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TRANSCENDENTAL

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Introduction

Reflection on the meaning of philosophical concepts with a long history is often illuminating, not only because of the continuities, but also the contrasts it makes apparent. This is very much the case when considering how the term “transcendental,” with its long history (see Aertsen 1998), is understood in the phenomenological tradition. There are four major points of contrast that are relevant: the medieval or Scholastic roots of the term; its transformation in the work of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and further development in the Neo-Kantianism of the nineteenth century; its appropriation in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938); and finally, the critique of transcendental idealism in Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and post-Husserlian phenomenology.

Medieval origins

In use since at least the thirteenth century and commonly associated with Albertus Magnus (c. 1200–1280), though perhaps most rigorously articulated in Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308) and his followers, the term “transcendentals” (or transcendentia) refers to concepts such as “being,” “one,” “true,” and “good” that are said of beings in general, irrespective of their articulation in the Aristotelian categories such as substance, quality, and relation (Aertsen 1998, 1360–1364). Transcendentia are thus “transcendent” in the sense of trans-categorial.

The development of the concept of transcendentals has its roots in Aristotle’s discussion of the distinction between the concepts of “being” and “one” in Metaphysics IV, chapters 1–2 (Aristotle 1979). Aristotle argues that even though the concepts of “being” and “one” (or unity) are distinct, nevertheless, what is a being cannot be said to be distinct from what has unity. The implication is that the distinction cannot be understood in terms of contrasting genera or kinds of things, but must instead be taken as determinations that are held in common for all being qua being. Accordingly, in the Scotist tradition (Kobusch 1996; Aertsen 1998, 1365–1372) the transcendentals are described as the “most common” (communisimus) among all being qua being; likewise, for the Scotists (here influenced by Avicenna) the transcendentals count among the most basic determinations (prima) of being as such.

Though the fact that the transcendentals “transcend” the categories as communisimus and prima established for the Scholastics the possibility of a universal ontology, the principal moti-
vations behind the development of the concept in figures such as Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) were decidedly theological. Scotus, in this vein, formulates in a systematic way the idea of the being of God as “above” the categories, an essence wholly unconstrained by categorial determination, and who thus stands in a uniquely original relation to all beings as such. The theme of the transcendental thus expresses the being of God as origin, or the original being of the creator, the fundamental determination of which rests on a notion of the ontologically or metaphysically “prior” (see Aertsen 2012).

**From Kant to Neo-Kantianism**

Though a core of the original Scholastic sense of “transcendental” arguably remains intact—above all in its association with universal ontology and the *apriori*—the meaning of the term nevertheless undergoes a fundamental transformation in the philosophy of Kant. This is perhaps most dramatically illustrated when considering its relation to ontology. Though Kant still identifies his transcendental philosophy as *ontologia* (Kant 1999, A 845/B 873f), it is no longer an ontology that purports to yield immediate cognitions of things, but instead to determine the conditions under which the cognition of things is at all possible: “I call all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects insofar as this is to be possible *apriori*” (Kant 1999, B 25).

In Kant, the Scholastic–Aristotelian orientation to the knowability of things thus remains in place, thereby meriting the title of *ontologia*, but the emphasis shifts from the concepts proper, through which things are thought, to the subjective conditions, in which such concepts can be said to yield true knowledge of things. This is coupled with another shift, this time in the relevant sense of the logical. To the extent to which “our mode of cognition of objects” is governed by the forms and principles of pure or general logic, the relevant domain of inquiry is “logical” in character. However, the emphasis again shifts, this time from the logical forms themselves to the determination of the “origin, domain, and objective validity” of cognitions that relate to objects *apriori* (Kant 1999, B A 57/B 81).

