

Yearnings for Foundation. The Idea of Philosophy as a Rigorous Science and *Ideas I*¹

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Abstract: This paper reads Husserl's phenomenology as an attempt to solve the crisis of our civilization. It is well known that for him the deep roots of this crisis are related to a misunderstanding of the idea of rationality that leads to skepticism and relativism. It is also well known that in order to overcome this situation Husserl will propound a new idea of reason and rationality that will supposedly fulfill the old dream with which philosophy was born in Greece: To be *episteme*, rigorous science valid at all times and in all places. Taking this general thesis into account, the paper will defend that Husserl is a foundationalist thinker and that the idea of philosophy as *strenge Wissenschaft* is present throughout his whole work, including, of course, *Ideen I*. This in some way "classic" interpretation tries to discuss other recent ways of understanding the whole Husserlian project, particularly Dan Zahavi's reading, in which the foundationalist position is downplayed.

Keywords: Husserl, Phenomenology, Foundationalism.

If the existence of the Western man appears critical and problematical, it is because he has allowed himself to become unfaithful to his idea, the very idea that defines and constitutes him as a Western man. That idea is no other than the idea of philosophy itself: The idea of a universal knowledge concerning the totality of being, a knowledge which contains within itself whatever special sciences may grow out of it as its ramifications, which rest upon ultimate foundations and proceeds throughout in a completely evident and self-justifying fashion and in full awareness of itself.

Aron Gurwitsch

¹ I would like to thank Pedro Alves for the invitation to participate in the conferences about *Ideen I*, which took place at the University of Lisbon and were the origin of this text. There I found old friends and colleagues who offered me the opportunity to discuss the presented ideas at length. I would also like to express my thanks to two people who were not present on that occasion but with whom I have had passionate discussions about some of the themes presented here: Jorge Brioso and Agustín Serrano de Haro. Lastly, I cannot nor should forget the patience and consideration with which Gema and Antón tolerate my philosophical work.

Philosophy, insofar as it is a rigorous science, is not philosophy, and insofar as it is philosophy, it is not rigorous science.

José Gaos

1. As a Way of Introduction: Husserl as a Thinker of the Crisis and the Ideal of Philosophy as a Rigorous Science

In his last book, *Della realtà. Fini della filosofia* (Vattimo, 2012), a volume that gathers mainly his Louvain lectures given at the *Cardinal Mercier Chair* and the *Gifford Lectures* of 2010, the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo develops a subtle and well-crafted critique to the hyper-philologism which reigns over the field of philosophical studies. His aim is mainly focused on the works of a thinker who, along with Nietzsche, was the favorite target of his attention: Martin Heidegger. Vattimo's thesis is that there is a serious risk of misunderstanding what Heidegger wanted to tell us if we limit ourselves to articulating the doctrines which appear in his texts. When trying to clarify some of the most complex and technical discussions in his works, we chance to forget the basis, the origin, the why, and what-for of all that "conceptual carpentry."

In regard to the thinker from the Black Forest, Vattimo maintains that this basis is what we could call the "vanguard spirit" present in the first decades of the twentieth century. This is the spirit Heidegger would share with Bloch, Luckas, Karl Barth's dialectical theology, the futurists, the catastrophic utopias of expressionist films, etc. This is the time of Dostoevsky's popularity, the rebirth of Kierkegaard, and the appearance of Nietzsche's work, which was until then completely outside of academia. The philosophical, artistic, literary, and theological culture of that time had a certain "existential tone" motivated by something that was understood as a crisis of a civilization that had generated a life system that was believed to crush individuals and their freedom in favor of what Adorno would later call the *totale Verwaltung*, that is, the organization, the complete administration of communities mainly composed of mass men.

In this context, Heidegger's philosophy is for Vattimo, first of all, an outcry, a drawing of attention to this phenomenon. It is the "vital expression" of a world that perceives itself to be broken and the diagnostic of such a fracture. To not have this in mind distorts the core understanding of his works, why and what they were conceived for. To

go into what we earlier called the “conceptual carpentry” to “logically” discuss his doctrines without referring back to their living source is for this Italian thinker like having a good view of the Heideggerean trees or at least some of them, but to lose sight and meaning of the forest, which is what is truly relevant.

