

Natorp, Husserl and Gurwitsch: The Problem of the “Pure Ego” in Phenomenology

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Abstract: There is an ongoing debate concerning the concept of the “pure ego” that begins with Paul Natorp and Edmund Husserl, rooted in the methodological differences stemming from the intellectual legacy of their predecessors. This article aims to demonstrate how the development of this initial debate provides the foundation for a second controversy, internal to the phenomenological tradition itself, in which Aron Gurwitsch – drawing on Natorp’s influence on Husserl – questions the “pure ego” as an element present within the sphere of pure consciousness in Husserl’s transcendental turn.

Keywords: Natorp; Husserl; Gurwitsch; Phenomenological Method; Reconstructive Method

1. Introduction

In Philosophy, there is a well-established debate between Paul Natorp and Edmund Husserl concerning the necessity of a “pure ego” and the possibility of intuitive access to subjectivity. Much of this debate is motivated by methodological concerns, involving the Neo-Kantian transcendental method and Husserl’s phenomenological method, and unfolds through the publication of several works by both authors. However, the aim of this article is not to focus on that debate in itself, but rather to investigate how it gives rise to another, much less well-known controversy that takes place within the context of phenomenology itself: Aron Gurwitsch’s 1929 denial of the possibility of a “pure ego” within the sphere of pure consciousness, as affirmed by Husserl in *Ideas I* (1913).

Gurwitsch draws on Natorp’s position to support his own objections to Husserl’s thesis of a “pure ego.” According to Gurwitsch, it is consistent for a Neo-Kantian to defend the “pure ego” as the pole of subjective knowledge; however, for a phenomenologist to do so is, at the very least, questionable. In an effort to clarify the origin of Gurwitsch’s critique, we will begin by outlining the development and characteristics of both the transcendental method (Neo-Kantian) and the phenomenological method (Husserlian). Once these elements are more

precisely defined, it will be possible to achieve a clearer understanding of the debate between Husserl and Natorp, specifically concerning the issue of the “pure ego”¹. Only then will we be in a position to comprehend why Gurwitsch invokes Natorp in his discussion with Husserl.

2. Methodology and tradition

Understanding the debate between Husserl and Natorp requires, first of all, a clarification of the methodological frameworks from which each of them proceeds. Moreover, both belong to distinct traditions that approach the problems of philosophy in fundamentally different ways, which explains their divergent perspectives. The transcendental method of the Neo-Kantians is certainly distinct from the phenomenological method, which descends from Franz Brentano’s psychological theory of acts. But in precisely what sense do these differences manifest, and how do they shape the debate at hand?

2.1. Paul Natorp, the Marburg School and the transcendental method

The transcendental method emerged as an expression through Hermann Cohen, leader of the Marburg School, as an alternative response to the development of modern science. It stood in opposition to scientific materialism, while also distinguishing itself from idealist perspectives such as those of Fichte and Hegel. As Porta (2011: 48) explains, “It consists in taking science as a *Faktum*, that is, as something ‘given’, and through an explicative reflection, elevating oneself to the establishment of its basic conditions of possibility.” This approach seeks to avoid grounding the conditions of logical possibility for science in a form of subjectivism that might lead either to psychologism or to some metaphysical principle. The consequence of this position is an ascent toward the objectification of knowledge, which, until Natorp, had remained without a subjective perspective.

In reintroducing a subjective perspective, Natorp does not intend to maintain a strict opposition between subject and object that would result in an insurmountable dualism. Rather, he seeks to understand subjectivation and objectivation as opposing directions of one and the same process – the scientific *Fieri* (its process of becoming). As Natorp (2013: 262 [285])

¹ This controversy does not exhaust the dialogue between the two philosophers. The *Logical Investigations* are divided into two volumes, the first of which is known as the *Prolegomena*. In *Allgemeine Psychologie*, Natorp acknowledges his agreement with Husserl up to the first volume – where Husserl argues against psychologism – but disagrees with the phenomenological, rather than logical, solution offered in the second volume.

states, “the path of subjectivization runs, just like that of objectivization, into the indeterminate, and by possibility, into the infinite”¹. The difference lies in the fact that from the objective perspective one ultimately has access to objectivity through the laws of nature and scientific experiments governed by physics and mathematics. From the subjective standpoint, by contrast, one undertakes a reconstruction of this process of objectification, returning to the fact of consciousness (*Tatsache des Bewusstseins*).

