



FROM THE CRITIQUE TO NATURALISTIC POSITIVISM TO A PHENOMENOLOGY AS “PHILOSOPHICAL POSITIVISM”

Da Crítica ao Positivismo Naturalista à Fenomenologia como um “Positivismo
Filosófico”

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De la crítica al positivismo naturalista a la fenomenología como “positivismo
filosófico”

Abstract: The present paper approaches initially the exercise of the critical task in Husserl’s phenomenology. It highlights the denunciation concerning to the theoretical contradictions of the naturalist doctrine, as well as emphasize the epistemic naivety of positive sciences founded on naturalism. The paper also shows that the denunciation of such contradictions becomes a condition for the exercise of the “positive task”, through which a phenomenological sense of the idea of “progress” (*Fortschritt*) would be revealed. It is not about an accidental progress, resulting from an eventual beginning and end, but of progress based on “own things”, that is, on the intuitive presence of the thing to the consciousness. The new meaning of this idea would allow Husserl’s phenomenology to aspire to an authentic “positivism philosophical”.

Keywords: Edmund Husserl; critical task; naturalism; positivism; progress; phenomenology.

Resumen: Este artículo aborda inicialmente el ejercicio de la tarea crítica en la fenomenología de Husserl. Destaca la denuncia sobre las contradicciones teóricas de la doctrina naturalista, además de destacar la ingenuidad epistémica de las ciencias positivas fundadas en el naturalismo. Posteriormente, este artículo muestra que la denuncia de tales contradicciones se convierte en una condición para el ejercicio de la “tarea positiva”, a través de la cual se revelaría un sentido fenomenológico de la idea de “progreso” (*Fortschritt*). No se trata ahora de un progreso fortuito, resultado de un eventual comienzo y final, sino de un progreso basado en las “cosas mismas”, es decir, en la presencia intuitiva de la cosa a la consciencia. El nuevo significado de esta idea permitiría a la fenomenología de Husserl aspirar a un auténtico “positivismo filosófico”.

Palabras-Clave: Edmund Husserl; Crítica; Naturalismo; Positivismo; Progreso; Fenomenología.

Resumo: O presente artigo aborda, inicialmente, o exercício da tarefa crítica na fenomenologia de Husserl. Destaca a denúncia concernente aos contrassensos teóricos da doutrina naturalista, além de ressaltar a ingenuidade epistémica das ciências positivas fundadas no naturalismo. Em seguida, o presente artigo mostra que a denúncia de tais contrassensos se torna uma condição para o exercício da “tarefa positiva”, através da qual seria revelado um sentido fenomenológico da ideia de “progresso” (*Fortschritt*). Trata-se agora não de um progresso fortuito, resultante de um começo e um fim eventuais, mas de um progresso fundado nas “próprias coisas”, isto é, na presença intuitiva da coisa à consciência. O novo sentido da referida ideia permitiria à fenomenologia de Husserl aspirar a um autêntico “positivismo filosófico”.

Palavras-chave: Edmund Husserl; tarefa crítica; naturalismo; positivismo; progresso; fenomenologia.

