

Man should not let death attain the dominion of his thoughts: An Essay on Subjectivity, Self-Preservation and Immortality

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Abstract

Mortality seems to have no place in the theories on subjectivity in Kant and Husserl. It is suggested that this *entente cordiale* is an expression of the shared principle at the heart of their philosophy, i.e. the principle of self-preservation. Self-preservation is a principle that in a certain sense excludes mortality. It is argued that the primary sense of this exclusion is not theoretical but practical. Kant and Husserl are both endorsing the imperative that *man should not let death attain the dominion of his thoughts* (cf. Mann 1976, 600). The positive correlate to this is to be found in the demand that man should think of himself as if he was immortal. With special regard to Husserl the predicament that accompanies his relentless attempt to fulfill this demand is described as a sluice through which anthropology threatens to flow into the phenomenological enterprise.

Keywords: subjectivity, self-preservation, immortality, Husserl, Kant

“Der freie Mensch denkt an nichts weniger als an den Tod;
und seine Weisheit ist nicht ein Nachsinnen über den Tod,
sondern ein Nachsinnen über das Leben.”
(Spinoza 1950, 247)

“Sagen Sie Herr Professor Kant worauf begründet sich
die mehr oder weniger permanente Todesfurcht
die Angst vor dem Ende? KANT *aufbrausend*:
Sagen Sie nicht das Wort Ende.“
(Bernhard 1988, 307)

“Ich kämpfe ständig mit der Ungunst der Umstände, zum Teil
solchen, die in mir selbst, in meinen schwachen Kräften liegen.“
Husserl (Schumann 1977, 213)

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I. Opening

Existentialist philosophy has made us accustomed to the thought that subjectivity has an intimate relation to its own mortality. However, in Kant and Husserl we will look in vain for an elaboration on what it means for subjectivity that it is mortal. There is no theory on subjectivity and mortality to be found. It is in a way astonishing to make this observation. How can it be possible? How can such an important and weighty issue as mortality play no role in two of the most comprehensive theories on subjectivity in our philosophical tradition? How is it possible that the significance of mortality should be completely overlooked? The hypothesis I would like to consider is, that the absence of mortality in Kant and Husserl is not a theoretical lapses or a philosophical deficiency. It is not even a blind spot, but on the contrary an intentional evasion. This evasion is a consequence of the principle at the heart of both Kant's and Husserl's conception of subjectivity, i.e. the principle of self-preservation (Sommer 1977; Sommer 1987).

The clearest expression of this commonality is perhaps exactly the implicit denial of mortality as in any why significant for the self-understanding of subjectivity. Self-preservation is a principle for which it is constitutive in a certain sense to rule out death. Whatever is structured by the principle of self-preservation is nothing but self-preservation and has accordingly no inherent or intrinsic relation to its own annihilation. Spinoza gave this principle a universal metaphysical articulation in his doctrine of *conatus*. According to this every particular thing strives to preserve its own being. Nothing in the thing opposes this strive and annihilation must consequently be brought about externally. When this principle is elevated into a principle of subjectivity it loses its substantial appearance. It is not so that first there is a being and then, secondly, what this being does to preserve itself. Subjectivity is not a thing that preserves itself, rather it *is* self-preservation. And it is in the movement of self-preservation that all substantial being is constituted. As Husserl puts it in a very condensed formulation: "*Ich bin nicht erst und erhalte mich*

hinterher, Sein ist Selbsterhaltung” (Husserl 1973b, 367). Considered as “pure” self-preservation, subjectivity has, just like Spinoza’s *conatus*, no relation to its own annihilation. This feature can be traced in the very structure of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness cannot think itself away, but must always, whatever it posits, preserve itself as the positing self. This implies that subjectivity and mortality must be alien to each other. As already Epicurus said: when we are, death is not, and when death is, we are not.