Natorp’s reconstruction is arguably one of the greatest influences on what would later be called Husserl’s genetic phenomenology, despite the considerable differences between them – differences that may lead a Husserl scholar to overlook the same problem of the absence of intuitive access that Gurwitsch would later emphasize. Therefore, it is important to focus on the moment in which the debate properly begins, when Husserl was still speaking from the standpoint of what is referred to as “static” phenomenology. This fact is relevant because Natorp is explicit about the parameters of his reconstructive method. For Natorp (2013: 263 [287]), reconstruction is “nothing but the counter-view of the construction of the object and, with it, shares the genetic or methodological character, that is, also the sense of ‘intention,’ although of an intention that is never entirely fulfilled”². For this reason, the Neo-Kantian author begins from the fact of consciousness, emphasizing that the reconstruction in the direction of subjectivity presupposes a point of departure which one can never properly access in order to describe or transcend it.

In 1888, Paul Natorp published his *Introduction to Psychology*, in which he proposes the fact of consciousness as composed by the relation between conscious-being or consciousness (*Bewusstheit*), content (*Inhalt*), and the “pure ego” (*reines Ich*). *Bewusstheit* is a legacy from Cohen, whose aim, as Porta explains (2011: 273), is to differentiate “the logical-objective instances (which include ‘transcendental apperception’) from the psychological ones”; content is everything that is given to the ego; while the “pure ego” is the pole of reference in relation to that content. Between the “ego” and content, there is a functional relationship in which the “pure ego” is always something to which content refers and at the same time something from which content is always distinct.

¹ “Der Weg der Subjektivierung verläuft ebenso wie der der Objektivierung ins Unbestimmte, der Möglichkeit nach ins Unendliche”. (Translations are ours)

² “Welche nur die Gegenansicht der Konstruktion des Objekts ist und mit ihr den genetischen oder Methodencharakter, also auch den Sinn der „Intention“, und zwar der nie schlechthin sich erfüllenden Intention gemein hat”.

The ego, as the subjective center of relation to all contents conscious to me, stands in incomparable opposition to these contents; it does not have the same kind of relation to them as they have to it – it is not conscious of its contents in the same way that the content is conscious to it¹. (Natorp, 1888: 13)

This reconstruction reveals a limit. This is because the “pure ego” can never become an object for itself and, for this reason, cannot be described. According to the Neo-Kantian author, any attempt at description already generates an objectification:

In other words: any representation [*Vorstellung*] we might make of the ego would turn it into an object. But we have already ceased to think of it as ego in the moment we think of it as an object. To be an ego means not to be an object, but rather to be that in relation to which everything else is object². (Natorp, 1888: 13)

Here we find the point that will guide both the debate between Husserl and Natorp and the critique Gurwitsch will direct toward Husserl: the impossibility of describing subjectivity. However, in order to understand the significance of this issue, we must first delve into Husserl’s tradition and methodology.

2.2. Edmund Husserl, the Brentano School and the descriptive method

Husserl is one of the most emblematic students of the Brentano School and perhaps the disciple who advanced his teacher’s project for the description of subjectivity to its greatest extent. Franz Brentano was responsible for developing a descriptive psychology of psychic structures – intentional acts – which correlate in a non-causal manner and constitute our psychic life. Here, there is a point of contact with the Neo-Kantian tradition: subjectivity should not be studied from the standpoint of a naturalistic psychology. However, the way each tradition conducts this investigation is markedly different.

¹ “Das Ich, als das subjective Beziehungscentrum zu allen mir bewussten Inhalten, steht diesen Inhalten unvergleichlich gegenüber, es hat zu ihnen nicht eine Beziehung gleicher Art wie sie zu ihm, es ist nicht seinen Inhalten bewusst wie der Inhalt ihm”.

² “Anders ausgedrückt: jede Vorstellung, die wir uns von Ich machen würden, würde dasselbe zum Gegenstand machen. Wir haben aber bereits aufgehört, es als Ich zu denken, indem wir es als Gegenstand denken. Ich-sein heisst, nicht Gegenstand, sondern allem Gegenstand gegenüber dasjenige sein, dem etwas Gegenstand ist”.

Husserl starts from Brentano's framework, which posits the intentional act alongside its content/object. There is no relation comparable to Natorp's consciousness (*Bewusstheit*), because in Brentano's theory intentionality is not properly a relation, but rather a characteristic of the object itself, which is the psychic phenomenon. There is no pole such as a "pure ego" that maintains a relation of being conscious of something. The psychic phenomenon, through its intentionality, thematizes its object/content. For example, when I hear a sound, the psychic phenomenon (the act) is the hearing itself, which thematizes the physical phenomenon, the sound. What Brentano offers is a method of access to subjectivity: internal perception (*innere Wahrnehmung*). By distinguishing itself from both external perception and introspection, internal perception opens up a perspective for resolving a problem that had previously led either to the subordination of psychology to the results of the natural sciences or to an infinite regress. Thanks to internal perception, it became possible – and necessary – that, at the same time the psychic phenomenon is directed toward an object, it is also directed toward itself.

