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Late Husserl for the Rhetorical Critic

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Abstract

Questions of objectivity are perennial concerns of rhetorical critics—whether it is attainable, what form it takes, and how generally its results may be held. Given the celebrated “particularity” of any given rhetorical act, “objectivity” in rhetorical criticism is generally inadmissible as a standard for evaluation. The most frequent response to such questions is to assume a relativistic critical stance. Another alternative is to take a phenomenological approach—to let “the things” speak for “themselves.” This approach has taken root in communication studies, but less so in rhetorical criticism, given the (false) dilemma that the objectivity-subjectivity dichotomy forces. Edmund Husserl, in his last works, suggests the real decision lies between “ideal” and genuine objectivity. This study, then, offers up this choice, and proposes—by examining Husserl’s later concepts, method, and extensions—that rhetorical critics can, and perhaps should, seek genuine objectivity.

Key words: Husserl, phenomenology, rhetorical criticism, science, history, language

Introduction

“No ideas but in things.”

~William Carlos Williams

“Zurück zu den *Sachen selbst!*” [Return to the things themselves!]

~Edmund Husserl

In the past 15 years or so, a number of communications scholars—a small handful of rhetorical critics among them—have taken a phenomenological approach to observed “phenomena,” armed with the vague call to action to account for “the things themselves” without the aid of theory, scientific or otherwise. Understood, per the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1970a), as an “inquiry back into the ground of” any given phenomenon, “to look open the obvious as questionable,” or, for Derrida, “to cut a path to what is already supposed,” phenomenology has benefitted both broad, contemporary areas of inquiry as well as the disclosure of individual phenomena (p. 175, 180; Derrida, 1978, p. 121). Phenomena most apparent in “the world” of women’s studies (Campbell, 2004; Fish, 1976; Hua, 2009; Isa, 2000; Sundén, 2001; Suter, 2004; Thompson, et al., 1990), queer studies (Ashford, 2006; Horncastle, 2009; Lindholm, 1998; Weeks, 1998; Weiss, 2005; Young, 2004), and race studies (Halone, 2008; Haritaworn, 2009; Jackson, 1998; Martinez, 2006; McPhail, 1996), to cite only the broadest fields, have all been the object of phenomenological critiques.

Even within the field of rhetoric, a small, sometimes exclusive variety of phenomenological approaches have been rendered as a meta-critic. Lanigan, from this perspective suggests (for example) that in traditional situational criticism, “one gains a conception (a sedimentation) of a situation, but not a perception of the value constituents that constitute the primordial act of speaking with intent” (1969, p. 64). That is, we may have *rhetorical history* but not *rhetorical criticism*, a distinction of value for the rhetorical critic. Other prominent rhetorical scholars, too—namely Gregg, Aune, Rosenfield, and Blair recommend phenomenological approaches to rhetorical criticism, that, we shall see, ultimately fall short of Husserl’s original intention.

Gregg (1966) takes the view of the *psychologist* that “behavior is not so much a function of an external event as it is a product of the individual’s perception of the event” (p. 83). In recommending a *phenomenological psychology* for rhetorical criticism, Gregg looks to a rhetor’s cognitive structure as an intellectual and symbolic ordering and as the basis for his or her actions. It is not clear if Husserl ever came to terms with psychology, but it is clear that Gregg’s approach brackets out the world of others. Lanigan takes the view of the *existentialist* who sees *self* in terms of the *world*, whereas it is clear Husserl reversed these. For Lanigan, a rhetor “constitutes a phenomenon wherein meaning is “bracketed” within a *Gestalt*.” This, a rhetorical act, calls a rhetorical situation into being, effectively reversing Bitzer’s original conception (1969, p. 61). Aune (1981) takes the view of the *hermeneuticist*, settling for “a description of the sedimentations involved in an initial encounter with the statement, a ‘making strange’ of the statement through free variation in the imagination, and, finally a search for invariant structures that appear through the process of free variation” (p. 102). There is textual evidence in Husserl to suggest that this is not inappropriate: “The horizon-exposition to which we recurred must not bog down in vague, superficial talk; it must itself arrive at its own sort of scientific discipline. The sentences in which it is expressed must be fixed and capable of being made self-evident again and again” (Husserl, 1970b, p. 374). That is to say, *add reason* and Aune’s approach becomes Husserlian. Rosenfield (1974) takes the view of the *aestheticist*, preferring to “release himself, letting the phenomena ‘speak to him’ through their luminosity” (p. 494-495). Rhetorical criticism here would take shape as an appreciation of “expression[s] of the human spirit,” and thus probably be more accurately called literary criticism.