Admittedly the formality and triviality of this seems somewhat faint or even superficial when contrasted with the more profound and concrete experiences, which existentialist philosophers can offer. It may very well be, that we cannot think ourselves away – but does that change the deep impact which the knowledge of our most certain death has upon us? Is this view on subjectivity and mortality anything else but the inauthentic denial of the bourgeois? To see how it might be more than this, it is important not to be content with the descriptive argument from self-consciousness alone. It is necessary to acquire a sense of the normative aspect of the matter. The exclusion of death, which we find in Kant and Husserl, is not primarily a result of a theoretical argument. It is not so that mortality is not significant because it has no bearing, when subjectivity is conceived of as self-preservation. It is rather so, that subjectivity is conceived of as self-preservation because in this way it is possible to avoid that death attains the dominion of our thoughts. The descriptive argument – that we *cannot* think our own mortality – only comes into play, when the normative stance has already been taken: we *should* not think of our own mortality. However, in order to fully exclude death from our thoughts it is not enough to leave a vacuum that would otherwise be occupied with thoughts of death. We should re-occupy this vacancy in our system of metaphysical questions with a notion, which prevents mortality from re-entering our self-understanding. It is in other words required that we positively think of ourselves as if we were immortal. Kant and Husserl share this imperative. In the following remarks on subjectivity and

immortality they are my key figures of reference, although I will mainly stick with Husserl.

II. Two thanatologies

What is the relation between subjectivity and mortality? Taking a swift glance at our tradition I suppose it would not be completely inadequate to say, that two answers have been given to this question. The first thanatology states that the idea of mortality is inscribed in what it means for a self to be a self. The second denies this. The associated pragmatic implications differ vastly. Let us consider the first case: The active life of human beings would never unfold, if this life was not structured up against deadlines – in the end up against the ultimate deadline. Subjectivity, or at least human subjectivity, is *Sein-zum-Tode*. And, one might add, luckily so! For if this was not the case, human life would dissolve into utter passivity and boredom. It would never amount to anything. Why should I do something now, when I have unlimited time? The tension – and this word is of cause derived from the Latin term *tentio* meaning *I am tense, I worry, I mind, I care* etc. – so, the tension involved in intentionality would never come about without mortality. Subjectivity would not establish any directedness toward what in appropriate philosophical abstraction is usually called *the world*. It would be like Epicurus' immortal Gods: careless (*ohne Sorge*) and world-less (*Weltlos*). To be directed towards, to carry out, to think about and to act – for all this it is necessary to concentrate, to gather strength, to focus and to aim. And this, in turn, is only possible if life – in its totality and in all its moments alike – is affected by its inherent mortality. Only in this way can life attain significance.

The outlook in the second case is quite different: The active life of human beings would never unfold, if this life was accompanied by the idea of its mortality. In order to have a *vita activa* at all, man must not think of his own death. The *memento mori* does not entail a meaningful view on pragmatic life. And, one might add, this is not surprising, since the motif behind this *topos* is to remind us of the vanity of earthly existence. It is not designed to encourage pragmatic

involvement in the world, but to sharpen our soteriological senses. Incessantly contemplating death does not help us concentrate and gather our strength, but consigns us to a state of paralysis and apathy. Why should I do anything, when nothing matters in the end – when all I do and accomplish will be forgotten and when it eventually will be as if I never existed? In order to act and to carry out man must banish, reject, repress or otherwise forget the idea of mortality. And this in turn is only possible if life – in its totality and all its moments alike – is affected by its inherent immortality. *The way I have lived has an everlasting importance; it determines the way I will spend my immortality* - only a perspective similar to the kind provided by an obsolete notion like this bestows life with significance. Accordingly man must live at least *as if* he was immortal.