When Husserl takes up Brentano's psychology of the act and the notion of intentionality, he makes important modifications. One of these is the complexification of the structure of the act, which comes to unfold into moments such as quality, matter, objectuality and representational content. In this new structure, content becomes the means through which the object is apprehended, marking a fundamental distinction that was lacking in Brentano's description in his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874).

Nevertheless, there are key elements in Husserl's thinking that remain consistent with Brentano, such as the possibility of intuitive access to subjectivity, which makes the description of this psychic structure possible. This is a crucial point that differentiates Husserl from Natorp. According to Berger (1972: 14), while Husserl "wants to go 'to the things themselves', he sees the Neo-Kantians of the Marburg School as substituting reflection on scientific theories for the direct study of known objects". Another legacy from Brentano is the preservation of the multiplicity of intentional acts. Like his teacher, Husserl also understood psychic life as a unity that does not eliminate its complexity. For this reason, he began from the relation of intentional acts articulated with one another, without relying on causal relations or on reference to a pole of identification such as the "pure ego."

It is now possible to understand why Husserl, after reading Natorp's remarks, responded to him in the Fifth Logical Investigation, stating that he could not find the subjective pole of reference to which the Neo-Kantian author referred. According to Husserl, the only subjective pole to which the contents of consciousness and objects could refer was the empirical ego.

I must frankly confess, however, that I am quite unable to find this ego, this primitive, necessary center of relations. The only thing I can take note of, and therefore perceive, are the empirical ego and its empirical relations to its own experiences, or to such external objects as are receiving special attention at the moment. (Husserl, 2014: 92)

Husserl certainly does not reduce his idea of subjectivity to the empirical ego, but it is important to note that it still plays a fundamental role in his methodology. It is the empirical ego that the phenomenological ego – or the multiplicity of intentional acts – maintains as its point of reference. As Marbach (1974: 8) explains: “The ‘phenomenological ego’ is the individual, empirical ego considered from the perspective of what is phenomenologically given, that is, the empirically conceived real complex of experiences, which Husserl would later call the stream of consciousness”¹. We would like to draw attention to the fact that it is generally accepted that Husserl, in the *Logical Investigations*, operated with a non-egological conception of consciousness. And, while this is correct when compared to Natorp, it does not reflect the complexity of Husserl’s position.

Natorp received Husserl’s criticisms and, in 1912, in his *General Psychology According to the Critical Method*, responded by emphasizing that, due to the latent methodological differences between them, the “pure ego” was not within the reach of the phenomenology Husserl was proposing. This is the position that Gurwitsch would later take up and partially agree with, as we shall see. Natorp is categorical when he asserts:

It is also entirely understandable that Husserl, in accordance with the whole intention of his “Phenomenology,” begins his consideration immediately with the “phenomenological findings,” that is, in my terms, with the contents of consciousness, which according to my claim constitute the only field of investigation for psychology. The pure ego, the ego of consciousness in general, to which alone my thesis referred, is therefore not at all a question for him². (Natorp, 1912: 36 [34])

¹ “Das ‘phänomenologische Ich’ ist das individuelle, empirische Ich unter dem Gesichtspunkt des phänomenologisch Gegebenen betrachtet, d.i. die empirisch aufgefasste reelle erlebniskomplexion, das, was Husserl später Bewusstseinsfluss, Bewusstseinsstrom nennen wird”.

² “Es ist auch durchaus zu verstehen, dass Husserl, nach der ganzen Absicht seiner ‘Phänomenologie’, sofort beim ‘phänomenologischen Befund’, d.h. in meiner Sprache, beim Bewusstseinsinhalt, der ja gerade nach meiner Behauptung das einzige Untersuchungsfeld für die Psychologie ist, mit seiner Betrachtung einsetzt. Das reine Ich, das Ich der Bewusstheit überhaupt, auf welches allein meine These sich bezog, kommt für ihn daher gar nicht erst in Frage”.

The debate could have ended there. However, in the following period, Husserl's phenomenological method undergoes significant changes, which lead to a revision of his position regarding the "pure ego," recognizing it as necessary by 1913. The first material proof of this change in position appears in the publication of the second edition of the *Logical Investigations*, in the form of an additional note, where Husserl (1970: 93) retracts his earlier position while minimizing the impact of this shift on the analyses contained in that specific work: "I must expressly emphasize that the attitude here taken up to the question of the pure ego – an attitude I no longer endorse, as remarked before – is irrelevant to the investigations of this volume". The second and more prominent formalization of this new position is the inclusion of the "pure ego" as an important element in his transcendental phenomenology in *Ideas I*.

