

## The Crisis of Meaning and the Life-World

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## INTRODUCTION

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### BACK TO THE THINGS THEMSELVES?

In our opinion, Heidegger's philosophy provided some extremely important prerequisites for a complete rethinking of phenomenology, chiefly inasmuch as it brought to light unnoticed ontological presuppositions in Husserl's phenomenology. As however Heidegger's own philosophy took a turn that allowed the theme of "appearing as such" to be dealt with exclusively in connection with the renewal of the problem of Being, Husserl's problems have since then never been taken up again, though they do not seem to have been simply settled and done with but, on the contrary, rather to have deepened through new inquiries.

—Jan Patočka<sup>1</sup>

This book started as a puzzlement related to the title of Edmund Husserl's book *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*.<sup>2</sup> What kind of *crisis* does Husserl speak about? We know that when Husserl conceived his book, Nazism was coming to power. For Husserl, this was a victory of irrationalism at the heart of Europe: despite a long European history of rational inquiry, most spectacularly embodied in natural science, irrationalism was rising. Yet the problem that he addressed in his book is still with us. Irrationalism—and Husserl's concern that the reason admired in science is mistrusted and discarded in other domains—is as valid now as it was in his time, going back to the nineteenth century at least. What is the root of this splitting of reason? Why do we distrust reason while we accept scientific reason as the highest achievement of rationality, which began in ancient Greece? It also seems that, more and more, the scientific explanation of meaning—which reduces meaning to an investigation of the material components of the human brain—is

not questioned at all. Hence, Husserl's *crisis* is still with us, and in need of rethinking.<sup>3</sup>

This book, then, is the continuation of a debate both with Husserl and against him. Husserl presented his thinking about the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) in lectures in Vienna (7 and 10 May 1935) and Prague (12–15 November 1935); eventually the Prague lectures were posthumously published as *Crisis*.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is an extension of his early work on the problem of scientific formalization embedded in scientific method, as I discuss in chapter 1. We can formulate the problem as the problem of modern mathematical science, which we accept as the only adjudicator of what constitutes objective knowledge. The problem lies in the question of what constitutes knowledge and how objective knowledge relates to the meaning of the world and human subjective existence.<sup>5</sup> There are two interrelated issues. One is the question of meaning; hence the title of Husserl's work, which could be formulated as the crisis of meaning. The other is the trajectory of how the modern conception of nature came about. These issues are related, but they do not overlap in the consideration of the thinkers whom this book presents.

This problem can, of course, be traced back to the beginning of philosophy in ancient Greece, and could be expressed, paraphrasing Patočka and harking back to Pascal, in this way: "How can we procure meaning from this mute, scientifically conjured-up universe, which is indifferent to our lived experience of the world; which is indifferent to what makes us human?"<sup>6</sup>

## THE QUESTION OF MEANING

This book, then, presents a history of problems related to the human constitution of meaning and the scientific formalization of nature that overrides human experience. The unresolved issue is the transition from understanding nature in a qualitative sense to mathematically mastering it, thereby putting aside questions relating to human existence. The division between nature and humans was conceptualized by René Descartes with his separation of *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. The legacy of this reconceptualization of nature is still with us. I offer four different approaches to this quandary. First, I present an outline of Husserl's work in relation to the problem of the objectification of meaning. Then I consider the continuation, appropriation, and transformation of Husserl's project by three later thinkers. This debate is bound to continue indefinitely, but my hope is that the clarification of certain

presuppositions embedded in the work of these thinkers can help us to reinvigorate our investigations, in what seems to be a debate without answers. Philosophy always strives to present problems that we can all think about and, perhaps, through the debate, shift the ground of those problems. The most difficult thing is our ability to see past the problems and our historical situatedness, to reformulate what is at issue: that is the aim of this book.