Taking these two shifts of emphasis in tandem illuminates Kant’s transformation of the sense of the “transcendental”: ontology takes on a decidedly epistemological orientation, and logic becomes transcendental logic. The result is that while transcendental cognition remains *apriori*, it is limited to a much more circumscribed sense of the *prima* than had been the case in the Scholastic tradition:

> not every *apriori* cognition must be called transcendental, but only that by means of which we recognize that and how certain representations (intuitions or concepts) are applied entirely *apriori*, or are possible (i.e., the possibility of cognition or its use *apriori*). Hence neither space nor any geometrical determination of it *apriori* is a transcendental representation, but only the cognition that their representations are not of empirical origin at all and the possibility that they can nevertheless be related *apriori* to objects of experience can be called transcendental. […] The difference between the transcendental and the empirical therefore belongs only to the critique of cognitions and does not concern their relation to their object.

*(Kant 1999, B 80f)*

Whereas in medieval philosophy the transcendental is contrasted with the categorial—the transcendentals “transcend” the categories qua predicatable without restriction—the contrast in Kant is instead between the transcendental and the *empirical*, where transcendental is understood to
designate a non-empirical origin of cognition. Again, something here is preserved while being transformed: as non-empirical in origin, the apriori status of the transcendental is preserved, but it is in turn restricted to its applicability within the domain of sensibility. Ironically, Kant appropriates Aristotle’s categories, with some significant revisions, in his elucidation of the apriori concepts of the understanding (Kant 1999, A 76f/B 102f), thereby designating as “transcendental” what had traditionally served as a point of contrast to the transcendental.

The idea that there are conditions under which concepts of things find applicability apriori implies of course a restriction, and with that a different sense of “transcendence” that further deepens the contrast between Kant and Scholasticism. The region delimited by transcendental logic as the sole domain of the objective validity of the (now) transcendental categories of the understanding takes on the character of a transcendental immanence. Kant contrasts this with what he calls the “transcendent” deployment of the concepts of the understanding, namely when such concepts are used to think objects that can in principle never be encountered in a properly empirical experience (i.e. intuitively or sensibly given; Kant 1999, A 296f/B 352f). The result is a transvaluation of the Scholastic concept of the transcendental: it remains “transcendent” in the sense of non-empirical (or ideal) in origin, but it nevertheless finds its legitimacy, its truth, solely within the immanence of empirical experience (or the real), in contrast to a new sense of “transcendent” that designates the misapplication of the pure concepts of the understanding, leading only to transcendental illusion.

Kant’s conception of transcendental philosophy was transformative. It inspired, above all, a renewed engagement with the idea of experience as fundamental to philosophy. Here Kant’s thinking both advances and critiques the traditions of British empiricism, above all the work of John Locke (1632–1704) and David Hume (1711–1776), who had also sought to grasp the origins of the understanding and its concepts in a reflection on the interface between mental processes and concrete encounters with things in the world (Locke 1964; Hume 2003). In contrast to the British philosophers, Kant introduces a more radical emphasis on the essential discursivity of empirical cognition: the encounter with things in experience is no longer something simply given and interpreted through ideas equally given or furnished by the history of the subject, but inwardly fashioned apriori in accordance with fundamental principles introduced by the subject itself apriori. This figure of a self-fashioning subjectivity, the forward, spontaneous movement of which establishes the very trajectory of the being of understanding, became the fundamental leitmotif of an even more radical transcendental idealism in the philosophy of J.G. Fichte (1762–1814), which in turn provided a key point of contrast for the absolute idealism of F.W.J. Schelling (1775–1854) and G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) (see Hegel 1977).

However, it is the waning of the influence of absolute idealism after the deaths of Schelling and Hegel that, arguably, sets the stage for the kind of Kantianism, and with that a conception of transcendental philosophy, that is most pertinent to the phenomenological tradition (Willey 1978). There are two main elements to emphasize in this history. The first is an emphasis on a psychological reading of Kant, an approach that appeared early in the work of J.F. Fries (1773–1843), who argued that Kant’s turn to the subject must be understood in terms of fundamental principles introduced by the subject itself apriori. This figure of a self-fashioning subjectivity, the forward, spontaneous movement of which establishes the very trajectory of the being of understanding, became the fundamental leitmotif of an even more radical transcendental idealism in the philosophy of J.G. Fichte (1762–1814), which in turn provided a key point of contrast for the absolute idealism of F.W.J. Schelling (1775–1854) and G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) (see Hegel 1977).

