

On the “Idol of the Mind”: Edmund Husserl and Paul Valéry

Sobre o “Ídolo da Mente”:
Edmund Husserl e Paul Valéry

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses some less explored structural parts of the phenomenological method as it was construed by Husserl in order to validate a twofold thesis. First, the application of phenomenological notions such as the neutrality modification, the distinction between the positional, transcendental, and imaginative ego, body-consciousness, etc. stimulates the deconstruction of a “spiritual” quest in any traditional and/or modern sense. On the other hand, this approach offers some new possibilities for the quest for “transcendental absolutism” which is illustrated here by Valéry’s creative approach. Husserl’s and Valéry’s distinct but complementary projects represent several major intellectual shifts in early contemporary Western philosophy and literature.

Keywords: Edmund Husserl, Paul Valéry, phenomenology, consciousness, pain.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa algumas partes estruturais menos exploradas do método fenomenológico tal como compreendido por Husserl, a fim de validar uma tese bipartida. Primeiro, a aplicação de noções fenomenológicas, como ‘modificação de neutralidade’, a distinção entre ego posicional, transcendental e ego imaginativo, a consciência corporal, etc., estimula a desconstrução de uma busca “espiritual” em qualquer sentido tradicional e/ou moderno. Por outro lado, esta abordagem oferece algumas novas possibilidades para a busca de “absolvição transcendental” que é ilustrada aqui pela abordagem criativa de Valéry. Os projetos distintos, porém, complementares de Valéry e Husserl representam muitas das principais mudanças intelectuais na filosofia e literatura ocidental contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Edmund Husserl, Paul Valéry, fenomenologia, consciência, dor.

I confess that I have made of my mind an idol, but I have found no other
(Valéry, 1948, p. 40).

Introduction

It is well known that several turns taken by philosophers in the West at the end of 19th century (“the age of progress”) prepared the methodological grounds for a radically new

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approach to traditional anthropological problems that transformed the humanities (see Spiegelberg, 1982). Yet because of the extrapolation to myriad fields of human theory and praxis, the potential of this particular intellectual revolution remains promising.

When Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) dedicated himself to the radical renovation of philosophy as a strict science dedicated to the demarcation of essential structures of experience (*Wissenschaft*) and called this *phenomenology*, it was still hard to tell how this fundamental investigation of the *logos* of *phainomena* of any kind would be received in such diverse areas of human research as psychotherapy, literary studies, structuralism, visual arts, or cognitive sciences (see Husserl, 2001). On the other hand, the era had already been shaped by the works of F. Nietzsche, S. Kierkegaard, M. Proust, J. Joyce, and legions of symbolists, impressionists, and/or surrealists who one after another offered revolutionary insights concerning the human condition and the methodology relevant to its investigation. Husserl became a champion of the whole spectrum of new theoretical paradigms while other proponents of this turbulent intellectual era received much less attention. Hence, besides the father of phenomenology, we wish to bring one more man of great academic spirit into discussion, who quite early on made an attempt to conjoin intellectual purity with a spiritual quest while at the same time opposing any kind of Western relativism as well as the dogmatic “spiritual” *bables* of bourgeois society. This is the French poet Paul Valéry.

Husserlian Typology of the Ego and Deconstruction of “Spiritual” Matters²

The Self could never manage to function if it did not believe ... it was all (Valéry, 1948, p. 23).

Though Husserl did not write much on religion except when talking about Fichte (see Waibel *et al.*, 2010), it is well known that the relation between phenomenology and tradition of religious thinking was determined as a heavy critique of the latter by Heidegger via his conception of onto-theology (see Thompson, 2000). On the other hand, Husserl’s approach is relevant to a much wider horizon of “spiritual” matters than traditional religions represent, because of the distinctive phenomenological typology of the ego envisioned in his theory of *Imagination*, i.e. the impor-

tance of *imaginative variation* and *neutrality modification* for the whole enterprise of phenomenology (see Husserl, 2005).