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Introduction

A overview of the path traced by Husserl in the XXth century allows us to notice the author's concern in drawing attention, in different moments of his itinerary, to the theoretical and practical counter-senses inherent to the doctrine of naturalism. In the permanent exercise of what we could call "critical task" (*kritische Aufgabe*), Husserl never abdicated denouncing those counter-senses. The author alerts that by supporting the thesis according to which thinking the world consists in thinking it solely as a reality of natural facts, such a doctrine becomes, in the second half of the 19th century, a type of 'ground' of positive sciences which, by its turn, absorb without knowing the referred naturalistic counter-senses. As Husserl will show, by reducing the world to a reality of natural facts (including men as a psychophysical being), confining thought itself to inferences of "vague generalizations of experience", naturalism falls into a type of skeptical relativism, since every proposition inferred from facts consist in a proposition whose validity is grounded on experience, not losing with this its contingent character. The positive sciences which rely on such a doctrine, taken by an "epistemic naivety", are not aware of this relativism which, according to Husserl in his course of 1906/1907 entitled *Introduction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge* (*Einleitung in die Logik und Erkenntnistheorie*), expands itself like a "worm" (*Wurm*) in the roots of naturalistic doctrine, ground upon which those sciences are founded. Among those sciences, some will be highlighted in the last quarter of the 19th century through an alliance with the experimental method of the natural sciences, psychology in its scientific project. If it initially emerges as *débutante* between the natural sciences of the time, in a short time the youngest of these positive sciences would be, exactly for dealing with cognitive faculties as a "psychology of knowledge" (in Husserl's terms on his winter seminar of 1923/1924, published under the name of *First Philosophy* (*Erste Philosophie*), lifted to the place of the "prototype of authentic science in general" (*Prototyp echter Wissenschaft überhaupt*) (Husserl, 1923-1924/1956). Such a change of position would be determinant for the birth of an epoch-making inclination in the end of the 19th century: the search for the foundations of logic and mathematics in psychology, consolidating through numerous enterprises of authors of the same period (such as Lipps, Wundt, Mill and others), what Husserl identifies, already in the courses of 1896 in Halle and more precisely in 1900 with the *Prolegomena to Pure Logic* ("*Prolegomena zur reinen Logik*"), in the context of the debate on the grounding of logic, as a "psychologistic" misconception (inasmuch as the authors insist on confusing the psychological act of thinking with the ideal content of thought). It consists on the "fruit" of a tree whose naturalistic soil was already contaminated by the referred skeptical relativism. To denounce the theoretical counter-senses of psychologism, the epistemic naivety of the positive sciences by which emerge scientific psychology and finally the relativism contained in the doctrine of naturalism upon which the sciences are grounded, those are Husserl's aspirations on the exercise of the so called "critical task". After all, the phenomenological project could not go forward without fulfilling those aspirations, making of this task a permanent and necessary resource that would never be absent on Husserl's long itinerary. Much on the contrary, such absence would imply, however small, the risk of making phenomenology to incur the same theoretical counter-senses which were criticized by Husserl in the origins of phenomenology (confusing, with this, theory of knowledge with psychology of knowledge). It was for this reason that the author obstinately dedicated himself with so many pages to the critique directed to the positive sciences of his time regarding both their naturalistic "ground" as well as their psychologistic "fruit". But, to what extent are we allowed to say that Husserl's critique to the positive sciences would imply a critique to the "positive spirit" as such? The hypothesis formulated in the present article consists in showing that the husserlian exercise of the critical task wishes to denounce the theoretical counter-senses (and subsequently "practical", since such counter-senses will have implications in the field of culture) in which the positive sciences incur, preparing the field for the exercise of the "positive task" (*positive Aufgabe*), by which one seeks, through a "methodical return", to ground the judgements in evidence (or in the "effective donation") of objects which show themselves to consciousness. The accusation of naturalism's counter-senses would consist, therefore, in a decisive step for clearing the path which would conduct us to a phenomenological sense of the idea of "progress" (grounded, as Husserl himself writes, in evidencing the "things themselves"), allowing the program of phenomenology to aspire an authentic "philosophical positivism". That is the hypothesis of the present article.

