

Edmund Husserl: Founder of Phenomenology

Dermot Moran

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Edmund Husserl is generally taken to be one of the most important thinkers within the European tradition of thought, influencing not only Heidegger, but also thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Derrida, and Levinas. In addition, even some Analytic philosophers, including, for instance, Dummett, have applauded Husserl's early philosophy, particularly both his contribution to the history of logic and to the philosophy of language, as well as his critique of psychologism. Nevertheless, Husserl's philosophy after the *Logical Investigations* (1900), and, indeed, his lifelong philosophy, still leaves most contemporary philosophers uneasy. His *Collected Works*, meticulously edited in Belgium and in Germany, (so far) comprises forty-four volumes, as well as ten volumes of letters—with more to come! During the last decade, several studies in English, including texts from philosophers Don Welton, Steven Crowell, Burt Hopkins, John Drummond, Dan Zahavi, and Anthony Steinbock (just to name a few), have appeared, demonstrating Husserl's philosophy and its influence. This is evidenced by the fact that both investigations appropriating his thought in new and critical ways and studies in which specific aspects of Husserl's philosophy are elucidated abound. In addition to this stream of writings, Dermot Moran's study *Edmund Husserl. Founder of Phenomenology* presents the first text within the "new reception" of Husserl within the Anglo-American world that tries to—if I may express it in Derrida's terms—"do the impossible," insofar as this very well-written text attempts to give an overview of Husserl's *whole oeuvre*.

Moran's text is divided into seven chapters. The first four chapters closely follow Husserl's development, from his early mathematical writings to his *Logical Investigations*, whereas the last three chapters offer a more structural (systematic) account of Husserl's philosophy—a wise decision, since studies that try to cover "the whole" of Husserl's thought by following its development are almost automatically in danger of losing their focus, since Husserl's thinking is not very well structured in its own right.

After an overview of Husserl's life and writings, the author recounts the most important steps in Husserl's attempt to understand and define the nature of philosophy itself. As becomes clear, there are many "self-corrections" in Husserl's writings, and, indeed, re-definitions of what philosophy is supposed to achieve, though three elements seem to be central, namely, (1) the idea of philosophy as a rigorous science without scientism, (2) the concept of intentionality, and (3) the project of philosophy as transcendental idealism, the latter of which Husserl did not develop before the appearance of his *Ideas* in 1913. Moran spends a good deal of the book explaining and outlining

Husserl's first work on arithmetic, as well as his early "breakthrough work," the *Logical Investigations*. He pays close attention, in his explanation, to the relation between Frege and Husserl, primarily discussing the relation from a historical point of view. He also gives an overview of all parts of Husserl's early main work, after which he outlines, in chapter four, Husserl's "Eidetic Phenomenology of Consciousness," as it was developed after 1900. This is especially impressive, given that Husserl's eidetic phenomenology of consciousness remains barely visible within thousands of manuscript pages.

The aforementioned chapter will be of most interest for readers who are interested in having an overview of Husserl's phenomenology of the mind and the structure of consciousness, since it does not pay close attention to Husserl's development and does not probe very deeply into the question of idealism and transcendental philosophy. Although Moran addresses these questions, he reserves his treatment of them for the last two chapters of his text, where he pays especial attention to topics that are not well-known in non-Husserlian scholarship, such as intersubjectivity, monadology, and embodiment. Husserl's analyses of perception, memory, picture consciousness, position taking, normality, and time, as well as his understanding of the relation between Noesis and Noema, are very well laid out by the author, and will be especially helpful for the inexperienced reader of Husserl.

Seen from the standpoint of Husserl scholars, and in terms of offering an "overall evaluation" of Husserl's position, Moran's depiction of the later Husserl as an "extreme idealist" deserves significant attention. According to Moran, all possible and actual being in Husserl "is to be construed as a cognitive accomplishment, production or achievement (*Erkenntnisleistung*) of transcendental subjectivity" (178; see also 51). Though one could agree with Moran that Husserl indeed sometimes sounds as if he is a *productive* idealist (and not a transcendental idealist), one would have expected the author to *explain* how this "production thesis" fits together with Husserl's own claim that the *a priori* status of the relation between cogito (intention) and cogitatum (object *as intended*) is the *absolute* starting point of phenomenology, according to which both the subjective and the objective side have the same status and *therefore* are accessible to phenomenological description. According to this doctrine, neither the intention nor the object as intended have priority over the other, nor are they causally related, the consequence of which is that the intention does not produce its object just as the object does not produce its act. In addition, if the *a priori* status of the correlation between cogito and cogitatum holds, then Husserl could not have meant by the term "sense-giving" (*Sinngabung*) that *one* side constitutes the other; rather, the term "constitution" for Husserl must mean that the whole relation constitutes itself *as* experience, which is to say, it constitutes itself, ultimately, in *absolute* passivity. The absolute synthesis of *everything*, according to Husserl, is time, which is not "produced," especially not "cognitively" (*erkenntnismaessig*). If temporal synthesis is what Husserl claims it is, namely identical with