3. The "pure ego" in *Ideas I*

We now arrive at Husserl's position in *Ideas I*. It is from this point that Aron Gurwitsch will begin to question his teacher's procedure. In this work, published in 1913, Edmund Husserl formally introduces the "pure ego" as an element that constitutes the sphere of pure consciousness, describing a structure that, at first glance, may appear very similar to the one proposed by Natorp.

Let us first proceed in a way that directly identifies the being in question, and – since the being to be identified is nothing other than what we will designate, for essential reasons, as "pure experiences," "pure consciousness," with its pure "correlates of consciousness" on one side and its "pure ego" on the other [...] (Husserl, 2014: 58)

If in Natorp we find *Bewusstheit* (consciousness), *Inhalt* (content), and the *reines Ich* (pure ego), in Husserl we find intentional acts, correlates of consciousness and the "pure ego". But what exactly accounts for this significant shift between the *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas I*? It is possible to highlight at least two central elements that explain this transition: first, phenomenology's treatment of temporality, which requires dealing with the themes of unity and identification through time; and second, the adoption of the transcendental reduction as a

methodological tool, which excludes the empirical ego that previously served as a reference point for the phenomenological ego.

There is yet another similarity with Natorp's perspective: the description of the "pure ego" remains inaccessible, serving solely as a pole of unity and identification. This issue had been addressed differently in the *Logical Investigations*, because that work still operated within the legacy of Brentano's psychology of the act, as we saw earlier. At that time, the issue was not the existence of a single and identical subject persisting through time, but rather intentional acts understood as moments within the multiplicity that constitutes the stream of consciousness, which in this context was approached statically from a temporal point of view.

Therefore, if there is a "problem of the unity of consciousness" in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, it is certainly not in the form of the identity of an "I" through time. Rather, the task is to show that the existence of a multiplicity or diversity within the act does not affect the unity of the psychic phenomenon present at a given instant. On the contrary, in Natorp, with the introduction of a "pure ego," the problem of its identity through time arises, which refers back to the Kantian tradition concerning the theme of transcendental apperception. (Porta, 2011: 285)

Whereas time was not yet a central concern for Husserl in the *Logical Investigations*, this scenario changed in the period leading up to the publication of *Ideas I*. In the years between these two works, Husserl increasingly devoted himself to the question of temporality. However, interestingly, when Husserl introduces the "pure ego" in his 1913 work, he explicitly chooses not to address the temporal question in sufficient detail, even though he acknowledges its importance. For this reason, the status of the "pure ego" wavers in *Ideas I*, which still operates within the framework of a static phenomenology, while at the same time presenting signs of a genetic vocation.

Another crucial turning point is the transcendental reduction, which we could consider the foundation of the method proposed by Husserl. Through it, the phenomenologist aims to suspend the natural attitude and gain access to what remains – the residue consisting in the sphere of pure consciousness. It is this reduced phenomenon that must be described. Since the reduction only begins to be proposed around 1907, reaching its fully transcendental character in 1913, it makes sense that its absence in the *Logical Investigations* favored the rejection of the "pure ego." According to Marbach (1974: 5), Husserl "grasps consciousness in the *Logical*

Investigations in relation to the empirical ego, that is, in empirical apperception.” Thus, the radicalization of the reduction entirely suspends the relationship between the empirical ego and the phenomenological ego, making room for the possibility – and indeed the necessity – of the “pure ego” within the sphere of transcendental phenomenology.

If we take the debate concerning the “pure ego” as a point of reference, there is no denying a certain presence of Natorp in the development of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. Numerous analyses of their correspondence support this claim. But to what extent was Natorp truly an influence on Husserl’s transcendental turn? Some scholars argue that this influence is underestimated:

As Husserl acknowledged after his transcendental turn, it was his discussions with representatives of the transcendental tradition – i.e., the Neo-Kantians – that aided him in developing a full-fledged transcendental phenomenology. His closest ally among these erstwhile opponents was undoubtedly Natorp. (Luft, 2011: 59)

Luft (2011: 72) goes even further and draws a direct parallel between Husserl’s transcendental reduction and Natorp’s reconstruction: “In short, the transcendental reduction as a break with the natural attitude can be interpreted as a *reconstruction* of how the natural attitude has come to be constituted through intentional life”. Nevertheless, we believe that interpreting Husserl’s move toward the reduction as a step in the direction of Natorp’s reconstructive method demands a nuanced approach. This is because the so-called “genetic” reconstructive movement does not operate under the same parameters for both authors, as Natorp himself had previously acknowledged. Moreover, alongside Natorp, there are other important influences that Husserl draws upon in his study of subjectivity. One of these is certainly Descartes, with his methodical doubt and his conception of subjectivity as evidence.