III. Husserl versus Heidegger

According to Heidegger death is inscribed in subjectivity as a *Sein-zum-Tode*. This is a crucial point of difference to Husserl. Husserl stresses the infinite immanence of subjectivity. What is the phenomenological basis for doing this? The answer is that from the phenomenological point of view subjectivity is given for itself without beginning or end. This has to do with the structure of inner time-consciousness that pertains to all intentionality. Subjectivity cannot remember any conscious state as being the first or imagine any conscious state as being the last – because all conscious states are accompanied by the retention of previous and the protention of coming states. This so called *lived presence* is the necessary condition of intentionality as such. It is the basic form of its self-preservation in as much as it is the alternative to the atomistic time-conception and its accompanying idea of a transitive preservation. It is, in other words, a condition for intentionality that it in itself has no relation to its own mortality. Accordingly we find, perhaps surprisingly, that all that which Heidegger describes under the heading *Uneigentlichkeit* is in fact a notable and important contribution to a theory of subjectivity as structured by self-preservation. What characterizes the

inauthentic mode of intentionality – or *Sorge* – is precisely that it inhabits a life-world by neglecting its *Sein-zum-Tode*. In everyday life it appears as if man does not really believe that he eventually will die. For Husserl there is no need to label this as inauthentic. Far from being inauthentic if neglecting their own mortality, human beings rather participate in transcendental subjectivity in this way. But more on this point later.

IV. Retention and transcendental subjectivity

Even though subjectivity from the phenomenological point of view does not know its beginning or ending, this is of course not evidence for the belief that the phenomenologist as an empirical human being is immortal. The immortality of subjectivity – not only its immanent infinity – would entail that beginning and ending are not only not phenomenologically *given*, but that there *is* no beginning or end. This is not the case for human life. A human life has a *factual* beginning and a *factual* end, although both of these are *essentially* not given. Let us, however, as brave phenomenologists leave facts aside and concentrate on the essential i.e. on consciousness as such or transcendental subjectivity!

Transcendental subjectivity has no factual beginning or end. It is nothing but pure immanent infinity. And exactly this – immanent infinity without factual beginning or end – is what Husserl understands to be the immortality of transcendental subjectivity. Husserl writes: “Aber das transzendente urtümliche Leben [...] kann nicht aus dem Nichts werden und ins Nichts übergehen, es ist „unsterblich“, weil das Sterben dafür keinen Sinn hat etc.“ (Husserl 1993, 338) Following this line of thought, transcendental subjectivity could be described as possessing an infinite retention – or metaphorically speaking: it could be described as being in a state where *everything clings eternally*. Nothing gradually fades away until it is totally gone – everything is retained and simultaneously given in one lived and eternal presence. This may seem speculative. And it is undoubtedly articulated in a form closer to traditional theological conceptions than Husserl’s taste

would agree to. But it is, nevertheless, a very obvious idea considering the phenomenology of inner time-consciousness. In fact if we follow this phenomenology what is in need of explanation seems to be why the retention of intentionality should *not* be infinite.

V. Recollection and anthropological subjectivity

Husserl leaves us no doubt regarding the mortality of human beings: “Der Mensch kann nicht unsterblich sein. Der Mensch stirbt notwendig. Der Mensch hat keine weltliche Präexistenz, in der zeit-räumlichen Welt war er früher nichts, und wird er nachher nichts sein.“ (Husserl 1993, 338) The paradox is, however, that we *know* this, but cannot *think* it. As intentional subjects we can neither think our own beginning nor our own ending. And this unthinkable beginning and ending does not even have to be the capital ones usually known as birth and death. The minor cases have the same feature. The intentional life which unfolds between waking up and falling asleep possess the same immanent infinity. After waking up we cannot depict any intentional state as being the first. For as long as I can remember I was always already awake – and this is true for the same reasons it is true that for as long as I can remember I was always already alive. However, we know that our retention is *in fact* not infinite even though it is *essentially* given this way. It gradually fades away. We don’t know exactly where it ends, but we know that it has ended – and from where do we know this? The simple answer is: from the fact that we recollect.