The methodological departure for this project was puzzlement concerning the term “crisis” in the title of Husserl’s book, which seems to refer to a “crisis of meaning.” The problem is that, originally, for Husserl, “meaning” is related to the constitution of meaning; in other words, his insight is that we cannot understand meaning, on the model of British empiricism, as following from the *ideas* of objects that are imprinted on our minds. Phenomenology discloses that we always see more than is given to us. Ideas are not the intermediary between meaning and things. We do not see ideas but, rather, things themselves. In many ways, acknowledging our participation in the constitution of meaning is the Kantian project. Our mind is not a *tabula rasa* on which ideas are imprinted from experience. As Leibniz pointed out, there must be something else to “combine” those ideas.<sup>7</sup>

In *Logical Investigations*, Husserl starts with a critique of psychologism to show the difference between formal logic and empirical logic—at this point he does not yet address knowledge but considers logic only. We need formal logic to make sense of empirical laws. Expanding his observation to account for knowledge in *The Idea of Phenomenology*, he introduces his notion of *epochē* to show that there is a difference between an appearance (a particular appearance of something *as* something, or *noema*, as he calls it later) and that which appears (*noesis*—in other words, adumbration of *noema*). It is we who, through a synthesis, constitute the meaning of a phenomenon. Phenomena are the meaningful things themselves, as we constitute them. Here there is no *crisis* of meaning. The project of phenomenology is, as Steven Crowell sums up, that “one simply ‘lives’ in the realm of meaning without ‘knowing’ it as such.”<sup>8</sup> The issue is to describe how we constitute the meaning of things.

Husserl’s later insight is to acknowledge prepredicative experience, which is the route to his reflections on the life-world. He extends his investigation into the constitution of meaning to account for the life-world, where we already encounter typical instances of things. We already “objectify” imprecise experiences to constitute meaningful things. Husserl moves from the constitution of things to the outer horizon of meaning: a meaningful thing

leads to another meaningful thing and so on, until the external horizon of all objects is disclosed. The move is *from* things *to* the horizon. Presumably if we go back to the things themselves, stripping away the garb of ideas and considering them without the overlay of scientific hypotheses, we will be able to change that outer horizon, recovering the life-world that is the ground of formalization, as Husserl argues. Husserl attempts to clarify the problem of modern epistemology. How do we know things, and what is the ground of our constitution of meaning? His answer is the transcendental *ego*. Since Husserl starts from things, the meaning of the whole—as later addressed by Heidegger and Patočka—is not a part of his project.

Heidegger moves away from Husserl's solution to the constitution of meaning in transcendental subjectivity but retains his insight that we typically encounter things in the world. Heidegger's change of focus is to account explicitly for a questioner—*Dasein*—who understands things, prior to any theoretical reflections, by simply dealing with and using them. In Heidegger's formulation, we do not understand things in their singularity; rather, we understand the project that we are involved with. Here the meaning of things is not primary. Heidegger's focus is, of course, different from that of Husserl: he is interested in Being. It is a shift from epistemology to ontology: not "How do we know the meaning of things?" but "What are things and what is the Being of a questioner?"; he explores how the Being of a questioner is different from the Being of things. Heidegger starts by rethinking logic as *logos*, speech, and considering the Being of a questioner who is a speaking being living in and understanding the world already. He claims that by rethinking *logos*, we realize that the meaning of things is constituted by "freezing" our initial understanding of them—imprecisely revealed through our engagement with words in our projects—into words that we can then use to communicate with others via language. Language is similar to theorizing: we consider things outside of our lived experience, outside of their initial context, when we use words. This reconsideration of *logos* as speaking leads Heidegger also to rethink the concept of truth; from the correspondence of propositions and things to *aletheia*—unhiddenness—or showing something forth. Heidegger is not concerned with meaning constitution but with the meaning of the whole, the question of Being.

The difference is in their respective understandings of the life-world. Husserl's life-world is structured as an everyday world that the formalization of science has obscured with the garb of ideas. By questioning this formalization and returning science to its original impulse to understand the world, instead

of structuring it through this garb of ideas, we can recover the human understanding of things and reinstate science as a responsible human achievement. By contrast, Heidegger insists that we cannot reveal the original structure of the life-world. Science's revelation is already dependent on its mathematical basis. Hence, there cannot be an "original" life-world that is covered by scientific explanation. Our understanding of the life-world is already informed by the modern mathematical project.

Husserl and Heidegger use the notion of "meaning" differently. Heidegger's consideration is with the overall meaning of the world, being already scientific, enframing us all in its design. For Husserl, the lived understanding of the world can be recovered from scientific misconceptions if we pay attention to the constitution of the meaning of things, recognizing that even scientific formalization is based on our human experience of the "typicality" of objects that we encounter in everyday life.