However, what does this critique of Vattimo to the hyper-philologism in Heideggerean studies have to do with Husserl’s thought? Perhaps a good part of Husserl’s scholars will have a different opinion, but for the last years I have had the impression that works about this German philosopher have also become hyper-technical and specialized to the point where in several monographies we end up losing the vital philosophical meaning: The –we could say– final intention behind the obsessively detailed reflections about the noema, intentionality, the reduction, the *epoché*, the passive synthesis, intersubjectivity, the I, time, etc. It seems to me that we are progressively witnessing an increase in detailed analyses of the trees in the Husserlian forest, to continue with the previous metaphor. Nevertheless, we are rarely able to remember the forest itself as a whole and the meaning with which it was conceived, that is, the why the trees were planted and what-for. At this point, I think Vattimo is perfectly right in his diagnostic, and we could apply, without changing a single comma, his considerations about Heideggerean studies to the Husserlian ones. If we forget the philosophic-vital background from which phenomenology emerges, the set of problems it wants to provide answers to, we also forget, in a way, the very philosophy that is behind those theories, the reason that moved their author to create them, and without which it is impossible to really understand them.¹

In Husserl’s case, it seems clear to me that his thought, like Heidegger’s, is a response to the times of crisis in which he lived, a time of violent disaggregation of a world that believed itself firmly supported and superior to any other cultural manifestation. In this sense, what Vattimo claims about the context of Heideggerean philosophy could also be applied to the Husserlian one, even though the positive readings Heidegger makes of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, or Barth’s dialectical theology, with their insistence on human contingency and finitude, will not be for Husserl part of the solution but rather of the problem. In any case, it would not be an exaggeration to maintain, and several well-documented studies have defended it, that both thinkers are *philosophers of crisis*, and it is

¹ For an understating close to Vattimo’s is not only applicable to Heidegger’s thought or to phenomenology, but rather to how one should understand and historicize philosophy in general, see Ortega y Gasset (2006: 135-171).

only from that perspective, from the diagnoses and the solutions given to it, that it is possible to wholly understand their ideas.¹

Focusing now on Husserl's case, and giving for granted that he is, as was said, a philosopher of crisis and that phenomenology wants to be the solution to this, the question we have to immediately answer is the following: How did the author of *Ideas* understand philosophical activity? In other words: What model or what idea of philosophy did he adopt in order to overcome or contribute to healing an illness he thought humanity was plagued with?

Everyone knows that Husserl believes the fractured society humans live in is due to a lack of rationality or, better put, due to a misunderstood rationality of an objectivist and naturalist style that cannot deliver what it promises: A clear and distinct meaning about the ultimate and most important issues that concern humans because it unavoidably leads to skepticism. Insofar as this is a forerunner to nihilism and relativism, skepticism is the great enemy to fight against. This is why it is not an overstatement to understand Husserlian thought, from *Logical Investigations* to *The Crisis of European Sciences* –to mention two works that encompass the entire vital arch of phenomenology– as a fierce struggle against this possibility of human reflection and existence.² This is also why the possible solution could only come for Husserl from more and better rationality, from placing philosophy on science's rightful path, of making real, once and for all, the ancient Greek aspiration with which philosophy was born: To be *episteme*, rigorous science valid at all times and in all places.

Phenomenology would embody, therefore, this ideal of philosophy as rigorous science, and, for this reason, it would not simply be for its author one more philosophy, that is, another system that would later be defeated by the current of time. Instead, it would be the only possible option which the other thought expressions, if they were truly led by the strength of better arguments, should converge into, if they really aimed to be a true philosophy and contribute to overcome the bankruptcy humanity is immersed in, which is the truly decisive issue.³

¹ See, for example, Buckley (1992), Morujão (2013), Wetz (1995). Although this latter book contains some inaccuracies in what concerns understanding some parts of Husserlian phenomenology, it very acutely shows the background of civilizational breakdown.

² Javier San Martín has amply insisted on this matter. See., for example, (Martín, 1987).

³ About the convergence between true philosophy and phenomenology, one can see among many other texts the famous "Nachwort" to *Ideas* (Husserl, 1976: 138-162).

From these parameters and using a language that is translatable to our current philosophical debates, I believe that Husserl is a foundationalist, someone who thinks that his phenomenological philosophy has opened a definitive way towards the truth, not only theoretical but also practical, because it captures, even if asymptotically, the very structure of reality. Phenomenology accumulates, in an infinite progression, truth and reality, and for that reason, it will allow us to gradually but definitively unravel the dilemmas or enigmas of the world.

Now, for various reasons, a large part of twentieth-century philosophy has little by little been abandoning the foundationalist thesis, at least the strong version that Husserl maintained in his program during his entire life. In the pragmatic-hermeneutic *koine* in which, for better or worse, we are progressively more immersed, Husserlian foundationalism has low stock value. Currently, it is very difficult to claim that philosophy has developed in the straight and correct path of science or that there is such a thing as true progress of any type for a philosophical thesis that would grant it the status of eternity to its truth. Given this situation and seeing that Husserl ran the risk of becoming an uninteresting thinker, extemporaneous or out of date, some recent interpretations of his work, such as Dan Zahavi's, have attempted to downplay or ease up on Husserl's foundationalism (Zahavi, 2003). So, for this important interpreter, to understand Husserl in that tone is a big misconstruction arising from the programmatic article, *Philosophy as Rigorous Science*, and from certain readings bound to the Cartesian path to reduction, particularly as it appears in *The Idea of Phenomenology* and other early writings.