One thing that Husserl’s reductions presuppose is that the basic problem of philosophy in particular and humanities in general is a narrowing down of every phenomena to their “real” or “ideal” ontological values, as is the case of positing, natural sciences. This is the reason why science and/or philosophy escape essential structures of intuition and givenness, because they have been metaphysically focused on objects and not the structural ways in which objects are given (see Crowell, 2006). This relation of the ego to its environment (in the broadest sense) Husserl called the *natural* or *naïve* attitude (see Husserl, 2006). Nevertheless, Husserl constantly introduced new concepts in order to clarify this original idea of his phenomenology, one of which is crucial for our thesis here.

In manuscripts dedicated to the project of *Imagination* (consisting of *Image-consciousness* and *Phantasie*) Husserl constantly relies on the concept of *positionality* (*Positionalität*), which denotes the positioning of things according to actual, real, factual relations to particular subject-matter. This in turn presupposes a *positional subject* – the entity that is crucial for a consideration of any “spiritual” quests. The *positional ego* demarcates a real, actual or, as it were, psychological agent involved in coping with things according to particular beliefs – first of all, belief in the actual existence of those things. It appears that the question of how to reduce or “disconnect” *positionality* interests Husserl because of the methodological foundations of phenomenology itself, while every spiritual argumentation concentrates on this very personal concern, presupposing the positional ego.

If Husserl, following Kant, sees consciousness as an all-embracing synthesis, he must have finally found it (*Fundierung*) in some kind of basic intermediate intentional acts. In other words, for any experience to be possible there must be (besides the celebrated Time-consciousness, structured by protentions, impressional moments, and retentions) some kind of activity *modifying* the attitude via some intentional act responsible for this kind of modification into a non-positional mode. Husserl calls this part of the whole structure of reduction *neutralization*, as the fundamental *modification* (*Neutralität Modifikation*) of the positional ego, which in turn belongs to the domain of *Imagination*.

The specificity of the modification performed by imagination, or, more precisely, *Phantasie*, differs drastically from the positionality that pertains to perception.³ The dialectical relation between the *presentation* of sensual data by perception and the playful co-presentation or *presentification*

² Understanding the method of transcendental reduction always oscillated between it being taken as “friendly” to mystical thought and rather strictly oppositional to this approach, for example, in Mohanty, who saw it as a strict scientific method (see in this regard, Mohanty, 1991).

³ For example, in the case of image apprehension the structure of *image consciousness* (*Bildbewusstsein*) is at work, which with its physical media (pictures, paintings, etc.) remains rooted (founded) in perception but differently from way in which the latter (*Phantasie*) exhibits the structure of twofold apprehension (when the appearing image and the “subject” of the image do not coincide). On the other hand, *Phantasie* is not rooted in any physical substrate of a particular medium.

(something given "as if" (*Gleich*) it were given by perception) of the initially modified content of perception by means of *Phantasie* is one of the cornerstones of Husserl's overall approach. *Positional acts*, or as Husserl sometimes puts it, *doxic acts* (see Cairns, 2013), are those that are experientially based in *reality* and *actuality*, which is a distinct feature of the structure of perception. Thus, for example, the doxic act of *hesitating* as rooted in "real" circumstances structurally presupposes the *anticipation* of real consequences of this particular, actual situation. This is basically how we survive; thus it is "natural" but at the same time unreflective, and eventually "naïve." But besides these "natural" impulses we are equipped with the power to *imagine* and eventually *vary* or *play* with those natural doxic acts, for example while imagining making a judgment or hesitating to do so. Most importantly, that structure of imagination which isn't rooted in a physical substrate (images), i.e. *Phantasie*, appears as a *free variation* that starts from *neutrality modification* in its constitution of the horizon of free and playful possibilities. Hence, while perception introduces an object to us (or *vice versa*) as concrete, actual, and real, *Phantasie* plays with this encounter in all *possible* ways of positing.