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The second is an emphasis on the historical development of transcendental philosophy in the Neo-Kantianism proper of the Marburg and Southwest schools (Köhnke 1986), above all in the work of Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936), and Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945)—is the

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dominance of materialism and positivism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and the resurgent epistemological realism that accompanied it. Transcendental philosophy in this context was understood by the Neo-Kantians to be locked in a critical dialogue with positivist conceptions of science, against which the Neo-Kantians tended to emphasize either the logical necessity of *apriori* principles for scientific understanding (Cohen 1885) or the constitutive role of subjective activity and valuation in cultural formations more generally (Rickert 1899; Cassirer 1923–1929).

Kant was also frequently called upon to mediate the debate between an idealism that would emphasize the constitutive importance of the logical functions of the understanding, and a realism that would insist on reducing all cognitive phenomena to psycho-physiology. Nineteenth-century Neo-Kantianism itself, as a recognizable philosophical program, arguably arises out of an attempt to gain ground in the idealism–realism debate that was emerging mid-century, and which was being driven by an ever closer intertwining of logic and empirical psychology. One of the earliest polemical texts in this vein is Otto Liebmann’s *Kant und die Epigonen* (Liebmann 1865), which takes as its point of orientation precisely the impasse between idealism and realism, and argues for the necessity for a more fundamental appraisal of the master himself, with the recurring cry “back to Kant!”

**Edmund Husserl**

The tensions characteristic of the uneasy blend of logic and psychology in Neo-Kantianism, not to mention in the more unabashed psychologism of figures such as John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), provide the most immediate context of the development of Husserl’s phenomenology, both prior to and after Husserl’s explicit embrace of his version of a “transcendental idealism.” It is important to emphasize that Husserl’s phenomenology began as neither a transcendental philosophy nor an idealism. The ideality of pure logic, the argument for which lay at the core of Husserl’s critique of psychologism, was not meant in the sense of a *transcendental* ideality (Husserl 2001, 144–162). Nor was Husserl’s eventual embrace of transcendental idealism, announced in his 1913 *Ideas I* (Husserl 2014) and further elaborated in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (Husserl 1969) and *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl 1982), welcomed by others in the phenomenological movement, such as Adolf Reinach (1883–1917), Max Scheler (1874–1928), or much of the circle of young philosophers that had gathered around Husserl during his years in Göttingen (Ingarden 1975).

It is also important to emphasize that, even within the horizon of Husserl’s mature philosophy, properly “transcendental” phenomenology remains a sharply delimited thematic field. This can be illuminated by way of a contrast with Husserl’s idea of a “pure phenomenological psychology.” Analogous to pure mechanics, pure psychology for Husserl is an eidetic science of the fundamental forms and structures of psychic life (Husserl 1997, 86f; Hua IX). Like any science, pure or phenomenological psychology is defined on a proper object domain, in this case mental life that has been revealed after the suspension or bracketing (*epoche*) of all naturalizing presuppositions or judgments, and the reduction of the objects of experience to their givenness as pure phenomena of mental life.

Despite the obvious methodological parallels (see Husserl 2014, §§27–32, 56–62) the eidetics of pure consciousness does not, however, amount to a properly transcendental phenomenology, but stands as a self-sufficient *apriori* science of its own:

Phenomenological or pure psychology as an intrinsically primary and completely self-contained psychological discipline, which is also sharply separated from natural sci-
Transcendental phenomenology, by contrast, treats specifically the problem of understanding, or the objects of experience, with regard to their evidential character. For Husserl, transcendental philosophy in this sense is only possible as a science that does not assume evidence as a positive given, but instead seeks its origin or ground in the constitutive accomplishments of pure consciousness. In this sense a “transcendental” science stands in contrast with all “positive” sciences as such that take their evidential ground as given within the horizon of the world:

A psychology could not [Husserl’s example here is Locke] be the foundation of transcendental philosophy. Even pure psychology in the phenomenological sense, theoretically delimited by the psychological-phenomenological reduction, still is and always will be a positive science: it has the world as its pre-given foundation. [...] Like every positive science, this pure psychology is itself transcendally problematic. (Husserl 1997, 96–97)