Bearing this in mind, I will try, in what follows, to address some aspects of Zahavi's general thesis and will defend that Husserl is, in fact, a foundationalist thinker in the strong sense of the word and that perhaps it is there, paradoxically, that his value lies today; that is, in being a deforming mirror in counter-current to the enormous doubts that a rising number of members belonging to the philosophical community (and I count myself among them) currently hold about the possibilities of a foundation in the strict sense. For this purpose, I will divide the rest of my essay into two parts, the last of which will be more of a coda. In the first one, which will take up most of the paper, I will try to show that the idea of scientificity is prevalent throughout all of Husserl's work, from the early to the later works, and that it is also possible to see it in all its splendor in *Ideas I* (a work which, curiously, Zahavi does not refer to when he develops his critique of the neo-cartesian vision of phenomenology). In the second part, which as mentioned will be more of

a coda, I will develop a brief reflection on the greatness and the poverty of foundationalism.

2. Yearnings for Foundation. *Philosophie als Strenge Wissenschaft* as a Program for a Philosophical Life that also involves *Ideas I*

In his interesting work, *Husserl's phenomenology* (Zahavi, 2003), Dan Zahavi dedicates some brilliant pages to countering the thesis that the author of *Ideen* is a foundationalist or, at least, a foundationalist in the traditional sense of the word; that is, a thinker who, in a Cartesian style, would discover by a certain method a final indubitable reality, in this case, transcendental subjectivity, from which we would be able to discover a set of absolute truths that would in turn progressively reveal the totality of what is.

For this Danish philosopher, and assuming of course that the father of phenomenology entitled one of his programmatic, most famous, and widely read articles, *Philosophy as Rigorous Science* (Husserl, 1987: 3-62), it was the Cartesian path to reduction or, better yet, its misappropriation (taking into account the way it was developed in early works like *The Idea of Phenomenology*) that was responsible for this misunderstanding. This path tries to justify the difference between the world and consciousness by claiming that the latter is given through a set of evidence that is completely different from that of worldly objects. This evidence is characterized as absolute in regard to worldly relativity and, therefore, says Zahavi, it was possible to interpret Husserlian phenomenology as an attempt to bring a certain number of indubitable truths to light that could then serve as ground or starting point for all later knowledge. Therefore, in texts with pronounced Cartesian orientation, as is the case of *The Idea of Phenomenology* (Husserl, 1950), Husserl's continuous attempts to unveil further and further aspects of constitutive life "could easily give rise to the impression that phenomenology should neutralize and suspend every transcendent intention and every positing of that which is given inadequately in order to focus exclusively on the adequately and apodictically given subjective immanence" (Zahavi, 2003: 66). It is only from such an apodicticity that it would be possible to develop, step by step, a science of consciousness with an absolute and universal validity. Yet, Husserl, despite contradicting appearances, would not work within this philosophical model.

Zahavi recognizes, nevertheless, that the great German thinker is looking for a special epistemological status for his analyses of transcendental subjectivity and the field

it opens, a unique self-legitimation in comparison to any other type of knowledge. Furthermore, insofar as he is a transcendental philosopher, one cannot firmly deny he is concerned about finding “some kind of foundation” (Zahavi, 2003: 66). In fact, if phenomenology investigates the conditions of possibility for the appearing itself, it cannot have a similar epistemological range as, for example, sciences, including those we consider the loftiest and purest, as is the case of mathematics. The reason is simple: such sciences, just like any other manifestation of what is given, emerge always within that originary emergence that ultimately phenomenology investigates. As it is well known from the reading of *The Crisis of European Sciences*, the scientific universe is for Husserl the result of a series of idealizations that individuals develop from their experience of the lifeworld, which is why sciences are not something primary, but secondary. What is truly primary is the lifeworld and, as its ultimate legitimization, the life of the consciousness which constitutes it.

Now, to recognize this peculiar foundational character of Husserl’s philosophy does not mean to accept the neo-Cartesian interpretation introduced above. For Zahavi, there are at least two reasons why it is profoundly misguided to consider Husserl a foundationalist or, at least, a normal foundationalist.

The first reason has to do with the idea that Husserl did not conceive his own transcendental analyses as being absolutely complete, fixed, and closed from further revision. These are closer to explorations of the field of consciousness –to use an expression put forth by his faithful pupil Gurwitsch (1964)– that is certainly absolute in the sense that it is an unavoidable structure, an ultimate opening from which it is not possible to go further back because it is the condition of possibility for any manifestation. However, once we arrive there, the analysis of such a field can always be refined, developed, and corrected. For this reason, Zahavi maintains very correctly that, “according to Husserl, the full and conclusive truth about the transcendental dimension is a regulative ideal. Philosophy as a science based on ultimate justification is an idea which can only be realized in an infinite historical process” (Zahavi, 2003: 67).