In this "passion play" of *Phantasie* the importance or even the very difference between the existence or non-existence of some thing doesn't matter anymore in that sense that "objects" of imagination do not present themselves as "lacking existence", but as having another synthetic value performed by consciousness, maybe the greatest value. On the other hand, imagination essentially founds every apprehension, because *synthetic appresentation* delivers different sides of the same objects at hand while we experience only the one that is given directly (perceptually). Hence it is only possible to experience the whole richness of any "object" via this "irreality" (*Irreelle*) structured by *Phantasie*.⁴

For our further discussion it is very important that not only the discrete "objects" but the whole horizon of the *irreal* becomes accessible through this imaginative neutrality modification. On the other hand, though the modified horizon of the imagination flows as a free play, it is not chaotic: the validity or invalidity of judgments and space and time configurations are still operating here (see Husserl, 1909). Third, neutrality modification influences and in a sense initiates the *imagining ego*, i.e. the transition or, as Husserl puts it, *displacement* of the self or initially naïve agent.⁵ Because of the fact that imagined objects are non-present (presentified), the

"affection of reality" (a term used widely in phenomenological psychology) shifts elsewhere – the very act of givenness becomes a new reality and its affection is of a different kind because it is sheer possibility rather than actuality. *Phantasie* tears us apart from the real while at the same time opening a space for being (thinking) "otherwise." This brake with the *familiarity* of a natural attitude brings the *imagining ego* one step closer to the *transcendental ego*.⁶ It is just the ontic modality of a particular object that is neutralized, but this "just" is a crucial step towards the celebrated transcendental reduction by which we suspend not only beliefs in physically "real" objects but also concerns about psychologically "ultimate" spiritual urges (Tillich, 1952).

In this context of freedom from the real and actual, the ego stands as the biggest problem. Though this sounds very relevant to Eastern spirituality, for phenomenology it is one of the challenges that has to be embraced, i.e. is the ego "lost" in a free play of imaginative variations? (Sartre, 1957). As stated above, all positional aspects or everyday coping-with-things performed by the ego are neutralized in a process of bracketing belief between reality and actuality, but now it is necessary to stress that this changes something in its very structure. Hence, the imaginative ego becomes a non-positional transcendental ego in the sense that the neutrality now consists not in *belief* (which is also at hand for scholars of eidetic sciences) but in the *experience* of imagined objects as *unreal*, i.e. free as much as they are possible.

Paradoxically enough, especially after all the accusations made by existentially minded critiques arguing that Husserl's Transcendental ego is anemic, lifeless, and incomprehensible, it appears that on the contrary, non-positionality (enabled by neutrality modification) brings the ego closer to "her" objects precisely because "she" is disinterested and dispassionate, which in turn constitutes "her" in the strict opposition to psychological positionality or natural naivety, resting on every kind of metaphysical postulate.⁷ Now it is time to see how this newly constituted ego, who is not bound to any particular context of "natural" circumstances, who has the power to make any context an "object" of free variation, finds herself in the quest of moving away from the individual and the singular to the essences of experience. In the second part of the article we will follow one such project initiated by the French poet Valéry (1871-1945). At the same time it will enable us to put neutrality modification into a wholly new context and challenge its limits.

⁴ It is worth noticing in this regard the importance of imagination for the distinctively Western spiritual exercises designed by the Roman Stoics: "Unlike the Buddhist meditation practices of the Far East, Greco-Roman philosophical meditation is not linked to a corporeal attitude but is a purely rational, imaginative, or intuitive exercise that can take varied forms" (Hadot, 1995, p. 59). On the other hand, this brings phenomenology closer to Stoic ethics (see in this regard, Madison, 2009).

⁵ Concerning the phenomenological notion of *Displacement* in Husserl, see Sokolowski (2000).

⁶ It is important to note that the imagining ego performing neutrality modification and free variation is a necessary but not yet sufficient condition for transcendental reduction; otherwise such thinkers as Proust would be called phenomenologists, though they have a subjectivist approach. What else do we need in order to reach the transcendental?

⁷ Paradoxically enough, at the beginning of the twentieth century Husserl's ideas influenced the "existential theists" represented by P. Tillich, G. Marcel, R. Bultmann, and others.

Monsieur Teste's "pain"

Man is different from me, from you. That which thinks is never that which it thinks about, and since the first is a form with a voice, the second takes all forms and all voices. So, no one is man, M. Teste least of all (Valéry, 1948, p. 63).