Critique to naturalism and the epistemic naivety of positive sciences

Already in the origins of phenomenology is possible to note Husserl's renewed concern in order to show that every attempt of grounding logic in psychology, and therefore in a positive science whose



foundations lie upon the doctrine of naturalism, is to be an attempt which would inevitably conduct us to a theoretical counter-sense. After all, as Husserl shows since 1900 in his *Prolegomena to Pure Logic* (“*Prolegomena zur reinen Logik*”), the propaedeutic book of the *Logical Investigations* (*Logische Untersuchungen*) (Husserl, 1900/1913), by ignoring the distinction between the psychological act of thinking and the ideal content of thought and by wrongfully reducing such a content to psychological connections, besides incurring foundational problems (because it mistakes the domains of real and ideal), the mode of natural analysis -upon which psychology as a positive science lies- confines man (as psychophysical being and, therefore, as a “natural fact” among other facts) to a relationship with the world which is solely empirical. In this case and in such a way of analysis, however successful the thought is, it remains to be confined to infer, from the observation of facts, propositions which are nothing other than, as Husserl writes in the § 21 of the *Prolegomena*, “vague generalizations of experience” (*vage Verallgemeinerungen der Erfahrung*) which, as such, do not lose its episodic nature. Such propositions inferred from experience, for lacking apodictic validity, would inevitably take us, according to Husserl, to a domain of contingencies, opening the gates for a skeptic relativism.

In the period of the courses ministered in Göttingen, right after the publication years of the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl claims that the mode of natural consideration before the world, which is usually adopted by both men and the positive sciences of nature, consider knowledge as an “obviousness”. It could be said that such a mode of consideration stands upon the doctrine of naturalism, according to which men is confined to a mere empirical relationship with the other beings that inhabit its surrounding world. By adopting such attitude, it would be up to the men of science, in a supposedly cognizing life, to systematically observe the positive phenomena, describe its regularity in order to finally infer an empirical generalization. The so-called “positive” science, as Husserl clarifies, while deep in the natural thought, is unconcerned regarding the difficulties of the possibility of knowledge, since it considers such a possibility something obvious. It could be said with this that the referred science manifests, from the philosophical point of view, a naivety by the realism it assumes when investigating its object, as it does not interrogates itself about the meaning of the objectivity which science itself considers as given or unquestionable. In the § 32 of the fifth chapter of Husserl’s 1906/1907 lectures, published under the title *Introduction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge*, the author reminds us that the positive sciences find themselves in a “paradise of cognitive-theoretical innocence” (*Paradies der erkenntnistheoretischen Unschuld*) (Husserl, 1906-1907/1984). The sciences advance in an unshakable mode until is performed a “cognitive-theoretical reflection” (*erkenntnistheoretische Reflexion*) about the meaning or validity of the world’s objectivity which such sciences consider as obvious. Husserl even claims, in the §§ 32 and 33 of the chapter five, contained in the already referred lectures, that do dare to perform this reflection would consist in something like eating the “forbidden apple” (*verbotene Apfel*) from the “tree of philosophical knowledge” (*philosophischen Erkenntnis Baum*), what would imply something like being expelled from this paradise of cognitive-theoretical innocence (Husserl, 1906-1907/1984). Therefore, in its epistemological innocence, positive science “turns its back” to the question posed by the theory of knowledge: after all, what is the foundation of the supposed relationship of correspondence between the alleged cognitive experience and the things which are transcendent to it? What natural thought considers obvious and free of questioning, the cognitive-theoretical - exerted on the relationship of the cognitive experience with that which is transcendent to itself - discloses an enigma, designated by Husserl as “enigma of natural knowledge” (*Rätsel der natürlichen Erkenntnis*). Such a reflection puts us in front of the question ignored by the natural thought adopted by the positive sciences. The doors are opened for the exercise of the “critical task” (*Kritische Aufgabe*) of theory of knowledge, whose purpose will be to denounce the counter-sense that leads us to some forms of skepticism regarding the theme of knowledge.