absolute consciousness, then Moran's interpretation might be misleading, insofar as it does not make clear that all acts—and this includes the *active* acts—are synthesized in an absolute sense as “phenomena” (something that shows up). Reading Moran's account, the reader (at least the reviewer) does not always understand the ultimate sense of Husserl's idealism, and is thus left confused. Of course, as all scholars of Husserl know, a manifold of positions—which sometimes seem to contradict one another—can be found if one just digs long enough in Husserl's manuscript jungle. Unfortunately, Moran fails to clear up this confusion, as he himself switches between a more passive interpretation (187–88) of Husserl's idealism to a more active interpretation (196) of it. Accordingly, the reader would have hoped to find at least some *guiding clues* regarding what should be taken as the superior position, especially since this move could also clarify some historic relations, such as Moran's repeated claim that Husserl belongs into the idealist tradition of Fichte and Hegel.

At times, the material that Moran tries to cover is just too intense for a study like this, which leads, at some points, to a “summary style” explication. For example, some brief overviews of Husserl's concepts, such as the notion of *hyle* (sensual matter), conclude with the statement to the effect that Husserl developed a “very complex account” (154) of that concept, which only serves to leave the reader with imaginations of what that could look like. Similarly, some concepts, such as the concept of *synthesis* (152), are not really *explained*, but rather their aspects are only *listed*. Given that the concept of synthesis seems to be so central for the Kantian tradition, and given that Husserl uses the term in all central manuscripts, Moran could have done more to clarify what Husserl is up to in this regard.

Nevertheless, these critical remarks do not detract from the quality of the overall text or from the success of Moran's project. Readers who are not specialists in Husserl will be delighted with Moran's superb ability to put virtually all aspects of Husserl's thought together, as well as with his equally impressive ability to lead the reader to a soft encounter with the “real” and, as Moran puts it, the “hidden” (11) Husserl.

Moran's study closes with a brief outline of the following selected critical points, which are worth mentioning: [1] According to Moran, Husserl does not give a full account of absence and presence. In addition, Moran (relatedly) maintains that Husserl does not make clear how indications, apperception, and perception hang together in experience. [2] Moran claims that Husserl's approach cannot deal appropriately with senses other than the visual sense. [3] He criticizes (briefly) the concept of evidence in Husserl. Additionally, Moran criticizes [4] Husserl's “Cartesianism,” as well as [5] the concept of reduction. He also elucidates [6] the problems with Husserl's account of the other, and, finally, [7] the problem of birth and death.

To sum up, a scholarly reader who is interested in an in-depth treatment of the systematic horizon of Husserl's phenomenology, or of the systematic

and contemporary relevance of Husserl's thought, or the full historical connections that influenced Husserl, should not choose Moran's book, whereas the reader who wants to have a wide ranging overview and orientation of what Husserl has worked on in his lifetime from the end of the nineteenth century up to his death in 1938—either as a teacher or as a student—should consider reading Moran's impressive text, since it presents (so far) the best overview of Husserl's developing thought that is available on the market. It is especially strong, if taken precisely as an overview from a perspective that remains faithful to Husserl's texts, without losing all critical distance. Moran demonstrates throughout his study a superb command of Husserl's corpus, and of his sometimes difficult technical language. Accordingly, this text is highly recommended as possible material for upper-level undergraduate or graduate seminars, since it will allow students to see just how complex Husserl's thinking really is. The "system" and "systematics" of transcendental phenomenology, though, still have to be written. Perhaps Moran will help us out with this project some time in the future!

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Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed

B. C. Hutchens

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In *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, B. C. Hutchens seeks to provide a comprehensible introduction to one of the most intriguing, yet most inscrutable, ethical theorists of the twentieth century. From the beginning, he makes his goals for the book clear. As he points out in his introduction, most philosophers who are not convinced of the worth of Levinas's system tend to avoid engaging with it entirely, rendering the world of Levinas scholarship an unusually clandestine and partisan one. As a result, although other well-meaning scholars have written introductory texts, "few have managed to avoid interpreting Levinas in a Levinasian fashion" (5). Beyond utilizing the same type of dense, hyperbolic language that characterizes Levinas's own work, such authors fail to discuss the place of Levinasian ethics within the landscape of contemporary philosophy, feeling that it either needs no explanation or is irrelevant to an understanding of his thought. Against this backdrop, Hutchens strives to create a work that will appeal not only to the uninitiated or intimidated, but also to those who may already have some understanding of Levinas but, failing to see his relevance, have dismissed him as undeserving of further attention. Rather than himself arguing for Levinas's