If we wished to oppose philosophy and poetry, we could say in phenomenological fashion that the beauty of conscious "performances" or pure delight of the mind and its accomplishments always transcend any aesthetic creation and thus cannot be captured entirely by the creative mode performed by the artists. Perhaps this is why Valéry saw the importance of relating a poetic attitude to the phenomenological approach in the quest to uncover the relation between structures of consciousness and human situation. Thus all of his conscious life Valéry sought to capture the very process of thought-becoming (see Mathews, 1948) and developed his own creative approach to the transcendental realm. Without any metaphysical, social or psychological explanations he managed to document those states of consciousness that are distinguished by the highest intensity and complete self-referentially. Out of these efforts the fictional hero was born, whose name was Monsieur Teste.⁸ In the introduction to the series of Teste's "adventures," J. Mathew describes him as a product of a "lifetime of meditation on the question: How would a complete mind behave as an everyday man?" (Valéry, 1948, p. xii). At the same time, this project is carried out in the midst of everydayness: "We see him at the cafe, the theater, at home, even in bed; we watch him think, make love, sleep, stroll in the park" (Valéry, 1948, p. xii). According to Jean Starobinski, "Teste has set out to overcome inner chance, to do away with the original automatism, social in origin ('to kill the puppet'), and to create others through voluntary exercise ('I sought a mechanical sieve')" (Starobinski, 1989, p. 375).

In the face of Teste, Valéry is seeking to withdraw from the ordinary self by constantly reflecting and overcoming the chaotic intentional life of consciousness. In his Nietzschean passion, Teste seeks a "will to attention" while testing its limits,

for example, willfully connecting to a singular thought for a particular period of time or staying in the same mood while changing places and physical surroundings. In short, he makes a giant effort to equate his being to his own powers of creative variation.⁹ In Husserlian terms Teste seeks kind of *evidenced life*.¹⁰ This means that evidence-constitution must be executed by replacing "alien" thoughts with one's own, thus gaining the distinct epistemological-ontological status of *the witness* (Valéry, 1948, p. 78),¹¹ where the reflexive ego blends with its own experiential structures.

It is striking how Valéry varies in opposing that attitude which we called "positionality" in a chapter dedicated to Husserl:

- "My dear fellow, you are 'perfectly uninteresting.' But your skeleton is not, neither is your liver, nor in itself your brain—nor your stupid look, nor those retarded eyes of yours—and all your ideas. If I could only know the *mechanics* of a fool!" (Valéry, 1948, p. 41).
- "The mind must not be concerned with persons. *De personis non curandum*" (Valéry, 1948, p. 88).
- "But isn't that just what M. Teste is seeking: to withdraw from the self, the ordinary self, by constantly trying to diminish, to combat, to compensate for the irregularity, the anisotropy of consciousness" (Valéry, 1948, p. 88).

Hence Teste trains himself to think constantly, to *neutralize, modify, and vary* experiences relentlessly, and he holds every piece of memory or expectance in the clearest light of presence as a directly experienced event: "We find in ourselves a capacity for *modifications* (stressed by M.B.) almost as varied as circumstances surrounding us" (Starobinski, 1989, p. 400). Following St. Augustine and Husserl, Teste takes to the extremes the truth that even the sense of the past, its image structure is a fact of the present. After a string of situations have been exhausted by the reflective powers of M. Teste,¹² he comes to the final point in his battle for absolutism – reflection on the structure of pain-experience.

Experience of pain as any other instant of *body-consciousness* belongs to what is called *kinesthetic experience*, mentioned by Husserl as the peculiar way in which we apprehend (or just live out) our own embodiment.¹³ Body in Valéry's project is

⁸ While being a prominent poet, Valéry is perhaps best known for his series of short stories about this fictional hero and his "thought-experiments." Another important source is Valéry's intellectual diary, called the *Cahiers* (Notebooks). Later on, Valéry found poetry unsatisfying and irrelevant to his investigation of consciousness, hence he stopped writing verses for several decades: "The one thing superior to a perfect poem, he thought, would be a full knowledge of how it was made" (Mathews, 1948, p. vi).