The second reason is based on the thesis that Husserl deliberately distanced himself from the axiomatic-deductive method that foundationalist rationalism took as a model. Therefore, he opposed the thesis that the transcendental ego could serve, at any moment, as a starting point for something similar to a transcendental deduction. Phenomenology, says the Danish philosopher, “is not a *deductive* discipline, but a *descriptive*

discipline, for which reason Husserl repeatedly emphasized that it belongs to a quite different type of science than mathematics. To put it differently, the truths that transcendental phenomenology might uncover does not make up a foundation that the contents of the positive sciences could be deduced from” (Zahavi, 2003: 67).

Therefore, we can say that according to Zahavi Husserl is not a foundationalist because neither his method nor the peculiar nature of the field of consciousness –and these two things are intimately connected– can allow for such a thing. It is true that an absolute foundation –a strict science of universal and apodictic character– is a regulative ideal, which is always present for the father of phenomenology. Notwithstanding, it is precisely because of this, because it is given in the way of an asymptotic curve that it can never be consummated. In this sense, Husserl’s philosophy cannot be read, without doing it a great injustice, as a set of absolute truths from which, by connecting them to each other, the totality of all that is can be promptly deduced.

In this regard, it is interesting that Zahavi relates this asymptotic idea of foundation, forever postponed, with the ultimate ethical motivations that would be at the base of phenomenology. In fact, for this distinguished interpreter, Husserl should not be understood as an epistemologist. His main concern, despite what many of his emblematic works may suggest, is not the possibility of knowledge or objectivity, but rather responsibility. In other words, the search for knowledge or truth is not an end in itself but instead, like in the best of philosophies, the necessary condition to live a life worth living. Husserl also holds as an ideal the examined life Socrates proclaimed.¹ However, such an ideal is never fully attained but is always a failed attempt for the individual and the community in which one lives. An attempt, nevertheless, one never stops striving towards.

So far, I have relayed the arguments by the Danish phenomenologist against a foundationalist, neo-Cartesian Husserl who would supposedly entail an ideal of philosophy as a rigorous science in the strong sense. Let us now look at the objections I make against this approach.

It seems to me that Zahavi forgets some important details when he maintains that such an ideal is mostly a misunderstanding resulting from the bad interpretative digestion of the *Cartesianische Weg*. If one reads, for example, the first part of *The Crisis of European Sciences*, the *Vienna Lecture*, or *Philosophy as Mankind’s Self-Reflection* (to men-

¹ For an immensely eloquent text on this issue, see Husserl (1956: 9).

tion only three relevant works of the last period in which he also programmatically addresses what philosophy should be and, more particularly, phenomenology as its truly refined incarnation, and where there is not an explicit adoption of the Cartesian path) it seems there is no other option than to accept that the founder of phenomenology varied little or nothing in his conception of philosophy as *strenge Wissenschaft*.

If in the *Logos*' article it was said –always bearing in mind the crisis situation in which humanity finds itself as a result of the skepticism born of an objectivist and naturalist reason– that.

from its earliest beginnings, philosophy has claimed to be rigorous science. What is more, it has claimed to be the science that satisfies the loftiest theoretical needs and renders possible from an ethical-religious point of view a life regulated by pure rational norms.

And that.

Philosophy, according to its historical purpose the loftiest and most rigorous of all sciences, represents as it does humanity's imperishable demand for pure and absolute knowledge (and what is inseparably one with that, its demand for pure and absolute valuing and willing).

Or that,

Philosophy, however, is essentially a science of true beginnings, or origins, of *rizomata panton*. The science concerned with what is radical must from every point of view be radical itself in its procedure. Above all it must not rest until it has attained its own absolutely clear beginnings, i.e., its absolutely clear problems, the methods pre-indicated in the proper sense of these problems, and the most basic field of work wherein things are given with absolute clarity" (Husserl, 1987: 3-4-61; Husserl, 1965: 71-72-146).

If in fact all this was said in that work from 1911, in that exceptionally vital and philosophical document that is the first part of *The Crisis*, and bearing in mind again the same skeptical mistakes of a naturalist reason nature which give rise to relativism, mysticism, and irrationalism, Husserl advocates anew for a philosophy which, in line with its Greek birth, would be "the one all-encompassing science, the science of the totality of what is." That is, a science that would reveal itself as the "historical movement through

which universal reason, ‘inborn’ in humanity as such, is revealed,” and whose core is the self-revelation of reason in “the form of a universal philosophy which grows through consistent apodictic insight and supplies its own norms through an apodictic method.” (Husserl, 1976: 6-13; Husserl, 1970: 8-16). If we go from the first part of *The Crisis* to the beginning of *Philosophy as Mankind’s Self-Reflection*, we can see that this text firmly states that: “The task which the philosopher puts to himself, his life-goal as a philosopher: universal science of the world, universal definitive knowledge, the universe of truths in themselves about the world, the world in itself” (Husserl, 1976: 269; Husserl, 1970: 335).