The exercise of the critical task allows us to initially identify that by ignoring the enigmatic character of transcendent knowledge the position assumed by natural sciences implies an obscure (or undeclared) skepticism, insofar as it becomes unnoticed by such sciences. In the § 33 of the already referred appendix of the 1906/1907 lectures, Husserl will call this undeclared skepticism “unconscious” (*unbewussten Skeptizismus*), even comparing it to the worm of doubt or obscurity (*der Wurm des Zweifels oder der Unklarheit*), hidden in all knowledge considered given as “definitive” (*bestimmten*) and that corrupts and destroys little by little the ingenuous approach assumed by the positive sciences regarding knowledge (Husserl, 1906-1907/1984). By conceiving the world as a reality of natural facts, including thought itself as a natural fact (collapsing the necessary distinction between the act of thinking and the ideal content of thought, which by itself conducts to foundational problems), natural thought confines one to a merely empirical relationship with things. Thus, in such an attitude, however successful the thought is in operating such inferences by the systematic observation of facts, it remains confined to propositions whose validity becomes merely empirical and, as such, do not lose its contingent character, therefore not being able to get rid of the siege of doubt and of that which is not entirely evident. Thus, there is, in the eyes of Husserl regarding such a way of natural consideration, an imminent skepticism. If we claim, in accordance with the natural thought, the thesis according to which “all” propositions inferred by thought are generalizations of experience and, because of this, insofar it lacks of absolute validity, being propositions which are subject to questioning,



we will at least suppose that the very affirmed thesis itself is an exception to the rule. On the contrary, it itself would also be the result of an inference of experience, thus consisting in an empirical generalization which, as such, is contingent. That is what remains unknown by the natural sciences and is simultaneously denounced by the exercise of the critical task: the counter-sense which is led by the inherent skepticism to the natural thought adopted by such sciences. However, to which extent can we say that Husserl's critique to the positive sciences would imply a critique to the 'positive spirit' per se? Let's see.

Phenomenology as a “philosophical positivism”

Three decades after the publication of the *Logical Investigations*, more precisely in 1931, in the first paragraphs of the *Cartesian Meditations* (*Cartesianische Meditationen*), when Husserl was dedicating himself to the analysis of the central idea around which the scientific activity would turn to, the author claims that the sciences would have, beyond its factual existence, as cultural phenomena, a teleology of its own which would guide them: intending to realize through a perpetual effort the directive idea of constituting themselves as an “authentic science”, as the author highlights in the § 4 of the referred work (Husserl, 1929-1931/1973). It is not, as Husserl claims, the formation of a concept of science through a comparative abstraction based in factual sciences, but is actually a pretension which such sciences would carry with themselves, without being able to justify it through its own existence as cultural phenomena. And it is precisely regarding this pretension to which Husserl warns us that is to be found science as idea - “idea of an authentic science”. Scientific activity goes forward by progressive approximations in obtaining knowledge. Such a movement converges, according to Husserl, to that by which sciences aspire in a truthful and proper meaning, as an ideal end: to reach “valid truths once and for all and for everybody” (*ein für allemal und für jedermann gültig*) (Husserl, 1929-1931/1973, p. 53). In this sense, so Husserl claims in the same § 4, nothing could stop sciences of living, by a continuous effort, the *meaning* of that which they aspire, preserving a clear and distinct idea of the desired end. Thus, sciences develop themselves in an “infinite progress”, inclined to the search for more accuracy and precision, exhibiting a current state of accomplishment in which they tend to the extent of a crescent perfection, gradually performed. Such a state of accomplishment is, therefore, something “relative” for science, as far as the achieved moments become, as partial achievements, intermediate objectives between a state which is less and another one which is more perfect. From this point Husserl claims a few years back, in the 29th Lecture of the second volume of the 1924 *First Philosophy*: regarding the infinite process of accomplishment of movement directed to knowledge, “every final end is only a relative *telos*” (“jedes Endziel ist nur relatives τέλος”) (Husserl, 1923-1924/1959, p. 14). Although such a state of current accomplishment is imperfect (since it is transitory), it exhibits some perfection, even if only in a relative manner lived by science, filling with this, in the terms of the previous lecture, a type of “nostalgia” (“*Sehnsucht*”), but filling it through the acts of knowledge only relatively. This moment is, still, a more complex state than the one which preceded it, in a way that the achieved perfection reached in the next moment would be like the *telos* to which science has tended in its previous state.