Now, it is important to see that it is actually highly surprising that recollection should become a form of intentionality at all. The appropriate perspective is provided by the phenomenology of inner time-consciousness. Following the descriptions given here, it becomes all but clear why the retention of intentionality should be limited. For why should that which is held back in retention eventually slip away? This cannot be shown to be essential for intentionality. And intentionality would not need to re-collect, were it not that the perfect continuity of an infinite retention was somehow

interrupted. Re-collection is the gathering – *collectio* – of something that belongs together but has somehow become dissociated. It is – to put it pathologically – a *symptom* of a delimited retention. This leads to the question: Is recollection a factual form of subjectivity pertaining to a specific empirical incarnation of subjectivity, say for instance human beings? Has it perhaps to do with what Husserl referred to as the narrowness of human consciousness? Is it an expression of the economy of a consciousness which cannot have all at once?

Questions like these give rise to the idea that re-collection is not part of transcendental subjectivity, but is a form of intentionality which human subjectivity constitutes to remedy its imperfect self-preservation. It may be that human intentionality is structured as a lived presence. And it may be that this guarantees that intentional life does not dissolve into atomistic time-capsules, which, if held together at all, is held together only by external intervention. But it does not guarantee that human intentional life is without discontinuity. Oblivion, sleep, coma, boredom and unconsciousness are among the troublesome interruptions of human intentional life. And ultimately death is the termination of this life. So we can – or perhaps even must – distinguish between the perfect self-preservation of transcendental subjectivity and the fragile self-preservation of human subjectivity that must constantly overcome dissociations in its intentional life – and in the end fail.

VI. Transcendental and anthropological subjectivity

When considering the question of immortality and asking about the relation between transcendental and anthropological subjectivity in Husserl the matter seems quite simple. Transcendental subjectivity is immortal, anthropological subjectivity is mortal. However, transcendental and anthropological subjectivity is not without relation to each other. And here the matter becomes intriguing and complex. Transcendental subjectivity and anthropological subjectivity share the same immanent infinity that comes with inner time-consciousness. This is no surprise since transcendental

subjectivity is nothing but the essential features pertaining to intentionality as such. For anthropological subjectivity this essential feature of intentionality is however combined with a factual beginning and end. Consequently anthropological subjectivity is finite and mortal, whereas transcendental subjectivity is infinite and immortal. Let us consider how Husserl describes the ultimate end of a human life. After remarking the “blendenden, tiefsinnigen Weisen, in denen Heidegger mit dem Tode umspringt“ he states, that in the genuine phenomenology, death is “das Ausscheiden des transzendentalen Ego aus der Selbstobjektivierung als Mensch“. (Husserl 1993, 332) From the point of view of anthropological subjectivity this entails, that it somehow carries or embodies transcendental subjectivity during its life. After once again having stressed that human beings are mortal Husserl says: “Aber jedes Menschen-Ich birgt in gewisser Weise sein transzendentales Ich, und das stirbt nicht und entsteht nicht, es ist ein ewiges Sein im Werden.“ (Husserl 1966, 381)

Does this mean that human beings after all are immortal in a certain sense? And if so, in what sense? In a remarkable explicit theological description Husserl gives us the following hint: “Also Unsterblichkeit in gewöhnlichem Sinn ist unmöglich. Aber unsterblich ist der Mensch wie jede Monade, unsterblich ist sein Anteil an dem Selbstrealisierungsprozess der Gottheit, unsterblich ist sein Fortwirken in allem Echten und Guten.“ (Husserl 1973b, 610) What is immortality in this sense? What is participation in God’s self-realization? What is continual effect in all that is real and good? How can it be attained? And do we not find ourselves far away from the competence of descriptive phenomenology when posing questions like this? Does the question of immortality not belong to metaphysics rather than phenomenology as a strict science? Have we forgotten Kant’s critical restrictions of pure reason? Let us, by all means, make sure, that we do not forget Kant! I turn to Kant and what he did...