⁹ Just compare this to Husserl's maxim "to get back to the things themselves": "He spoke, and one felt oneself confounded with things in his mind: one felt withdrawn, mingled with houses, with the *grandeurs* of space, with the shuffled colours of the street, with street corners. [...] His mind seemed to transform to its own use all that is, a mind that *performed* everything suggested to it" (Valéry, 1948, p. 14).

¹⁰ Concerning both men, I cannot help noticing how similarly rigorously their daily routine was dedicated to exploring and writing.

¹¹ Husserl sought immediate acquaintance with his own experience and thus to evaluate any kind of phenomena as absolutely *evident*. See on the concept of phenomenological evidence in Levin (1970).

¹² Theatre where he masters the crowd, coffee place, etc.

¹³ In the context of this article it is worth noting that phenomenology was developed mostly in the direction of body-consciousness by the followers of Husserl-Sartre, Heidegger, and especially Merleau-Ponty. This in a way overshadows the contribution to the analysis of embodiment made by Husserl himself, for example, as delivered in the 5th meditation and elsewhere.

arguably the central modality, i.e. it is an instance of incarnated dialectics between determination and illumination, in a sense echoing Sartre's dialectic of freedom and responsibility, or, further still, Hegel's correlation between master and slave. As we have seen, every aspect of experience served for Teste as a particular case of the functioning of his mind; thus pain and its peculiar kinesthetic nature also becomes that "material" which must be converted into knowledge.¹⁴ But what is the structure of this "painful" knowledge?

In reply Valéry delivers a breathtaking description in which he combines the power of poetics with phenomenological scrutiny. After we are introduced to the way in which Teste manages to master modes of neutralizing apparently independent content of consciousness and to perform a kind of eidetic variation step by step, he deconstructs the subject-object dichotomy. In his own way he shows how the experience of pain is "stuffed" with retentions and protentions, associations, and anticipations; and finally, he marks the demarcation area for the ego absolutism while at the same time constituting conditions for the transpersonal experience. It is precisely the experience of pain that melds together Teste as *spectator* and Teste as *sufferer*. This also negates the passivity that was traditionally rendered to the "sensual data receiving ego." The transgression and aggression of Teste's experiments (not "the outer world") means that his project of total domination meets pain as its reversal. Is Teste an absolute intellectual hero or does this mean the end of an "ecstasy of understanding everything without being caught in the trap of participation" (Starobinski, 1989, p. 375)?

Valéry establishes pain as the last stand between Teste and absolute domination, where the kinesthetically owned body constitutes the battlefield. It is crucial that "danger comes to him from himself" (Starobinski, 1989, p. 376) and the only appropriate response can be a careful perceptive attention to pain – the "strongest thing in the world" (*Notebooks*). Despite this, Teste (with some limits) *creates* a consciousness of Pain. Kinesthetic themes appearing in the bed-scene reflect the unstable life of the mind – such rhetorical figures as "swimming," "floating," or "sinking" transform the surroundings due to the amalgam of supreme attention and free imagination. Under this reflective gaze sensation gives Teste more hints as to the mystics of pain. First of all, it is *interruptive*, which means that pain brings interruption as the theme of reflection, which itself becomes interrupted. Later on he identifies painful experience as the *expectation* of terrible "objects" and the visualization of unbearable states. This anticipatory structuring in turn implies another transcendental condition of pain, i.e. the *oscillation* of moving away and getting back to the disgusting imagery of one in pain. All is summed up when the reflection on this oscillation as *partial control* becomes a challenge for an *absolute control* that is in vain, because reflection does not take us to a higher stage but is just modified *repetition*.