The introduction of the phenomenological reduction in the lectures of the summer semester of 1907 does not seem, on the basis of what has been said so far, to be directly the result of an in-depth engagement with either Kant or Natorp. This is confirmed by the form the phenomenological reduction takes in those lectures. There, it is not primarily shaped by a Kantian idea, but by a Cartesian one, namely by the idea that philosophy

begins with something absolutely given (with absolute evidence) and with the *epoché* concerning all that does not satisfy this requirement¹. (Kern, 1964: 26)

We align ourselves with Kern's position, which neither underestimates nor overestimates Natorp's influence in this regard. There is the influence of Descartes, through which the method of reduction is developed; there is that of Kant, with the structural character of the conditions of possibility of experience, which unfolds in Natorp's influence – specifically in his constitutive account of objectivity and his reconstructive account of subjectivity. What must be considered in the case of the latter is that, in the comparative analysis of the subjective and objective poles, for Natorp they are opposing directions, whereas for Husserl they represent dimensions of distinct experiences. As Kern (1964: 338) illustrates:

To use the image of spatial directions and dimensions, one could say: for Natorp, subjective science lies only in the direction opposite to objective science; it traces the path that objective science and knowledge have followed, as it were, in reverse. Whereas, for Husserl, subjective and objective science stand in relation as two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality².

A valid question arises from this difference: is it possible to transfer the “pure ego” from Natorp's directional context into Husserl's interdimensional one? The legitimacy of this question becomes clear when we recall that intuitive access to subjectivity and its consequent description lie at the core of the phenomenological method. If the “pure ego” cannot be accessed or described, is it the task of phenomenology to presuppose it? According to Gurwitsch, it is not.

¹ “Die Einführung der phänomenologischen Reduktion in den Vorlesungen vom Sommersemester 1907 scheint schon auf Grund des Vorangehenden nicht unmittelbar auf eine vertiefte Auseinandersetzung mit Kant oder mit Natorp zurückzugehen. Dies wird bestätigt durch die Gestalt der phänomenologischen Reduktion, wie sie in jenen Vorlesungen vorliegt. Sie ist dort in erster Linie nicht durch einen kantianischen, sondern durch einen Cartesischen Gedanken geprägt, nämlich durch die Idee des Anfangs der Philosophie in einem absolut Gegebenen (in einer absoluten Evidenz) und der Epoché hinsichtlich all dessen, was dieser Forderung nicht entspricht”.

² “Um das Bild der räumlichen Richtungen und Dimensionen zu gebrauchen, könnte man sagen: Für Natorp liegt die subjektive Wissenschaft nur in der entgegengesetzten Richtung der objektiven; sie verfolgt den Weg, den die objektive Wissenschaft und Erkenntnis gegangen ist, gewissermaßen rückwärts, während nach Husserl die subjektive und objektive Wissenschaft im Verhältnis von Zweidimensionalität und Dreidimensionalität stehen”.

4. Aron Gurwitsch's thematic phenomenology and the problem of the "pure ego"

Aron Gurwitsch was a phenomenologist and student of Edmund Husserl who emphatically denied the possibility of legitimizing the "pure ego" as the pole of reference for pure consciousness within the transcendental sphere. Although rarely discussed, this phenomenological divergence is far from insignificant. Spiegelberg (1981: 104) goes so far as to describe it as follows: "Husserl's increasing insistence on the absolute certainty of the pure ego and Gurwitsch's equally insistent denial of it is perhaps the most striking case of a basic disagreement between two leading phenomenologists".

Aron Gurwitsch made this problem the focus of his 1929 dissertation, *Thematic Phenomenology and the Pure Ego*, which takes as its primary reference Husserl's *Ideas I*. Gurwitsch represents the culmination of a phenomenological-structural tradition in which the "thematic" aspect of consciousness has always been present. It began with Brentano, for whom the theme was the objective content guaranteed by intentionality as a characteristic of the psychic phenomenon. It passed through Husserl, where, after the transcendental turn, there was the contribution of the noematic pole to experience, which guarantees access to the transcendent objectivity of the act. This is accepted by Gurwitsch in these terms, and based on them, he proposes his own interpretation. However, an observation must be made: there are several interpretations of Husserl's noema, and Gurwitsch's interpretation was not only the first to be expressed publicly and the only one by a student of Husserl, but perhaps the one that made the most original reading. Subsequent scholars have debated and refuted Gurwitsch's position, either directly or indirectly. This debate has been systematic, as evidenced by the works of Føllesdal (1969), Solomon (1970), Dreyfus (1972), and Drummond (1990, 1992).