Blair (1981), finally, does not so much suggest a new method for criticism as to provide us with a simple way to conceive—in Husserl’s terms—the range of rhetorical criticism. Starting from an early Husserlian conception of three ways of intending—being conscious of—an object (presentation, judgment, feeling), Blair shows us how the psychologist, existentialist, hermeneuticist, and aestheticist essentially overemphasize one of these *intentionalities*. That being said, Gregg’s critical method looks to “that which is the object of feeling and judgment. . . . the content of the phenomenon,” and so emphasizes a rhetor’s *presentational intentionality*, while Rosenfield “appreciates” the aesthetic givenness, or feeling, of a phenomenon—its *affective intentionality* (Blair, 1981, p. 56). What Blair argues is that these phenomenological approaches to rhetori-

cal criticism are incomplete: they all overlook a “final mode of intentionality” namely, evaluation. The Husserlian approach to which Blair refers and this study recommends incorporates at once all four of these intentionalities.

There is nothing inherently wrong with these recent critical treatments, but each one brings with it not only its own method, but also its own set of presuppositions. The first fault is benign—after all, phenomenology is a methodology, not a method. The second fault is probably also benign, presuming that one had indeed returned to the “things themselves.” But Husserl, late in life, was able to observe how his early phenomenology was being utilized and metamorphosed by his former students Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Arendt, among others, and sought to refine his original idea. Against existential phenomenology, for example, which seeks to disclose the things themselves in terms of total subjectivity, Husserl (1970a) asks, “Is its irrationality not finally rather a narrow-minded and bad rationality, worse than that of the old rationalism?” (p. 16) Does not even the subjective approach presume at least one ideally objective fact—namely, universal subjectivity, or relativity? Beyond this, Derrida (1978) points out:

there is another naïveté just as serious, but with a more modern style: naïveté of profundity or depth and not of superficiality, it consists in redescending toward the prescientific perception without making problematic . . . continually keep[ing] alive the *question: how can the a priori of scientific Objectivity be constituted starting from those of the life-world?* Without this question, any return, however penetrating, risks abdicating all scientific quality *in general* and all philosophical dignity . . . we see to what irresponsible empiricism all the ‘phenomenologies’ of prescientific perception are condemned, phenomenologies which would not let themselves be beset by that question. (p. 120)

Phenomenology for Husserl was from the start intended to be a “rigorous science,” and thus he sought in his fourth “Introduction to Phenomenology”—after *Ideas* (1913), *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (1929), and *Cartesian Meditations* (1931)—his final, unfinished work *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1937)—to give his own definitive statement. As *The Crisis* took shape, Husserl “repeatedly designated this series of essays as the crowning achievement of his life’s work,” according to another student of his, Schutz (Husserl, 1970a, p. xxix).

Prolific as he was, Husserl is nonetheless notoriously difficult to read in translation. If this study accomplishes nothing else, it aims to make accessible to rhetoricians (and communications scholars broadly) a précis of Husserl’s “definitive” late phenomenology—its fundamental concepts, moves, and implications. Along the way, its relevance to the rhetorical critic will be made clear. Because he is wont to teach his phenomenology as he constructs it, this study can only do the same. The reader is asked for a bit of “teleological” indulgence.

Husserl's Late Phenomenology

When Husserl set out late in life in search of “The Origin of Geometry,” he came to a striking conclusion, one most rhetoricians today take for granted. To the primary question “[H]ow does geometrical ideality (just like that of all sciences) proceed from its primary intrapersonal origin, where it is a structure within the conscious space of the first inventor’s soul, to its ideal objectivity?,” Husserl answered that “In advance we see that it occurs by means of language, through which it receives, so to speak, its linguistic living body [*Sprachleib*]” (1970b, p. 357-358). In coming to this conclusion, Husserl hit upon not only the rhetorical basis of the sciences, but the rhetorical fundament of all human institutions. His simple answer is misleading, though, presupposing in one premise what will take him all of *The Crisis* (and supplementary texts) to make self-evident: The geometer (nor, presumably, the reader) does not see this “in advance”—and herein lies the crisis.

Focused as it is on its forward development, all of science has come to “speak” a shared, efficient, self-sufficient language. Logic, understood by scientists as “the universal, a priori, fundamental science for all objective sciences,” is, for Husserl (1970b), “nothing but naiveté” in that “out of sentences with sedimented signification, logical ‘dealing’ can produce only other // sentences of the same character” (p. 365-366). Logical constructions have, from the start, lacked a full grounding in original self-evidence, and without this, any one logical construction “hangs in mid-air, without support” (Husserl, 1970a, p. 141). Self-evidence, for Husserl, “means nothing more than grasping an entity with the consciousness of its original being-itself-there [*Selbst-da*]. Successful realization of a project is, for the acting subject, self-evidence; in this self-evidence, what has been realized is there, *originaliter*, as itself” (1970b, p. 356). Logic, in leaving behind this original self-evidence, by implication leaves behind a part, however small, of the world—namely, the past “present” and the people living in it. Restricted by an internal language and negligent of large swaths of the world, science as it is practiced cannot attain its goal (*telos*) of genuine objectivity, understood by Husserl (1970c) as “that which is—for *all conceivable* civilizations (including Papuans), [for all] experiences, [all] surrounding worlds, which are assumed to be experiencing the same things” (p. 321). To the extent that this is so, “objectivity,” as scientists and most of us understand it, is an ideal objectivity—its “facts” are no more valid than any other particular “cultural facts.”