At the culmination of his work, Valéry interprets the "I can" of phenomenological existentialism as "I fight" (pain), when consciousness of one's own body becomes a limit case: "Teste has interpreted to be able to do to mean to fight" (Starobinski, 1989, p. 378) when *doing* and *feeling* blend together in structural proximity. But this limit is a paradox because at the same time it is the start, the source from which consciousness originates. Hence when pain is converted into knowledge something that mystics called "God" appears. "God is what is closest" (Valéry, 1948, p. 80) proclaims Valéry, reminding us intimately of our own thoughts in the face of the illumination by the transcendental ego, who alone is eternal, immortal, indifferent, pure, disinterested, etc. Pain illuminates the body, which was "a privilege that the mystical tradition attributed to the mind" (Starobinski, 1989, p. 384). Body becomes a revelation and testimony but not of transcendence, of the transcendental – when the "geometry" of pain tells the true story of the body and consciousness: "at the end of body is consciousness, but at the end of consciousness is body" (Valéry, 1948, p. 80). Valéry calls this achievement of transcendental reflection *impersonal consciousness*, when pain crosses the dialectics between "mine" and "alien" and enters the transcendental realm.

This is just to briefly touch (before another stroke of pain) on something that can be known and surely cannot be exploited for personal needs (for example, in spiritual quests rooted in positional certainties). This means that while transcendental awareness is the biggest achievement of consciousness, at the same time its structure remains pure and hence *a priori* transcendent to psychological, esthetical, or religious urges. As Starobinski summarizes, "it is not equivalent, for Teste, to a liberation of the person through the exercise of consciousness. It is another *strange* power, contained in the self, but 'distinct' from it" (Starobinski, 1989, p. 393). On the other hand, if the reflection on pain tells us that in essence we are too complicated to manage ourselves, there is also a promise of the absolute and infinite here, in reflecting on the basic structures of experience, be it the mathematical precision of Husserl's phenomenological descriptions or the passionate freedom of Valéry's imagination: "it is the unknown that I carry in myself that makes me myself" (Valéry, 1948, p. 43).

Conclusion

In the first part of the article, I presented a phenomenological critique of "spiritual-religious" thinking, understood in the broadest sense under the general denominator of *positionality*. The deconstructive arguments were based on Husserl's distinction between the positional, imaginative, and transcendental egos, which shows that there is a danger of making a principal (categorical) mistake while shifting existentially charged attention from observation, reflection, and descrip-

¹⁴ Another phenomenologically interesting issue concerning pain could be how *new* phenomena enter the experiential field. But we must set this intriguing problem aside for now.

tion to explanation (metaphysics) and from the transcendental to the individual or the psychological (positioning). Hence the aspirations presupposed in any spiritual quest are irrelevant to the psychological ego because their nature is uncovered after the suspension of doxic beliefs by the powers of *neutrality modification* and *imagination*, where objects are transmitted into the sphere of possibility rather than actuality, where reflexive ego blends with its own experiential structures.

In the second part of the article, I showed that Valéry's literary project in its own way sought to describe such transformation, and thus that it bears a lot of phenomenological significance. Valéry's fictional hero Monsieur Teste seeks to think constantly, to *neutralize* and *vary* experiences relentlessly in order to achieve an absolutely conscious autonomy while reflecting on the most ordinary experiences.

After the whole range of experiential modalities, the reflection on pain-experience reduces Teste's initial detachment from ordinary modes of being. Pain as interruptive *attentionality* here signifies the general instability of a subjective life. Incapable of reducing the body to an object, Teste experiences *kinesthetic illumination* as the highest mode of knowledge, which is delivered by means of imagination and body consciousness and is transformed into impersonal consciousness. Body-consciousness, or *kinesthesia* in Valéry's approach, become a ground and horizon for extreme modifications of consciousness, hence pain (and death) becomes a limit to the possibility of freedom as free variation while the "idol of the mind" finally finds its roots in the transcendental conditioning set out by the body-experience.

In the projects of Husserl and Valéry, imagination demarcates and structures the world of its master, becoming a major tool in her path to transcendental absolutism. But this also means that Western loyalty to the standards of rationality finally disregards any cultural, social, or intersubjectively constituted Other, thus objectifying it as irrational. Then even imagination, which in principle is able to break with the narrowness of *doxic givenness*, encloses the individual in its own subjectivity.

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