Dreyfus' position is that, although Husserl is primarily responsible for the multiple possible definitions, Gurwitsch's interpretation is excessive: "To sustain his interpretation, Gurwitsch has to follow an indirect line" (1972: 153). This indirect approach is in line with the internal relations inspired by *Gestalt* theory. The biggest problem with this proposal is that Husserl never granted phenomenological validity to *Gestalt*, as can be seen in *Nachwort* (1930). On the contrary, he always considered it a naturalistic psychology incapable of dealing with the transcendental dimension. Gurwitsch begins something that is only consistently established in Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945), when it is admitted that, even though there are limitations to its scope, *Gestalt* can provide valuable insights into phenomenological description, precisely the point of Gurwitsch's criticism of Husserl. Dreyfus' position is primarily to point out that

there is a Fregean influence on the Husserlian noema much greater than Gurwitsch is willing to acknowledge, while at the same time recognizing the following:

Gurwitsch's version, however, dating from 1929 and proposing to "advance and to develop further rather than merely expound" Husserl's view, has had a broad influence. The Gurwitschian interpretation of the noema is taken for granted in the works of Cairns, Schutz, Boehm, and Fink, to emerge transformed into a criticism of Husserl in the writings of Merleau-Ponty. (Dreyfus, 1972: 136)

Despite maintaining his own interpretation of the noema, Gurwitsch's perspective aligns with that of Husserl on a fundamental level: it accepts a correlation between the subjective pole, represented by the *cogito*, and the objective pole, represented by the theme. However, this *cogito*, as described by Husserl, unlike its Cartesian inspiration, is not grounded in the certainty of its own representations and is therefore inseparable from the notion of intentionality. As Berger explains (1972: 34): "the very essence of consciousness is to be directed toward something other than itself: that is the life proper to it. To say simply 'I think' has thus no meaning".

In thematic consciousness, the *cogito* is always approached in terms of its objective counterpart – the theme. The difference between Husserl's and Gurwitsch's approaches can be summarized by the fact that, while Husserl focuses on developing the subjective (noetic) side of this correlation, Gurwitsch emphasizes the objective (noematic) one. In either case, both start from the *cogito* as subjectivity.

Calling the something with which we concern ourselves the theme of our busiedness, we accordingly designate by "cogito" those acts in which we actually busy ourselves with a theme, and for "cogito" the expression "thematic consciousness", "consciousness of a theme", can be substituted, so that the terms "theme" and "thematic" always connote actual busiedness. (Gurwitsch, 1929: 195)

In other words, the *cogito* is nothing more than the subjectivity of thematic consciousness, which – precisely because it is always thematized – never assumes the aspect of a pure subjectivity. It is not an "I think," but always a "thinking of something," or, from Gurwitsch's perspective, "something being thought." In this sense, it is said to be thematically absorbed. As

Gurwitsch writes (1929: 237): “I am ‘absorbed’ in my theme while ‘living’ in those acts which make the theme present”.

Gurwitsch believes that, starting from the perspective of thematic consciousness, the idea of a “pure ego” makes no sense, since only the *cogito* appears as a phenomenological finding. For this reason, Gurwitsch proposes a return to the structure presented in the *Logical Investigations*, this time taking into account the transcendental reduction. Ironically, Gurwitsch’s critique makes use of almost the same argument that Husserl employed to challenge Natorp:

In the analyses of thematic consciousness we did not encounter a descriptively ascertainable ego moment as involved in every act of the form *cogito*, not to speak of the ego as a “primal source of generations” out of which acts radiate. As we have already said, we must revert to Husserl’s original position in the first edition of the *Logische Untersuchungen* over against his changed standpoint in the *Ideen*. (Gurwitsch, 1929: 239)

What Gurwitsch seems to be drawing our attention to is the fact that, in this Kantian – or Neo-Kantian – turn, Husserl not only expands his phenomenology toward the transcendental, but also inherits its problems and, in this case, presupposes a solution.

The pure ego lives itself out in a particular sense in every current cogito, yet all background experiences belong to it as well and it belongs to them. All of them, by virtue of belonging to the *one* stream of experience that is mine, *must* be capable of being converted into current cogitationes or of being included in them immanently. In Kantian language: “*The ‘I think’ must be able to accompany all my representations.*” (Husserl, 2014: 105)

As previously discussed, this solution becomes necessary because, following the transcendental reduction, the relation with the “empirical ego” is suspended, and what remains is solely the sphere of pure consciousness, which, as we now understand, has the *cogito* as its subjectivity. However, we have also pointed out that the *cogito* is always thematized; therefore, it never assumes the aspect of a pure subjectivity, being reduced to “thinking of something.” But who is thinking, if the reference point – the empirical ego – no longer plays any part in the investigation? Husserl does not believe that the sphere of pure consciousness can be left without

a pole of reference. He assigns this role to the “pure ego,” which he maintains as a residue of the reduction, guaranteeing the identity of consciousness.