Arendt accepts Heidegger's reading of *Dasein*. Human beings are not the same as things that we encounter. However, the structure of *Dasein* is not adequate to account for our understanding of the world. She posits the human condition in order to historicize *Dasein*,<sup>9</sup> yet she proposes a different structure to account for the constitution of meaning. Using the history of events, as she would say, in a very idiosyncratic manner, she critiques the privileging of contemplation over action. In her narration, it seems as if *homo faber* and *animal laborans* drove the transformation of action from ancient Greece to the modern age. Meaning is subsumed to either the means-ends categories of *homo faber* (i.e., utilitarianism) or the categories of *animal laborans* (i.e., the consumption [or modern destruction] of the whole world). For Arendt, it is not ideas but events that change the world: her distrust of philosophy leads her to this path. She shows the problematic nature of consumer society as well as the inadequacy of scientific speech, yet the transformation of the conception of nature from the ancient Greeks to the modern scientific construction of the world is not accounted for in its own right.

Patočka accepts Husserl's theory of meaning constitution, but he objects to the transcendental *ego* as the space where meaning is constituted. He also accepts Heidegger's critique of the structure of the life-world, agreeing that we live in a world we understand via a scientific model whose basis is already mathematical. In order to rethink the life-world, or, as he calls it, the natural world, Patočka addresses the meaning of the "whole"; not as the outer horizon of things (as in Husserl) and not as a history of Being that swallows up the Being of a questioner (as in Heidegger). He returns to the Greeks to

consider the way the idea of nature has changed throughout history. He credits Husserl with the discovery of “objectification” in our everyday encounters with things (not just in the sphere of ideas); and he credits Heidegger with his proposal that modern science, being mathematically based, is already uncovering “mathematical” processes rather than things. Patočka also applauds Arendt for pointing out that, initially, we do not use things (as Heidegger would have it), but we are born into a community that teaches us about the things we use and our way of life. He then offers different approaches to thinking about the changes instituted by modern science.

### THE PROGRESSION OF BEING

In a very schematic way, following Patočka’s exposition, we can say that in the mythological world, myths explain everything by relegating all meaning to a primordial past. When this world collapses—when myths cease to explain why things are—the pre-Socratics attempt to confront the mystery of the world through *Kosmogony*, and the mystery of the world becomes a mystery of Being, of why things *are*. Moreover, a new question comes to the fore: If gods do not rule the world, who does? The ancient Greeks, addressing this second mystery, disclose the problem of human participation in affairs related to their Being in the world.

Socrates takes over these two aspects and brings Being and politics into mutual relation. Politics is now a part of being human, as Socrates notes. His knowing that he does not know discloses that we simply cannot know why things *are* and how they *are*. We are finite human beings whose knowledge is always situational. We cannot know what justice and good *are*. The only way to gain knowledge and meaning in the world is to keep asking questions in relation to the historical situation of humans.

Plato, distraught by Socrates’ death, attempts to secure the space of questioning by positing the unchangeable realm of Ideas, thus providing a stable basis for the human quest for knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, already schooled in the Platonic solution, realizes that Plato does not explain the terrestrial realm. Platonic ideas are unchanging, but *phusis* (translated today as “nature”) changes. Aristotle’s solution is to conceptualize change as change-in-the-world. For Plato, this is precisely what we cannot account for, since we live in the world of the Heraclitean flux. Yet Aristotle introduces the idea of motion and change that he can theorize about. Change is conceived in terms of

movement *within* bodies: the process of generation of plants, humans, and animals and their movements from one place to another are explained by his conception of *dunamis*, the inner motion of each body according to its nature. Being—why things *are* and how they are—is explained by this capacity to change.

Christianity provides another answer to the mystery of why things are and how they are. Saint Paul conceptualizes the solution in terms of God's being as the ground of all because he creates the world. God creates and knows, and he communicates this knowledge to humans. Modern science offers another solution to this mystery of Being by mathematizing motion while ignoring processes. Processes, in terms of *why* they are as they are—the generation of plants, animals, and humans—are excluded from modern mathematical science, which deals only with mathematized processes that it can account for in the sense of how they “proceed.” Only mathematizable “motion” can be dealt with by mathematics. Modern science does not deal with nonmathematizable domains. Hence there is no possibility to account for human meaning, which cannot be integrated into the mathematical scientific project.