Therefore, with respect to the idea of philosophy Husserl developed at the end of his life, things did not change much. Indeed, if we take into account the explicit and detailed considerations of *phenomenology as the teleological horizon of the history of philosophy* in his most mature writings, we would have to conclude that the idea of *strenge Wissenschaft* was considerably reinforced.

In this sense, the careful reading of the famous *Beilage XXVIII* of *The Crisis of European Sciences* is immensely valuable to the defense of my counter-thesis. In this text, Husserl wrote a sentence that, with time, became famous both in and outside of phenomenological circles: “Philosophy as science, as serious, rigorous, indeed apodictically rigorous science — *the dream is over*” (Husserl, 1976: 508; Husserl, 1970: 369). Many interpreted that this declaration from 1935 was a renunciation of the philosophical ideal the old master had chased after his entire life, an admission of his own defeat. However, a close reading of the sentence in his life’s context reveals quite the contrary. Husserl is not talking about himself, but rather addressing the anti-rationalism which was pervasive in his time and which he considers a manifestation of the existential crisis plaguing Western civilization. The cure for this situation will be the affirmation, once more, of philosophy as rigorous science, as the ultimate foundation of all that is.

This is, so far, what could be considered my first objection to Zahavi’s thesis that the Husserlian ideal of philosophy as rigorous science, as an ultimately founded knowledge about the totality of what is, as *episteme*, is the result of an article that somehow should not have been written and of a distorted interpretation of the Cartesian path to reduction as it appears mainly in the early works, such as *The Idea of Phenomenology*. On the contrary, I have tried to show that the need for a scientific philosophy, the yearning for an absolutely grounded knowledge that should be the incarnation of phenomenology itself, is just as present or even reinforced in his later works and in texts which no longer use the Cartesian path, like, for example, *The Crisis of European Sciences*.

Once we have seen that this ideal of scientificity covers the whole of Husserl's work and is beyond good or bad interpretations of the Cartesian path, let us now undertake a brief analysis of how the thesis of *streng* *Wissenschaft* is modulated in some parts of *Ideas I* in order to contradict the two arguments of the Danish phenomenologist that I sketched above regarding Husserl's non-Cartesianism.

The first argument defended that the father of phenomenology never conceived his transcendental analyses as something closed, unable to be further developed or improved. According to Zahavi, the only real absolute, in the sense of being inevitable and ultimate, was the structure of the appearing itself. However, within it, truth worked only as a regulative and never reached ideal, which, therefore, had no true apodictic force. The second argument maintained, in tight connection with the former, that the phenomenological method was descriptive and not deductive, that Husserl had explicitly distanced himself from any type of axiomatic-deductive accumulation of truths from the basis of a first truth, the "I".

If we start with the second objection, with what Zahavi calls the Husserlian distancing from any axiomatic-deductive method that has the "I" as the first evidence, the reply, if we take a look at "The Considerations Fundamental to Phenomenology" of *Ideas I*, could go something as follows: (i) it is true that phenomenology mostly has a descriptive character and does not follow a constructive or axiomatic-deductive procedure; yet, (ii) it is no less certain that the neo-Cartesianism, which appears in the mentioned meditation of *Ideas I* or in *The Idea of Phenomenology*, is not so much related to that methodological aspect (axiomatic-deduction) as it is to the thesis that the ego or, better said, the *ego-cogito-cogitatum* structure is seen in both works as an Archimedean point on which to base philosophy as a science with an absolute foundation. The whole Cartesian path is drawn –and it could not be otherwise– in order to reach the type of philosophy Husserl is aspiring towards. That is, a philosophy that could take, once and for all, the rigorous road of science. Let us look at this in more detail.

By closely following the reading Iso Kern (1962: 303-349) does of the "The Considerations Fundamental to Phenomenology", with which I substantially agree, I believe the Cartesian path in *Ideas I* has the following four main features:

The first points to that which bothers Zahavi so much, that is, that phenomenology should be understood as a science with an absolute foundation; that it should start from an absolute beginning and follow its path in a way that would offer evidential quality in

the subsequent steps. At least that is what it is aimed for. Therefore, that absolute beginning should be embodied by indubitable evidence.

The second feature has to do with the search for that Archimedean point on which to support philosophy. Taking into account the Cartesian perspective that is developed in *Ideas I*, no knowledge that is based on or makes reference to the world as a reality transcendent to the subject can be such a point. For Husserl, the philosopher who begins and wants to do it in an absolute manner cannot take into account all those knowledges that are based on the belief in the world, whether they come from our daily life or are connected to the sciences.