VII. For the consolation of Lampe

The saying goes that in the moment of death Voltaire folded his hands and let a prayer out of his heart and out of his wit: *May the almighty God – (if he in fact exists) – have mercy on my poor soul – (if I in fact have one)*. This is what a prayer must look like when the impossibility of theoretical demonstrations within metaphysics affects religious life. And when the chance to ridicule religious dogmatism occurs Voltaire is of course not a man who hesitates. Kant, on the other hand, was not inclined to mockery. But nevertheless *der alleszermalmer aus Königsberg* relentlessly demonstrated the futilities of metaphysical dogmatism. The existence of God, the immortality of the soul and the freedom of the will were beyond the scope of theoretical reasoning. Take for instance the case of immortality. It is a transcendental condition of the possibility of consciousness that “Das: Ich denke, muß alle meine Vorstellungen begleiten können...” (Kant 1998, B132) But this logical function does not give rise to a sound theoretical proof of the immortality of a substantial soul. That we cannot think the transcendental I away, that this I on the contrary must accompany all conscious acts – this can only through paralogsms be applied in an argument for immortality.

It is questionable if Kant’s servant Martin Lampe understood this argumentation from Kant’s first critique. But the outcome was easily graspable in all its horror. And so we must follow Heinrich Heine and depict the pious old man loyally standing in the corner of the room trembling with fear. Could it be true? Had the renowned professor really refuted all proof of the immortal soul and even of the existence of God himself? Tears and sweat of anxiety ran down his face - and Heine writes: “Da erbarmt sich Immanuel Kant und zeigt, daß er nicht bloß ein großer Philosoph, sondern auch ein guter Mensch ist, und er überlegt, und halb gutmüthig und halb ironisch spricht er: »Der alte Lampe muß einen Gott haben, sonst kann der arme Mensch nicht glücklich seyn - der Mensch soll aber auf der Welt glücklich seyn - das sagt die praktische Vernunft – meinetwegen – so mag auch die praktische Vernunft die Existenz Gottes verbürgen.«“ (Heine

1979, 89) And with this reasoning in mind Kant returned to his desk and wrote the second critique for the consolation of his servant.

Here, as is well known, Kant transposed metaphysics into the domain of practical reason where it took on the guise of postulates. But it is not easy to determine exactly what a postulate of reason is. Let us once again take the case of immortality. The moral law is an unconditioned imperative. But it demands more than a finite being is able to fulfil. A reason that demands what cannot be fulfilled is unreasonable. It is therefore a consequence of reason as self-preservation, that a *must* presupposes a *can*. If a finite being should fulfil the categorical imperative, it must be able to do this. Since such a state of fulfilment is impossible for a finite being, it must be conceived of not as a state but as an infinite progress. An infinite progress, in turn, is only possible if the finite being has an everlasting existence and so, in other words, is immortal. In this way the immortality of the soul must be demanded if practical reason is not to contradict itself. When Kant stressed, that this line of thought is not a theoretical proof, he did not mean to diminish it, but to strengthen it. When elevated into a practical postulate, immortality is freed from all its dubious theoretical underpinnings. And given the primacy of practical reason theoretical reason was even obliged to acknowledge this postulate while coming to terms with its own incompetence regarding the matter. Of course, when it comes to Lampe, we do not know if he could find any consolation in this.

VIII. Transcendental and anthropological subjectivity – again

Let me return to Husserl and phenomenology, now having ensured that we have not forgotten Kant. From the standpoint of phenomenology death is in a certain sense not real. It is simply not a phenomenon, and so a limit-concept for phenomenology. In this sense it would seem as a kind of externalist naturalism to give death any significance in phenomenology. And indeed, Heidegger's "umspringen" with death appeared to Husserl as nothing but a relapse into

anthropology. Uneasiness with death ought to be below the worthiness of a phenomenologist. However, even if death was insignificant *in* phenomenology, Husserl could not wholly exclude death as insignificant *for* phenomenology. Or at least, he had problems doing so. These problems all appear in the context of the difficulties concerning *phenomenology as an institution*. This too might seem as an external problem. Phenomenology is concerned with intuition of essences. It is not, *as phenomenology*, concerned with the problem of its own existence. Or at least so we must initially expect from a philosophy, which systematically declares and methodologically ensures its disinterest in existence. However, at this point Husserl's strict insistence on the scholastic *distinctio realis* becomes intricate. This intricacy emerges when the late Husserl ventures into a variation of the ontological proof of God.