Rather the ego is inherent in every experience as it comes about and streams away; its “focus” passes “through” each current cogito to something objective. This radiating focus varies with each cogito, shooting forth anew with the new cogito and vanishing with it. Yet the ego is something identical. (Husserl, 2014: 105)

For Husserl, thematizing consciousness without an organizing pole risks undermining the unity and identity of consciousness. The “pure ego” solution becomes necessary because, at that time, there was no alternative concept of an internal network of relations capable of securing this possibility. Gurwitsch intends to change this scenario by employing connections inspired by *Gestalt* theory as a guarantee of internal structuring and organization within consciousness.

Gurwitsch acknowledges that Paul Natorp, coming from a Kantian tradition, is able to secure these fundamental aspects of consciousness through logical deduction. However, this is not the task of phenomenology. According to Gurwitsch (1929: 240), “With respect to phenomenally given unities, it makes no sense to ask about a ground of unity by virtue of which they ‘are made possible’”. There is an undeniable methodological distinction between the phenomenological method and the reconstructive method. “Natorp does not consider the ego to be a ‘phenomenological datum’; according to him, the ego does not manifest itself in phenomenological findings, nor is it under the obligation of such a legitimation” (Gurwitsch, 1929: 238). Thus, although it may be perfectly coherent within a Neo-Kantian proposal, a “pure ego” that is merely deduced without intuitive access is, at the very least, problematic in phenomenological terms.

Throughout his 1929 work, Gurwitsch seeks to offer a solution to the main criticism directed at phenomenological descriptions: the alleged impossibility of guaranteeing the unity and identity of consciousness due to the static nature of observation. His intention is not to disregard the temporal aspect, but to offer a valid complementary alternative that does not compromise the intuitiveness and descriptive rigor so characteristic of the phenomenological method. For Gurwitsch, the stream of consciousness is continuous, revealing its own intrinsic dynamic, which must be observed and described. Consciousness is not an aggregate of elementary contents that present themselves separately and successively, requiring an external

element to connect them. According to Gurwitsch, phenomenology proposes to respond – on the basis of the description of phenomenal data – both to the validity of objective unities and to the rational motivations of the connections of consciousness; “then the problem cannot be raised again concerning the possibility of those very phenomenal data and findings” (Gurwitsch, 1929: 240). As Gurwitsch (1929: 240) summarizes, “Quite in general, within the phenomenological realm the question is not *how* something is possible but *what* is possible”. The key to this answer lies in focusing on and beginning from the direct description of phenomena. According to Gurwitsch, within the context of phenomenology founded on a descriptive method, there is no direct evidence of the “pure ego,” and it is impossible to attest to its presence within the stream of experiences.

What the “pure ego” possesses in Husserl’s phenomenology are functionalities attributed thereto in order to ensure the organization and operation of our consciousness. One of these functions is to direct attention through the *cogito*, the only form of subjectivity to which I have intuitive access within the transcendental domain; another is to serve as the pole that guarantees the unity and identity of consciousness through time, making it possible for each *cogitatio* to belong to the same consciousness. However, the “pure ego” is an extrinsic solution to the organization of what Gurwitsch will call the field of consciousness, for which reason he will not accept it.

Through the development of an internal network of relations – whose complexity lies beyond the scope of this article – Gurwitsch intends to describe not only the operation of attention but also the structural organization of consciousness. Aron Gurwitsch believes he is remaining faithful to Husserlian phenomenology’s descriptive requirement, as well as to Natorp’s view that it is impossible to access and describe the “pure ego.” Given that description is always objective – or, in this case, thematic – there is, in thematizing, no subjectivity found other than the *cogito*, absorbed by its own theme. This does not mean that Gurwitsch entirely agrees with Natorp. For the phenomenologist, the hypothesis of a subjective pole of unification and organization still demands refutation. What Gurwitsch seeks to achieve is the description of a transcendently purified experience. What differentiates him from both Natorp and Husserl is his refusal to believe that presupposing a pure subjectivity external to states of consciousness offers a viable approach.