The third feature of the Cartesian structure of *Ideas* is concerned with the following issue: once all worldly knowledge, empirical or essential-scientific, is suspended, is there something left that could be qualified as absolute evidence, as indubitable knowledge? The clear answer to this question points to the *cogito* of the person who philosophizes. This *cogito* can be the object of immanent knowledge that is “absolutely evident”.

Finally, the fourth characteristic of Husserlian Cartesianism according to Iso Kern establishes that the *cogito* necessarily takes the *cogitatum* with it intentionally. This way, while the world as such and its contents remain out of consideration, they appear now in the form of *cogitatum*, that is, as phenomenon. This means that in the Cartesian path, subjectivity and its “world” are fully encompassed in the *ego-cogito-cogitatum* structure.

Now, if this is the case, and these four features are the cornerstones of “The Considerations Fundamental to Phenomenology” and with it of the Cartesian path in general, it seems implausible to maintain, as Zahavi does, that Husserl refused to understand the ego or, better put, the structure *ego-cogito-cogitatum* as a foundation, a primary truth, or as an absolute starting point in the development of a philosophy, the phenomenological one, which aims to attain the status of *strenge Wissenschaft*. In fact, this is so, at least in the works which follow the Cartesian path.

Considering the preceding argument, let us now look at the Danish phenomenologist’s first objection against a Cartesian-foundationalist interpretation of Husserl. We can recall the latter’s objection defended that the old Freiburg master never conceived his own transcendental analyses as being closed, definitive or absolute. They were only thought of as explorations of a field, the field of consciousness, which are always open to further revision. Because of this, the only meaning for the word ‘absolute’ in this context

is restricted to the inevitability of this field in which the final truth functions as no more than a regulative ideal.

Confronted with this objection, I think one could comfortably maintain that Zahavi's thesis does not in any way annul, diminish, or weaken the strict foundationalist character of phenomenology. It is true that Husserl thought that the analyses of the field of consciousness are in continuous progress, that they can be refined, corrected, or improved in a work that is constantly evolving into the future. In this sense, it is entirely correct to say that they are not absolute if we understand by this that Husserl is declaring to have reached, *in all respects*, the definitive aim or *complete* description. For the old master, phenomenology is, indeed, and as he stated on several occasions, an infinite open task. Yet, it is an infinite and open task –and this is the key point– that *aims to be on the safe path of science*. It is like this because the originary structure of appearing, the intentional correlation *ego-cogito-cogitatum*, and all that is manifested in it, are conformed to a set of essential regularities that the phenomenologist or, better put, the whole of phenomenologists, can describe in a patient and cooperative work which is always prolonged into the future. In this sense, that structure is not only absolute because we cannot go beyond it given that it is inevitable, but also because it becomes fundamental in the most classical form, as it establishes the true *telos* which constitute the world and its truth. The always improvable phenomenological analyses will be dedicated to their infinite revealing.

To put it in a somewhat crude and inexact manner: *the structure of appearing would have in Husserl something like an originary telos that somehow determines all the essential possibilities of truth and reality, or of what can be said with truth or taken for reality*. This way, and returning to Zahavi's expression, it is the case that the final truth or the unveiling of the totality of the structures of the real is a regulative ideal, a horizon always in the process of realization, but that process, and this is the key point, is not open to a radical contingency; it is always progressive, asymptotic and, because of it, what appears and is impending cannot radically contradict what has already been accomplished. The regulative ideal of truth and reality –in this case, both expressions should be understood in a wide context– define, so to speak, an infinite path always in the process of realization, but also a path where the direction is somehow already defined.

In this regard, I believe that some paragraphs from the fourth section of *Ideas*, titled "Reason and Actuality", are very enlightening and symptomatic. For example, in

§143, which discusses *Adequate physical thing-givenness as an idea in the Kantian sense*, Husserl tells us:

Of essential necessity, there are only given, we said, inadequately appearing (thus also only inadequately perceivable) objects. However, we must not overlook the restrictive addendum which we made. We said: inadequately perceivable in a *closed appearance*. There are objects –and included here are all transcendent objects, all ‘*realities*’ comprised by the name Nature or World– which cannot be given in complete determinedness and, likewise, in complete intuitiveness in a closed consciousness. But *perfect givenness is nevertheless predesignated as ‘idea’* (in the Kantian sense): as a system which, in the eidetic type, is an absolutely determined system of endless processes, an *a priori* determined *continuum of appearances* with different, but determined, dimensions, and governed throughout by a fixed set of eidetic laws. [And he concludes further ahead,] the idea of an infinity motivated in conformity with its essence is not itself an infinity” (Husserl, 1976: 297; Husserl, 1983: 342-343).