As was the case in scholastic philosophy, Husserl's phenomenology reached a point where existence became essential. In this sense phenomenology came to contradict a central Kantian restriction: that existence was not a real predicate. What I have in mind is the late Husserl's theory of inter-subjectivity as being a *conditio sine qua non* for objectivity and this in turn for the possibility of phenomenology as a strict science. Of course Husserl made sure that he spoke of *transcendental*, not empirical, inter-subjectivity. But for a spectator to phenomenology it is striking that what transcendental subjectivity needs in order to realize its inherent *telos* and what evolution and history can offer converge in mankind. It is almost as if a pre-established harmony was at play. (Of course the position and perspective of this imagined spectator is in itself highly interesting and can to some extent be examined in Hans Blumenberg's writings, especially in his *Beschreibung des Menschen*). This need not be a slip back into anthropology. The question is, however, if Husserl really did succeed in elevating a contingent existence – mankind – into a transcendental essentiality? The suspicion arises that Husserl, while persistently speaking of *transcendental* inter-subjectivity, unknowingly or even

unadmittedly discovered that phenomenology had anthropological conditions of its possibility.

Given his abiding phobia for anthropology Husserl would of course reject this. For the spectator to phenomenology, it is nevertheless impossible not to notice, that Husserl's late transcendental deductions (*sit venia verbo!*) are charged with subversive anthropological explosives. But of course, for this spectator it is hard to decide whether existence is elevated into something essential or the essential is made dependent on an existent contingency. *So oder so* – it has intriguing implications for the relation between subjectivity and mortality. If transcendental subjectivity must incarnate itself in mankind, it must be born, even though it in itself – in its pre-objective state – is without beginning or end. And if this embodied existence is somehow essential for transcendental subjectivity, then the death of mankind cannot be without bearing. Can transcendental subjectivity remain untouched when the medium of its realization ceases to be? Is it not affected by this mortality? Or is it rather the other way around? Is the mortality of man revoked when he participates in the actualization of transcendental subjectivity? Needless to say that these questions are the re-enactment of the old theological question: is incarnation the descent of God or the ascent of man – or is it a passionate transformation of both? – But let me put these lofty theological issues aside and return to the mundane problem of the institutionalization of phenomenology and illustrate it with...

IX. Husserl's forgetfulness

If evident intuition is essentially to be realized within the limits of the human condition, then the institutionalization of phenomenology is among the accompanying problems. Let us consider more closely why this is so!

Given that all intentionality is structured according to inner time-consciousness it follows, that pure and punctual evidence is impossible. There is no primordial impression without a retentional-protentional field. Such an isolated primordial impression would reduce and confine intentionality

to an atomistic being incapable of preserving itself. Intentionality would not by itself be able to establish any duration, but would fall apart into fragments. Instead of momentary evidence in this sense, Husserl therefore spoke of retentional evidence as the highest attainable form of apodicticity: “*Evidenz in der Retention*: Apodiktizität reicht so weit, als die zur Einheit der konkreten Gegenwart gehörige retentionale Vergangenheit reicht.” (Husserl 2002, 346; Sommer 1987) All intentional acts have a temporal shape, which is given without sharp limits but in a continuous graduality. This *clair obscure* is already a dim version of what traditionally have been hoped for under the heading “evident intuition”, but it is the highest version compatible with the self-preservation of intentionality. However, the narrowness of human consciousness entails that even what is held back within retention in this dim way eventually must slip away. Even though it is impossible to experience the point of actual slipping away human beings must recollect. And this in turn entails the possibility of forgetting, a thing of grave importance for the possibilities of phenomenology.