“The Crisis of European Sciences” is the same today as it was in Husserl’s 1930s: the products of scientific inquiry, despite their “ideal” status in the world, fall short of their “objective” claim to the total world. Science can not answer some of the most important, human questions. Can rhetoricians better answer these questions, as Husserl seems to indicate? Can the rhetorical critic make objective claims which hold for the total world? Can the claims of a rhetor be critiqued or judged against any objective standard? What follows describes two misguided “ideals” and how through Husserl’s late phenomenology, “the things themselves” can be understood genuinely objectively.

Scientific “Objectivity” and the A Priori of the Life-World

If anything in the world is to be held, per Husserl’s definition, as genuinely “objective”—and not merely ideally so, as in the sciences, one will have to transcend the naiveté of the scientific (logical-theoretical) purview and return, as it were, to the original naiveté of the life-world—the world in which we normally, straightforwardly live—to find it. To return to an original, prescientific naiveté is not a simple matter—it requires, in fact, a complete change of attitude. This change takes place through what Husserl (1970a) calls an *epoche*: “a withholding of natural, naïve validities and in general of validities already in effect” (p. 135). With respect to science, this means that the phenomenologist avoids “all participation” in the scientist’s paradigms, interests, aims, and activities. Rather, through the *epoche*, the phenomenologist adopts the “natural” attitude of normal living in the pregiven world—for all of us, including scientists, “the world.”

In this “natural,” pregiven world, we all “move in a current of ever new experiences, judgments, valuations, decisions” (Husserl, 1970a, p. 144). Here is found all of our goals and ends, of which the scientific goal of “objectivity” is but a part. It is true that all human interests—“all theoretical and practical goals taken as themes—as existing, as perhaps existing, as probable, as questionable, as valuable, as project, as action and result of action”—are directed towards objects in the world, and obviously this is the case in science (1970a, p. 149). Nevertheless, in the natural attitude, we are normally satisfied to base and judge our decisions and actions in “validity,” rather than (scientific) objectivity. “Everything becomes perfectly clear” in the *epoche* of the objective sciences, says Husserl (1970c), “when we say to ourselves, or each of us says to himself: the world of which I speak, the world of which the Chinese speaks, of which the Greek of Solon’s time, the Papuan speaks, is always *a world having subjective validity*, even the world of the scientist, who as such is a Greek-European man” (p. 325; *my italics*).

“Factual” History and the A Priori of History

With the last clause, Husserl introduces to his phenomenology the problem of history. The scientist, “a Greek-European man,” is himself a product and producer of history (and, as such, a man). The validities which the scientist produces in his forward advance necessarily presuppose the work and validities proffered by scientists before him on which the latter scientist will build. The latest scientific advance implicitly brings with it all the science of the past, which in its time was the latest scientific advance. In fact, everything that “exists in its essential being as tradition and handing-down” presupposes this a priori of history (Husserl, 1970b, p. 372). For Husserl, this includes “any given cultural fact” (e.g., science, geometry) and in toto, the “whole cultural world, in all its forms” (p. 354). All cultural facts, or phenomena, are ideal objects—are constituted historically from earlier, sedimented cultural facts, and these, in turn become the “working materials” for cultural facts to come (p. 369). This phenomenon allows Husserl to redefine history as “from the start nothing other than the

vital movement of the coexistence and the interweaving of original formations and sedimentations of meaning” (p. 371).

For the rhetorical critic who regularly deals in cultural facts, formations, and meanings, this means that to understand any one phenomenon—in full self-evidence—is “to be conscious of its historicity” (Husserl, 1970b, p.370). A phenomenon’s historicity is not the same as its “history,” in the traditional sense. “History” as a field of study presumes to issue in “objectivity” as much as science, and when it behaves as a science, stakes its claims too on formerly valid, now taken-for-granted, “facts.” Historicism particularly and “factual histories” generally fail to achieve their goal of (genuine) “objectivity,” insofar as their proponents presuppose many “facts” that in the past could not have been held genuinely objectively. The parts of “the world” which lied outside the past historian’s purview remain outside—even implicitly—the present historian’s gaze, no matter how much the contemporary historian may verify against state-of-the-art standards of “historical objectivity.”