Once again, we are back where we started. In the current dominant view, we are aware we cannot understand the mysteries that science excludes from its sphere of investigation, and we also cannot know “nature” in terms of why things are as they are if we accept that scientific explanations are the only way to disclose what nature *is*. We can know nature only as a mathematical manifold; in other words, through only those aspects that science considers. Moreover, the progression of knowledge is relative to the methods of investigation. Science never pretends to disclose the meaning of the whole; it is interested in an accumulation of knowledge that gives scientists glimpses into the vast universe from its own methodological framework. As Werner Heisenberg expresses it, “We invariably encounter structures created by man, so that in a sense we always meet only ourselves.”<sup>11</sup>

To deal with the human questions that science excluded—in other words, questions regarding humans' meaningful relation to the world, others, and their own Being—the Socratic questions—“What *is* justice?”; “What *is* human meaning?”; “What *is* good?”—became topics for the rational theology that Kant exposed as untenable. We are living in the world, where, once again, we cannot provide answers to the quandary of human existence with the methodology of modern science, and there is not any other “method” available.

Patočka's suggestion is: If there is only situational human meaning, then meaning will have to be constantly reaffirmed through the Socratic elenctic

and protreptic methods; through searching for new questions and answers with others by providing reasons that we can give an account for. In other words, to avoid the positing of an absolute meaning—be it via Platonic Ideas, God, history, or the eternal recurrence of the same—human finite meaning can only be situational, in other words, relative to the human finite situation.

## OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

In chapter 1, I discuss Husserl's discomfort with the way formalized science is applied as "technique" without reflection upon the ground of this formalization. Husserl is concerned with this problem from the beginning of his work, and this concern continues as a leitmotif throughout his whole oeuvre. In his final work, he suggests that Europe is suffering from a profound confusion between method and the object of its investigation. Consequently, what is forgotten is the life-world; the ground from which generalization and subsequent formalization proceed.

In chapter 2, I consider Heidegger's project, beginning with his opposition to neo-Kantianism, which reduced Kant to the status of an epistemologist only. His answer to Husserl and to neo-Kantianism is to rethink the Being of a questioner, a living being in the world. Heidegger also offers a different way to think about the mathematization of nature and modern technoscience through his discussion of the change from the ancient *ta mathemata* to the modern mathematical knowledge.

The topic of chapter 3 is the work of Arendt, who provides a different assessment of the changes to our understanding of the world, informed by Heidegger's thought, which she constantly problematizes. Nevertheless, she retains Heidegger's commitment to ask questions of "the tradition that is broken," as she puts it.

In chapter 4, I consider Patočka. By renewing Husserl's original "phenomenological motives,"<sup>12</sup> Patočka provides a critique that can help us understand not only his own phenomenology, but also the manner in which the Husserlian critique of formal knowledge and the associated concept of the "*Lebenswelt*" continue in his work and are developed there in important ways that continue to have contemporary relevance. Patočka retains the Husserlian commitment to the importance of critical and honest responsibility for one's own thinking, supplementing his reflections with Heidegger's notion of the importance of a questioner who lives in the world. Husserl's and Heidegger's

considerations are merged into Patočka's own conception of a subjective phenomenology and his three movements of existence.

The nineteenth century brought to the fore disenchantment with the new natural science. Humans became aware that scientific objectivity brought many inventions that made human life easier, but they also realized that science is not equipped and does not aspire to solve the existential human problems that God had answered previously. Humans found themselves in the world without secure, transcendent meaning. Many writings document this disenchantment. It was Husserl who pointed out the problem of the sedimentation of knowledge, the substitution of formal reasoning for existential questions, and the shift in our perception of the world by addressing the reversal in our understanding of nature brought about by Galileo.

The path from Husserl to Heidegger and beyond blazed a trail for subsequent thinkers, who took up seriously Husserl's critique of the formalization of sciences, turned into methodological techniques. In this book, I deal with three thinkers directly or indirectly influenced by Husserl's work and its changed focus: Heidegger, Arendt, and Patočka. I will argue that despite seemingly different projects, the initial driving force of phenomenology—to examine taken-for-granted theses by going back to the things themselves—underlines all four philosophers' undertakings.