Husserl seems almost appalled when he remarks in a marginal note to a phenomenological description: “Alle diese Dinge habe ich doch im Wesentlichen schon längst festgestellt, und es ist sehr merkwürdig, fast unglaublich, daß ich jetzt einen ganzen Monat lang mich quälen konnte und sie vollständig vergessen hatte.” (Blumenberg 2002, 111) This is, as Hans Blumenberg has pointed out, the almost scenic depiction of the troublesome relation between the deficiencies of the mundane phenomenologist and the methodological demands of phenomenology. What can we do to correct these deficiencies? Well, what we usually do, when we do not want to forget, is to write down! Accordingly phenomenological intuitions must be conserved in careful descriptions and these in turn must be materialized in writing. This mode of incarnation is unavoidable, when transcendental subjectivity has taken the risk of aligning itself with a creature whose deficiencies include forgetfulness. Husserl states: “Da ist notwendig eine sinnliche, naturale Objektivierung der Wahrheits- und Begründungsgestalten, es ist Sprache nötig

und Wahrheit muß zur Leitung werden, wobei die mündliche sprachliche Mitteilung zur schriftliche Fixierung werden muß unter vielfältiger und evtl. mechanischer Reproduktion.” (Husserl 1974, 349) By means of written descriptions intuitions are passed on, not only between different phenomenologists, but even within the life of each phenomenologist. The strictness of phenomenology lies in the demand that these descriptions must not *replace* intuitions, but only serve as a *vehicle* for intuitions. Phenomenological descriptions should not just be read, but they should serve as means whereby each phenomenologist can acquire original intuitions. Phenomenology is, as Husserls warns, “...nicht “Literatur”, durch die man lesend gleichsam spazieren fährt.” (Husserl 1957, 238) But whether description is a reliable vehicle is a dubious affair. We write down in order not to forget, but we know that this is not always enough. With time the words become ambiguous or even meaningless. The original intention slips away. What should be conserved is lost. In this way the incarnation of intuitions entails that mortality is inscribed in them.

I need not elaborate on this. Who wishes to dwell on this point can turn to Derrida. I for my part shall only point to an issue that has been brought to acute awareness since the intervention of Derrida: time is not just an ambivalent dimension *in* phenomenology, but also *for* phenomenology. Time should be the dimension of accumulation, but might very well be a dimension of loss. If human beings cannot retain their intuitions in their *lived presence*, but must hand them over to oblivion and death, phenomenology seems a futile endeavour. How is fulfilment of phenomenology possible, when it must realize itself under conditions such as these? Husserl knew only one answer to this question – and it was significantly not a theoretical solution but a practical stance that encouraged not to be affected by these problems, but confidently work on and rest assured that – as he declared: “Alle Probleme müssen sich lösen durch genaue *Beschreibung*.” (Husserl 1973a, 252)

X. Eiszeitod and immortality

Addressing the alternative sketched at the outset of this article, let me conclude by asking: Is a thanatology of the Kantian type sustainable, or must we not in the end live and die as the mortals that we are?

Upon considering Husserl's refusal to recognize the significance of mortality, it may indeed be hard to avoid the impression that he does not really recognize its inescapability. A heroic attitude does not after all alter the fact that death cannot be escaped. However, neither Kant nor Husserl thought so. Accordingly they did not attempt to deny the truth of human mortality. We know that we are going to die. But this knowledge is in an important sense purely theoretical. From a practical point of view, it is a wholly abstract knowledge. It is suspended whenever we live our lives. To do something in the world is to neglect death. Therefore it is indeed, as Heidegger showed in his analysis of *Dasein*, almost impossible *not* to escape death. In Heidegger's view this was part of what he characterized as *Verfallenheit*. Kant and Husserl would have it the other way around. In their view *Verfallenheit* would rather be the regrettable disturbance of this impossibility. Considering the nature of our subjectivity it should be expected to be the easiest thing in the world to rule out death. It should even happen automatically. Unfortunately it is not so. Death has, on the contrary, occupied our thoughts. How is that possible? The shortest answer is: because we have fallen out of the life-world. (Blumenberg 2001; Blumenberg 2010) Husserl knew very well that theoretical knowledge could hinder the acknowledgement of what we experience in a life-world perspective. What we know can make us unable to describe, and thus wholly experience, what we persist to see differently no matter how true our knowledge might be. Phenomenology is exactly an attempt to put such knowledge in brackets in order to access the life-world as a realm of *ursprünglicher Evidenzen*. Not the least important of these evidences would be the mode of *Selbstverständlichkeit* in which we live our life as if we were immortals.