That is to say, in the phenomenological sphere, once the structure *ego-cogito-cogitatum* is attained, there reigns a rational concordance in spite of the fact that there can always be some type of incoherence or anomaly. This perfect givenness is there, at least as an idea, even for those objects which are by definition given inadequately. The anomalies, which do exist, would always be able to be solved because they are rationally motivated, because they do not abandon, to use a classical expression, the principle of sufficient reason.

To say it again in a crude and controversial manner, for Husserl *the world is subject to rational order*. Our experience of it should always end in agreement, although that agreement is always manifested in the manner of a regulative ideal and never given as an actuality. It is precisely because this is ultimately the case that it is possible to speak of philosophy as rigorous science and of absolute foundation. For the same reason, in around 1930, in his famous *Epilogue to Ideas*, Husserl again says that the Cartesian path to reduction is substantially correct and that in the work of 1913 his phenomenology paved “the way, and even [took] the first steps along the way, on which, in sober research to be conducted in the most radically scientific spirit, all conceivable problems of philosophy must gradually achieve their genuinely original formulations and solutions” (Husserl, 1952: 138; Husserl, 1989: 405). In accordance with these words, David Carr stated about

Ideas I that “By the time he presents his fully worked-out method in 1913 (*Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*), Husserl conceives of phenomenology as a “transcendental” philosophy designed to resolve all philosophical issues and allow philosophy at last to attain the status of a rigorous science” (Carr, 1999: 676).

With Carr’s words, I conclude the argument against Zahavi’s anti-foundationalist reading of Husserl. My thesis is precisely the opposite: Husserl was a foundationalist in the strong, radical sense of the word. He was a philosopher, perhaps the last great one, who sought with enviable and heroic tenacity the ideal of philosophy as *strenge Wissenschaft* during his whole life. In his opinion, only a philosophy developed that way could solve the existential crisis in which Humanity finds itself.

3. Epilogue. The Greatness and Poverty of Foundationalism

In the previous section, I have tried to argue why it seems to me that the brilliant Danish phenomenologist is not right when he reads Husserl as a thinker who does not belong to the foundationalist team. This position would be a mere philological dispute if it were not for the fact that foundationalism—at least in the radical sense Husserl defends it—is in decline in contemporary philosophy. It is not easy to find thinkers today who believe we can make philosophy a rigorous science. Plurality, contingency, and historicity have made their way in and seem to be here to stay. From this point of view, now there is definitely the growing sense that the dream has truly ended. However, if that is the case, Husserl’s thought appears to become profoundly outdated. It is likely that many of his particular analyses concerning specific philosophical issues would remain immensely valuable, but the profound intention with which they were developed, the framework or ideal in which they originated, and which gave them meaning—that is, to put philosophy on a safe, scientific, and progressive path—has lost a great part of its force.

In this sense, I think Zahavi’s insistence on the lack of foundationalism in the old master’s position, his determination in considering it a mere misunderstanding, lacking real textual support, is a direct consequence of seeing this danger clearly. Nevertheless, is it worthwhile to “disguise” Husserl and make him “sexier” at the cost of renouncing his true identity? I do not think so. It seems to me that the deep interest the author of *Ideen*

can have today lies precisely, as paradoxical as it may seem, in his “inactuality”. To understand what I mean by this let us return to the idea of foundation.

The best of Husserl’s interpreters, among which we can find Zahavi, have keenly seen that his philosophy’s ultimate motivation is of a moral character. Knowledge, objectivity, and truth are strictly related to the examined life, that is, of leading an existence governed by absolute self-responsibility. In other words, life in truth is the moral life *par excellence*, and it is only by the foundation it provides that we can overcome the meaninglessness in which Humanity finds itself and reach solid and lasting agreements on those things that are really decisive for our existence.

Therefore, if the real possibility of the foundation were an illusion, for Husserl and others like him everything would be arbitrary, and thus we would not be able to distinguish truth from error, good from evil, just from unjust. Specifically, and translating this thesis into more concrete moral issues, if the rational foundation was not possible, why would one prefer a society where human rights are respected to another that continuously violates them? How could we distinguish oppressor from the victim? From this perspective, the “greatness” of the foundation idea lies in the fact that only from the latter can it be possible to lead a truly human life. Without foundation, there is no possible salvation: it is either foundation or barbarism.

If we could now take a brief look at the most common arguments against the idea of foundation practiced by Husserl and, by extension, by those who believe that philosophy as rigorous science is possible, we would realize (perhaps with some surprise) that the last motives for rejecting it (and above the purely theoretical ones I cannot now explore) are of ethical and political nature. That is to say, they are related to the possibility of living a rational and worthy life.

