich’ meaning or significance:

> Without pursuing this goal, Husserl *de facto* arrived with his method to a coherent picture of the world. He acknowledges an absolute being, to which everything else refers back, and on the basis of which everything else has to be understood: a plurality of human beings, that is, of subjects, each of which builds up *her own* world in her acts, but who also stand in a relation of mutual understanding and, in the exchange of their experiences, build up an intersubjective world. Everything else that exists beyond these monads is constituted through their acts and is relative to them.

*(Stein 1962, 12)*

By conclusion, let us turn to post-Husserlian phenomenology for a brief assessment of the history of the phenomenological reduction after Husserl. As anticipated above, the first generation
of phenomenologists, including figures as prominent as Martin Heidegger, Roman Ingarden, Edith Stein, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre, expressed skepticism about the possibility and even the desirability of a reduction as envisioned by Husserl. One could get the impression that, after Husserl, phenomenologists simply jettisoned the reduction. Alternatively, as Jacques Taminiaux has argued (2004), one can speak of a series of metamorphoses or shifts of the phenomenological reduction that occurred in the phenomenological movement after Husserl.

Heidegger, for instance, while never mentioning the word ‘reduction’ in *Being and Time*, writes in his lecture course on *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* in 1927:

> We call this basic component of phenomenological method—the leading back or reduction of investigative vision from a naively apprehended being to being—phenomenological reduction. We are thus adopting a central term of Husserl’s phenomenology in its literal wording through not in its substantive intent. […] For us phenomenological reduction means leading phenomenological vision back from the apprehension of a being, whatever may be the character of that apprehension, to the understanding of the being of this being (projecting upon the way it is unconcealed). Like every other scientific method, phenomenological method grows and changes due to the progress made precisely with its help into the subjects under investigation.

*(Heidegger 1982, 21)*

The ‘phenomenological reduction’ thus comes to designate the move that inaugurates the problem of fundamental ontology as defined in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. It no longer designates a move from transcendent unities to immanent (transcendental) multiplicities but the fundamental-ontological move from beings to being as such.

In a similar way, Max Scheler, in his 1928 groundbreaking work *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (Scheler 2008), uses the phrase ‘phenomenological reduction’ to designate the uniquely human capacity to suspend reality and free oneself from the pressure of vital needs, thereby gaining access to the dimension of *Geist*, i.e., the ideal domain of the essences of things (Scheler 2008, 35–38). Thus, in Scheler, Husserl’s sharp distinction between the phenomenological and the eidetic reduction becomes blurred. The phenomenological reduction is *eo ipso* eidetic, in that suspending the reality of things amounts to unveiling a new dimension that is no longer factual, but rather spiritual or ideal.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously wrote in the preface to his masterpiece *Phenomenology of Perception*: “The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, xv). Rather than seeking in intentional consciousness the ultimate source of constitution in Merleau-Ponty’s hands, phenomenology ought to unearth unthought-of dimensions of constitution (history, language, the flesh, the Other) that exceed the scope of reflectively accessed consciousness and through which consciousness itself is constituted. This conception of phenomenology’s task remained strong in the French philosophical landscape, and continued in the work of figures such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Henry and, more recently, Renaud Barbaras.

Despite the glaring differences, one could argue that post-Husserlian phenomenologists did retain the fundamental impulse driving the phenomenological reduction in Husserl, i.e., the quest for an original ground of meaning that remains invisible to both common sense and empirical science.

Finally, let us remark that in the recent present Husserl’s notion of the phenomenological reduction has re-gained philosophical visibility and reputation through the work of phenomenologists.
enologists such as Jean-Luc Marion and Dan Zahavi. Marion (1998) connects the notion of reduction to the notion of givenness and argues that, far from entrapping thought in the self-contained immanence of consciousness, the reduction is the philosophical device that enables us to see phenomena as given, thus making givenness as such available to philosophical scrutiny. In a very different spirit, Dan Zahavi has argued that the phenomenological reduction has the merit to finally overcome the problematic metaphysical neutrality characterizing the Logical Investigations (Zahavi 2002), thus opening phenomenology to an investigation of the world itself (Zahavi 2009, 88–89) and providing a helpful tool to challenge the naïve realism that undergirds much contemporary philosophy and science (Zahavi 2016).

References


Reduction