And again: “All positive sciences are sciences [that function] in transcendental naivete” (Husserl 1997, 98). What is required for phenomenology to operate on a properly transcendental register is a properly transcendental reduction, thanks to which pure subjectivity is revealed as the ground of all possible validity. As transcendental, subjectivity is no longer “positively” determined on the basis of the pre-given horizon of the world: “What remains [after the transcendental reduction] in validity is exclusively the universum of ‘transcendently pure’ subjectivity and, enclosed within it, all the actual and possible ‘phenomena’ of objectivities, all modes of appearance and modes of consciousness that pertain to such objectivities” (Husserl 1997, 97).

There is thus for Husserl a double sense of “phenomenon” that provides an axis of coordination between pure phenomenological psychology and pure phenomenology, and thanks to which both sciences coincide “proposition for proposition” (Husserl 1997, 98; 1969, Chapter Six). Their bond consists in their mutual rootedness in experience, or better the possibility of experience being revealed in reflection as a universum of manifestation (Husserl 2014, §§77–79). Thanks to reflection and what, in its various modes, can be intuitively apprehended within it, the experiential field can be explicated either positively, its world-validity naively operative, in pure eidetic psychology, or transcendently, as the origin of the “sense and existential validity of the naturally accepted world” (Husserl 1997, 98). It is in the latter case that pure consciousness reveals itself as properly sense-bestowing (sinngebende), and where the manifestation of objectivities becomes the theme of a series of studies of how different kinds of beings are “constituted as” objectivities of such and such a kind (Husserl 2014, §§149–153; see Sokolowski 1970).

All of this yields a unique sense of “experience” or “lived experience” (Erlebnis) that contrasts with the concept of empirical experience in Kant, something that in turn separates Husserl’s conception of the transcendental from many Neo-Kantian approaches. For Kant, experience is understood essentially as embodied in empirical knowledge, and subjectivity as a set of cognitive functions, the principles of which are necessary for establishing the objective validity of empirical knowledge. Kant’s manner of investigation is thus distinctly regressive, tracing objective determinations in empirical judgments back to the subjective conditions that rest in the cognitive capacities of the thinking mind. Husserl, by contrast, proceeds not regessively but descriptively, because any given intentio of consciousness and its intentum represents for him a given unity of experience available for intuitive apprehension (Husserl 2014, §§70–75). A phenomenon, pre-
cisely in its determinateness and structural complexity, is for Husserl not an index for a set of functions thanks to which representations are combined in accordance with *apriori* principles of the understanding and forms of intuition, as in the Kantian tradition. A phenomenon for Husserl is the manifestation of something itself, given within the horizon of the intentional experience in which its appearance is possible. Both the pure eidetics of intentional life and its parallel transcendental explication of constitutive validity remain within the immanence of pure experience in this sense. In this way, transcendental philosophy is, for Husserl, grounded not in a genetic psychology of our cognitive faculties, but in a properly *transcendental experience*, methodologically secured in reflection by the reductions: “The transcendental reduction opens up, in fact, a completely new kind of experience that can be systematically pursued: transcendental experience” (Husserl 1997, 98; Hua VIII, 69–81). In this way, the transcendental for Husserl is not so much contrasted with *experience* as it is with a *naively apprehended experience*.

The emphasis on description and its rootedness in the intuitivity of lived experience is operative also in Husserl’s “genetic” phenomenology, which tracks the emergent, even historical character of objectivity, though here it comes under considerable strain (Hua XI, 336–345). Nevertheless, however complex the theme of transcendental subjectivity becomes in genetic phenomenology, the analysis never shifts back to Kant’s regressive strategy, and the leitmotif of validity, itself a very Kantian theme, is never pursued in the manner of a transcendental deduction, but always in terms of intuitively apprehended modes of givenness. Instead of “back to Kant!”, the battle cry of transcendental phenomenology remains “back to the things themselves!”, the intuitive givenness of which always remains the final court of appeal for any claim concerning the transcendental constitution of validity and sense.