The analysis of the constitutive moments of this “teleological idea in general”, to which the sciences converge, refers to the impulse of reviving the reach of knowledge, placing us in front of that which Husserl thinks that would justify the meaning of knowledge: “evidence”. In a more general sense, evidence allows us, according to Husserl, the experience of a being and its way of being. In it, the intended thing is not only seen in a distant or “remote” way, as object of a merely significative intention. Before this, the thing seen is for us, in a certain way, “itself” present in its state of things “itself”. This is what Husserl considers, on the methodological point of view and even before writing about the performance of the *epoché* and particularly of the phenomenological reduction, a first methodical principle destined to guide all the ulterior steps: the evidence of the presence of the seen thing to consciousness. As Husserl reminds us, by asserting predications about objects, science not only wants in a general sense to formulate judgement about the latter, but actually to ground or verify them in evidence, not being able to attribute final validity to a judgement whatever (neither attributing to judgement the value of an intermediate stage on the way that would conduct it to its final validity) if it does not extract such a judicative validity of that which is evident.

The act of judging is above all an intention, and generally speaking a simple “presumption” that one thing is this or that. In this case, what is affirmed by the judgement is only a presumed thing or a state of affairs which is intended by thought and therefore “thought state of affairs” (“*Denksachverhalt*”). Generally speaking, for Husserl, to state judicative propositions, however lively is the conviction of such statement, is not yet “knowing” in the authentic sense of the word. Such purely presentive intention must initially demonstrate its value of truth, something that can only become possible by the adequation of the initial intention to a corresponding intuition, by localizing before sight the thing “itself” (its state itself). In short, the mere seeing of a state of affairs becomes a “grounded” (“*begründet*”) intention, in the sense of “raising it to evidence”. With this, eventually, we come across with another intentional judgement which we have, in a certain way, the presence to consciousness of that which is judged, or in Husserl's words: the “effective donation of things” (*die wirkliche Selbstgebung der Sachenreicht*) (Husserl, 1929-1931/1973, p. 54). Such conversion of a mere presentive judgement to an intentional judgement, in which the judged thing makes



itself in a certain way present to consciousness, is ensured by the evidence of the “seen and self given” thing. It happens then a conformation between the act of seeing and its intuitive filling, causing that the merely presumptive judgement to become objectively true, as far as the latter is confirmed in evidence.

The requirement according to which the scientist must ground in evidence the judgements which are to be formulated will be, for Husserl, succeeded by another: that of reflecting upon the reach and limits of the very evidence in question. After all, the ideal perfection required by evidence differentiates itself, being for the author “more or less perfect”. We have in front of us an infinity of experiences or pre-scientific evidences. When referring to this new requirement, Husserl claims that every “predicative evidence implies a pre-predicative evidence” (*Prädikative Evidenz schließt vorprädikative ein*) (Husserl, [1931] 1973, § 4, p. 52). The sciences aspire to destined predications in order to give evidently adequate full expression to pre-predicative intuition. And it is precisely the methodical principle of “only judging in evidence” which shall rule this task. The pre-predicative evidence supposes, by its turn, in the sensible domain, something seen whose presence to consciousness attests its evidentiality. In husserlian terms, the empty intention is filled through the evidence of the thing seen: there is a “significant filling” (*Bedeutungserfüllung*). For Husserl, there is no such thing as genuine knowledge if there is no intuitive filling of intentional acts.