5. The importance of bringing this discussion to the surface

One might inquire into the significance of Gurwitsch's reevaluation of Natorp's quotations in relation to contemporary interpretations of Gurwitsch's oeuvre, particularly its implications for his critique of Husserl. A preliminary, more general response would be the necessity to demonstrate that Gurwitsch's philosophical perspective is extensive and that his comprehension of Neo-Kantianism, which extends beyond Natorp, must be considered when assessing his oeuvre, as it resonates in a pertinent manner. For instance, Aurora's (2022) work exemplifies Gurwitsch's discernment of the pivotal figure of the Neo-Kantian Herman Cohen within the cultural milieu of Judaism in 19th-century Germany. However, the relationship between Gurwitsch's position in relation to Natorp goes unnoticed, despite Aurora's acknowledgment that:

Gurwitsch constitutes a significant moment – albeit largely ignored – within transcendental philosophical reflection. In fact, if we accept, as in this work, the historical-conceptual reconstruction of the notion of “transcendental” proposed by Gaetano Rametta – who interprets its history as characterized by a gradual process of desubjectivation – Gurwitsch's position proves to be of absolute interest. In fact, it coincides with a non-egological phenomenology of consciousness that can be interpreted as one of the most radical expressions of this process of desubjectification that characterizes transcendental philosophy, but at the same level as a phenomenological philosophy of consciousness¹. (Aurora, 2022: 6)

If this is the case, then adopting Natorp's perspective in this discourse on the pure ego becomes paramount. This is due to the fact that, as previously mentioned, in Neo-Kantianism, the dynamic evolved in the direction of subjectivation when a comparison was made between Cohen and Natorp. Furthermore, each of these three authors' treatment of subjectivity is intrinsically linked to their understanding of the structure of consciousness. In this context,

¹ “Gurwitsch costituisce un momento significativo – per quanto, per lo più, ignorato – all’interno della riflessione filosofica di matrice trascendentale. Se infatti si assume, come in questo lavoro, la ricostruzione storico-concettuale della nozione di ‘trascendentale’ proposta da Gaetano Rametta – che ne interpreta la vicenda come caratterizzata da un graduale processo di de-soggettivazione – la posizione di Gurwitsch risulta essere di assoluto interesse. Essa, infatti, coincide con una fenomenologia non-egologica della coscienza che può essere interpretata come una delle più radicali espressioni di quel processo di de-soggettivazione che caratterizza la filosofia trascendentale all’altezza, però, di una filosofia della coscienza di ordine fenomenologico”.

Gurwitsch's contributions gain relevance. While Natorp emphasizes content because it is the only element of consciousness that can be described and Husserl emphasizes the pure ego as the source of all intentional acts, Gurwitsch finds an alternative path. He restructures how this content is apprehended via internal relationships of the field of consciousness and redefines noesis, extending it to all consciousness. Why, then, would he be an exponent of the desubjectification of philosophy? Because, unlike Husserl, he emphasizes the noema, the objective correlate of phenomenological experience, rather than noesis and the pure ego. This influences other criticisms that Gurwitsch directs at Husserl, such as those concerning the impossibility of *hylé*¹. Many Husserl scholars believe passive synthesis resolves this issue, but Arvidson (2006: 97) disagrees: “in some ways it is never going to be answered in Husserl’s work to Gurwitsch’s satisfaction, because even in the so-called ‘passive’ syntheses, which by definition do not involve the activity of the ego, Husserl’s approach is distinctively noetic not noematic”.

To fully comprehend and acknowledge the strategic solution proposed by Aron Gurwitsch, who prioritizes the noematic aspect over the noetic, it is crucial to recognize his cognizance of, and positioning within, an ongoing dialogue between Natorp and Husserl. The resumption of Natorp's arguments to reinforce his criticism of Husserl is not arbitrary; rather, it exemplifies Gurwitsch's profound comprehension of the philosophical milieu within which he was beginning to position himself.

6. Final considerations

The debate between Edmund Husserl and Paul Natorp concerning the “pure ego” up to 1913 demonstrates how the divergences in their investigations on subjectivity stem from their respective traditions – namely, the Marburg School and the Brentano School – and their respective methods – the reconstructive and the phenomenological methods. Husserl’s transcendental turn brings about a shift in his position that, according to Aron Gurwitsch, does not do justice to the phenomenological method.

Gurwitsch raises these issues in his 1929 dissertation, revisiting the very same arguments Husserl had employed in the *Logical Investigations* against Natorp. Gurwitsch’s aim is to support his criticisms of the adoption of the “pure ego” as an element – within the sphere of pure consciousness in *Ideas I* – that cannot be accessed or described. By proposing a structure

¹ See Marcelle (2011).

composed of internally articulated networks, Gurwitsch believes he satisfies both the demand for the unity and identity of consciousness – necessary from the temporal point of view in phenomenology – and the principle of Natorp's reconstructive method, which does not accept the objectification of subjectivity.

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