But even for Husserl the thought of mortality was hard to exclude. It was for instance present as the knowledge of the second law of thermodynamic and its eschatological consequences, by Husserl summed up in the word *Eiszeit*. In a remarkable appendix to *Erste Philosophie* Husserl considers the inevitable extinction of mankind and its impact on phenomenology as an infinite task. Husserl writes: "Ich weiß, daß mein Leben ein Ende haben wird und ich nicht wirklich unendliche Werte erzeugen kann, ich weiß, oder wir wissen (oder sind in unserer Zeit mindestens überzeugt), daß auch die irdische Menschheit einmal enden wird: aber der wissenschaftliche Beruf und Wissenschaft als Gemeinschaftskulturaufgabe hat einen praktischen Sinn und ist ein (unter Umständen) praktisch Gefordertes." (Husserl 1959, 350) Interesting in this quote is the word "aber". For in what sense can a practical imperative serve as an objection to a scientific fact? Here we are, of course, reminded of Kant and the idea that a *must* presupposes a *can*. And this reminder proofs fitting as Husserl continues: "Für mich als Individuum ist die Pflicht "erledigt", wenn mir der Arzt sagt: es ist jetzt sicher, daß du stirbst. So lange ich aber noch ein offenen Lebenshorizont habe [...] so lange bin ich in der Pflicht. Nicht die Überzeugung leitet mir, daß ich wirklich ins Unendliche werde arbeiten können (ebenso für die Menschheit), sondern die Vermutlichkeit, [...] daß ich „fortarbeiten“ und immerzu fortarbeiten kann, ohne mir gegebenes und bekanntes Ende." And now follows the seminal sentence: "Ich kann nun auch sagen: Ich soll so leben, als ob ich unsterblich wäre und als ob ich wirklich ins unendliche arbeiten könnte." (Husserl 1959, 352)

This is Husserl's equivalent to Kant's postulate of immortality. It implies that only when I think of myself as immortal can I meaningfully take part in the infinite task, which in the case of Kant is called morality and in the case of Husserl phenomenology. Otherwise it is likely that I give into the knowledge that all things have an end and all earthly life is in vain. My impetus to begin something – my freedom – would be initially paralyzed, if my self-understanding as pragmatic being was occupied by the theoretical suggestion that I can

never fulfill it. To let what I theoretically know – or think that I know – prevent me from what I should practically do is the dissolution of reason, which is both theoretical and practical. Reason, however, is nothing but self-preservation and must accordingly prevent this dissolution. It must therefore not only make a practical postulate of immortality, but in doing so claim *the primacy of practical reason* as well. Having this practical aspect of the matter in mind the expression “as if” may seem misleading. It could convey the impression that the postulate of immortality is a theoretical clinging to the illusion that we are immortal, even though we know better. “I am immortal” can, if considered as a theoretical proposition, be imagined in various degrees of validity, e.g. certainty, probability or even – the thinnest versions – as an illusionary or fictional proposition. As a postulate of practical reason immortality has nothing to do with all of that. It is a mode of orientation, which a finite being who in itself finds an absolute imperative must oblige too if reason is to preserve itself. It is the way in which reason prevents mortality to have the petrifying effect on its practical use, which it might otherwise have. Or as Kant says – and I shall conclude with this instructive and beautiful version of the naturalistic fallacy: “Eine Ursache weswegen die Vorstellungen des Todes die Wirkung nicht thun, die sie könnten ist weil wir von Natur billig gar nicht daran denken sollten als geschäftige Wesen.” (Kant 1942, 6f.; Recki 2004)

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