The naive unilaterality of the naturalist project - theoretically contradictory and dangerous to culture - would be the great obstacle for the elucidation of the so called “originary teleology”, inherent to consciousness’ intentional life in its different aspects: from the merely significant intentional acts (aspiring to an intuitive filling), going to, now on the level of a pre-predicative evidentiality, the initial fillings of this act (each one of them aspiring to a greater perfection), and finally to the aspiration for a definitive intuitive filling, enabling judgements of perception to aspire for a categorial filling by asserting a predication about the state of affairs of the perceived thing. It is therefore a teleology that is immanent to the intentional life, whose essential laws and properties should be properly clarified. A great part of the effort for elucidation of this originary teleological realization, in which one could perhaps find the most intimate sense of husserlian phenomenology, without which no authentic knowledge would become possible, allows us to understand the reason for Husserl never abdicating, in all his itinerary, the so called “critical task”, by means of which he denounces the theoretical counter-senses as well as the foundational misunderstandings that were the result of the positive sciences which grounded themselves upon naturalism, and more particularly of the project of naturalization of consciousness (responsible by the recurrence of psychologism and the skeptical relativism that is proper to itself).

It should be added that such teleological accomplishments suppose the idea of “progress” (*Fortschritt*), crucial for the scientific aspirations of that time. However, if for the referred sciences the so called progress can only be obtained through that by which we can positively know (namely, from empirical generalizations which are inductively inferred by means of the description of the systematically observed facts’ regularity), in what concerns the teleological accomplishments to which Husserl draws attention, this progress would not amount to a fortuitous “beginning and end”, but actually, as he claims in the § 5 of the Cartesian Meditations (1931), it would be grounded in the “nature of the things themselves” (*in der Natur der Sachen selbst*) (Husserl, 1929-1931/1973, p. 53), i.e. in the intuitive presence of the thing seen towards consciousness. It is therefore a progress in a “phenomenological” sense and not in a mere “cumulative” one (such as understood by the positive sciences).

Thus, as a conclusion, it should be also highlighted that if the exercise of the critical task focus on the epistemic naivety of the positive sciences, having as objective that of denouncing the theoretical counter-senses which are inherent to the naturalist doctrine (as we saw, a kind of “ground” to those sciences), it is necessary to clarify, however, that such a critique does not fall upon the scientific spirit itself, but actually upon the “ingenuous” (philosophically speaking) and “dangerous” (by the point of view of the paths taken by the european culture) mode, by means of which such a spirit is strictly lived by the positive sciences at the time of Husserl. The exercise of the referred critical task enables the opening of a path by which a conception of progress grounded on the “things themselves” is disclosed, allowing the thought, with Husserl, from the critique to the positive sciences and, more particularly, to the naturalization of consciousness, an aspiration of its own to the program of phenomenology: to provide through the critical task conditions for the realization of a “philosophical and ideological positivism” (*philosophischen und weltanschaulichen Positivismus*), as he writes in the § 3 of the first chapter of the Crisis of the European Sciences and the Transcendental Phenomenology (*Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die die Transzendental-Phänomenologie*), Husserl’s last great testimony against the naturalist prejudices lived by the sciences of the time. It is an aspiration whose presence is possible to be noticed, in Husserl’s itinerary, since 1913, when Husserl claimed in the § 20 of the *Ideas I*, that “If “positivism” is tantamount to an absolutely unprejudiced grounding of all sciences on the “positive”, that is to say, on what can be seized upon originaliter, then we are the genuine positivists” (Husserl, 1913/1976, p. 45). Ten years later, in the winter courses of 1923, lecture 17 of the second chapter in the first volume of the *First Philosophy*, Husserl would emphasize once again the referred aspiration, claiming that “without an overcoming of “psychologism” and of objectivism in general (“without” positivism in the good sense of the term), no philosophy of reason, certainly, is possible—which is to say, no philosophy at all (Husserl, 1923-1924/1956, p. 125). It is thus revealed that,



for Husserl, besides the counter-senses of the epistemic naivety by the positive sciences, there is a “good sense” (*guten Sinn*) of the positivistic term. Such sense refers to a pretension which does not seem to be fortuitous, but in fact, as Husserl writes in 1923, one which is grounded in a “return to the things themselves”, revealing at last the conception of phenomenology as an authentic “logical positivism”.

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Submitted Feb 04, 2020 – Accepted Mar 18, 2020