In fact, for an author like Rorty, Husserl and the great philosophical tradition he embodies adopt a bad strategy when they put forward the alternatives, that is, either foundation or barbarism. It is a bad strategy because the danger of falling into the latter does not come from the breakdown of the former and the subsequent fall into coarse relativism and skepticism. On the contrary, what has a greater chance of generating violence is the “scientific” affirmation of any foundation: The idea of *one* single truth, of *one* single reality, of *one* single morality, valid for all time and in all places. I will quote Rorty interpreting and assuming the position of another thinker very dear to him, the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo:

Whereas those concerned to preserve the legacy of Plato and Kant think that the adoption of this conception [the anti-foundationalist one] will lead to “relativism” and moral flabbiness, Vattimo thinks that it will produce a desirable humility about our own moral institutions and about the social institutions to which we have become accustomed. This humility will encourage tolerance for other intuitions and a willingness to experiment with ways of refashioning or replacing institutions. Vattimo sees this humility as an antidote to the pridefulness characteristics of those who claim to be obeying unconditional, ahistorical, transcultural, categorical imperatives” (Rorty, 2007: 156).

In other words, for anti-foundationalists like Rorty and Vattimo, it is the assumption that we are always moving in a game of fallible interpretations that leads us to lucidity and keeps us from the risk of wanting to impose our criteria on others. In addition, if someone believes s/he has, even in an approximate and undetermined manner, the outline of the true structure of reality, a true dialogue among those who disagree seems impossible; it would become a monologue. For the anti-foundationalists, it seems much wiser to start from the obsolescence and historical limits of our opinions, from the idea that the future will most likely contradict a greater part of what I now consider reasonable. By adopting this attitude—which should not be confused with a lack of firm convictions—it is probable that we will be more open to listen and really take into consideration another’s opinion, and, perhaps, to come to an agreement.

Bearing this in mind, does the affirmation of this fallibilism really mean a total rejection of any type of rationality, a belief that all opinions are equal? Rorty thinks that this is not the case; instead, it is rather simple to accept the finitude of our perspectives and approaches in all their radicality, to understand that God’s eye is not within our reach and that, therefore, our rational justifications have an expiration date and must, for this reason, be continuously renewed. Yet simply being aware of the fallibility of our justifications does not mean they lack weight. For an anti-foundationalist like the American philosopher, “skepticism” about the ultimate and definitive truth of my arguments is not incompatible with the idea of their possible relevance and strength. It is precisely that combination of a restriction concerning an absolute point of view and an argumentative persuasion that leads Rorty or Vattimo to understand that “a democratic society can get along without the sort of reassurance provided by the thought that it has ‘adequate philosophical foundations’ or that it is ‘grounded’ in ‘human reason’” (Rorty, 1991: 19). Democracy is the free exchange of reasonable and fallible opinions aware of their own being

so. If that was not the case, if there was the possibility of argumentatively determining what is just and good on an absolute foundation, the system would lack any meaning. Therefore, both philosophers believe that anti-foundationalism provides philosophical reasons for preferring a free, democratic, and tolerant society over an authoritarian or totalitarian one.¹ If everyone accepted the finitude and fallibility of their own arguments, all would tend to be tolerant.

So far, I have quickly glanced over the ultimate moral motivations behind Rorty's criticism of foundation. From it, we can see that if for Husserl and the defenders of philosophy as rigorous science, the "grandness" of this idea was that it assured a truly human personal and communitarian life, a life in freedom and dignity, for Rorty and the anti-foundationalists, it is just the opposite. The *streng*e *Wissenschaft* would reveal its "poverty", not only in the impossibility of its realization but also in the imminent danger of its dogmatism and tyranny.

I will leave a detailed evaluation of both positions for another time. However, as I have implied at the beginning of this epilogue, I believe the Husserlian idea is losing more and more advocates. There really is almost no one today who would dare to defend that it is possible to have a foundation in the "apodictic" sense Husserl's rigorous science would demand. Today very few speak of Truth, Good, or Justice with capital letters. Even those who do not have positions as radical as Rorty's, as is the case of Habermas, have substantially thinned out the idea of foundation they hold and share the opinion of most daring anti-foundationalists: In other words, that the Husserlian project is not feasible. But precisely because we are in times bent towards plurality, historicity, and contingency, we should not try to dress up the sharp corners of Husserlian phenomenology to try to make it more attractive to current sensibilities. Its strength and interest lie today precisely in its "inactuality". Faced with a growing choir of voices, among which I tend to include myself more and more, proclaiming the "poverties" or the implausibility of the foundation, it is highly recommendable to carefully review what the old professor said about its greatness. Nevertheless, for that we need to hear a non-urbanized Husserl. We need to hear a foundationalist Husserl.

¹ Concerning this thesis, we should bear in mind that these philosophers are always talking about philosophical reasons of a contingent character, not about fundament.

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