In parallel with Kant’s transcendental philosophy but with the important differences already noted, transcendental phenomenology also merits the title of an *ontologia*. The *universum* of transcendental subjectivity, the accomplishments of which establish the experiential foundations for the very cognizability of things, yields in turn for Husserl a *universal ontology*—or the sum total of possible legitimate ontological concepts that provide the conceptual bases for the positive sciences:

In this way transcendental phenomenology, once realized, encompasses a universal ontology in a broadened sense: a full, universal, and concrete ontology in which all correlative ontological concepts are drawn from a transcendental originality that leaves no questions of sense and legitimacy in any way unclarified.

*(Husserl 1997, 99)*

**Heidegger and post-Husserlian phenomenology**

“Ontology,” as Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*, “is possible only as phenomenology” (Heidegger 1996, 31). Yet not in the form of Husserl’s phenomenology. Heidegger is sharply critical of Husserl’s embrace of Descartes in his understanding of phenomenological philosophy (see Husserl 2014, §§27–32, and Husserl 1982). Husserl’s trenchant Cartesianism, Heidegger contends, distorts the phenomenological field in ways that disrupt the possibility for a genuine ontological questioning; the assumption that the basic structures of consciousness or intentional life take the form of the Cartesian cogito posits a decidedly intellectual orientation that neglects a more fundamental questioning of the being of the subject, a neglect that is compounded by Husserl’s uncritical embrace of methodological principles that demand a delimitation of being in terms of clarity, distinctness, and certainty. All of this, Heidegger contends, is the apotheosis of a philosophical tradition in which the being of the subject, or in the case of Descartes the being...
of the *ego sum*, has been consistently obfuscated, and with that the entire ontological problematic (Heidegger 2005, §§46–50).

Yet even in the wake of this critique, Heidegger’s project of fundamental ontology, grounded in an analytic of Dasein, however distant it may otherwise be from the transcendental subjectivity of either Husserl or Kant, nevertheless remains decidedly “transcendental” in character. The basic reason for this is that the subject or Dasein for Heidegger remains the being of an *understanding*, the existential explication of which fixes the horizon for the determination of the sense of being in general (Heidegger 1996, 10–11). Dasein is that being that exists, or that is an issue for itself, to the extent to which it is an understanding of what it means to be; and if this understanding, its intentionality and basic structures as a mode of comportment towards itself and beings as a whole, is determined essentially as an understanding of *time*, then it is precisely time or temporality that will be revealed as the “transcendental horizon of the meaning of being” (Heidegger 1996, 34–35).

Despite the fact that, at least in his writings just before and including *Being and Time*, Heidegger continued to understand phenomenology as transcendental philosophy even after its purification from Descartes, the anti-Cartesianism of much of post-Husserlian phenomenology tended to associate the theme of the transcendental precisely with Cartesianism and, by extension, Kantianism. The broad acceptance of these critiques, such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Transcendence of the Ego* (Sartre 1960), led many phenomenologists to avoid the term altogether. The “phenomenological ontology” expounded in Sartre (1992), likewise the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962), keep transcendental philosophy at arm’s length, and Jan Patočka’s project of an “asubjective phenomenology” (Patočka 1991) attempts explicitly to re-articulate the basic gestures of phenomenological philosophy in a precisely non-transcendental mode. It would seem, in short, that the very idea of a “transcendental phenomenology” began and ended with Edmund Husserl.

Yet, at the same time, as Rudolf Bernet has recently argued (Bernet 2015), there is a risk in the current situation, in which there seems to be little interest in assessing either the cogency of Husserl’s conception of transcendentalism and its attendant idealism, or the trenchancy of the classical critiques levelled against it. Not to engage these problems risks undermining one’s grasp of the meaning and promise of phenomenological philosophy generally, and Husserlian phenomenology particularly. More, one could in turn argue that it risks misunderstanding the relation of the phenomenological moment to the history of philosophy, for the theme of the transcendental ties phenomenological thought to some of the oldest and most formative tendencies of philosophy itself, ancient or modern.

**References**


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