Historicity, on the other hand, encompasses—or, better—constitutes all “histories.” If we take seriously Husserl’s definition of history (above), historicity becomes that which constitutes “the whole sphere of absolute ideal Objectivity and all the eidetic sciences” (Derrida, 1978, p. 121). Just as all “sciences” practiced today have this historicity, our latest “histories” share this essence, too. Like “geometry,” any one of today’s “historical sciences” (“schools”) achieves no more than an ideal objectivity. Like “geometry,” “history” today is itself a cultural fact as it produces cultural facts; like geometry, it and its products can be studied as a phenomenon by rhetorical critics. What this means, however, is that if the rhetorician aspires to genuine objectivity, he or she can not turn to any of the methods and concepts of “science” or of “history” as it is practiced. Husserl suggests the critic must somehow “strike through the crust of the externalized ‘historical facts’ of philosophical history, interrogating, exhibiting, and testing their inner meaning and hidden teleology” (1970a, p. 18). What is required once more is an *epoche*, this time of “factual history” (or “history”).

Back in the natural world—the “prehistoric” world if you will—we realize everything—all people, acts, and ends—are thoroughly historical, but not necessarily “as if the temporal becoming in which we ourselves have evolved were merely an external causal series” (Husserl, 1970a, p. 71). To be genuinely objective, history must be able to give an account of “the essentially general structure lying in our present and then in every past or future historical present as such” (Husserl, 1970b, p. 372). Because “only in the final establishment is this revealed,” Husserl recommends a “teleological” approach to history (1970a, p. 73). (This is the overall method of *The Crisis* (Parts I and II), and “The Origin of Geometry,” as will be illustrated in the next part of this study). History made in this manner starts with what is, as a phenomenon to be made self-evident. Self-evidence can come only from “a critical over-all view which brings to light, behind ‘historical facts’ of documented philosophical theories and their apparent oppositions and parallels, a meaningful, final harmony” (1970a, p. 73). The benefit that accrues to rhetorical critics who take this view is that any critical claim established in this way (i.e., that accounts for present as much as the past) “can

never be decisively refuted by citing the documented ‘personal testimony’ [subjective validity] of earlier philosophers” (1970a, p. 73). This view is, once more, the natural attitude.

Genuine Objectivity

In the natural attitude, then, (after the epoche of the objective sciences and the epoche of factual history), “the world” is not only *a world having subjective validity*, for me and then for us, but also *a world having historicity*, wherein everything (all people, acts, and ends) are thoroughly historical. These characterizations Husserl calls, respectively, the “a priori of the life-world” and the “a priori of history.” For the rhetorical critic, or any investigator, these may be taken as two “healthy” presuppositions on which genuinely objective critical statements may be based. Admittedly, these a priori are already “taken for granted” by most rhetoricians, and taken alone, do not immediately suggest how to proceed making such statements. To what, if not “science” or “history,” does the critic turn?

These a priori do, however, suggest the radical generality required for a truly objective critical stance—one that is valid for the total world, present, past, and future. For many rhetorical critics, this forces a decision of priority, between the (celebrated) particularity of rhetorical acts and critical objectivity. Only each critic may decide which to emphasize. Husserl, for his part, endorses the latter, and for those who choose to follow this sort of phenomenological approach, he shows the way he has taken to reach this goal. In the next part of this study, I will illuminate his path with a map and a synoptic illustration. In the part following, I will draw from this critical example—an act of rhetorical criticism in its own right—implications and future directions for the phenomenological rhetorical critic.

Husserl’s Late Method

Recall that the phenomenon Husserl critiques in *The Crisis* is “ideal objectivity” in science. Two central questions essentially frame his inquiry: (1) How has original, genuine objectivity become, in science, “idealized?”, and (2) Can we re-attain the original sense of genuine objectivity?

The second question is, in fact, the fundamental question asked in all phenomenological inquiry: How can any object, or phenomenon, be made present and self-evident? Already in *The Crisis*, Husserl has, through the epoche of factual history and the epoche of objective science, respectively, disclosed two a priori that comprised the “original” present sense of objectivity and that, moving forward, should form the basis of genuine objectivity. Is this not also the fundamental question asked by the rhetor as he or she conceives a rhetoric: How can this idea of mine be made present and self-evident to my hearers (watchers, readers, etc.)? The first question shapes the majority of *The Crisis*, but its pertinence too should not be lost on rhetorical critics. Many of our critical questions take this same form: How has any particular cultural object become ideal—shared or sharable, communicated or communicable? What “in any given [cultural] situation [are] the available means of persuasion?”

In “The Origin of Geometry,” synopsized below, Husserl answers both questions in one act. In so doing, he performs, unbeknownst to him, an act of rhetorical criticism. For the benefit of the rhetorical critic, what follows is, in Husserl’s own estimation, “exemplary” of his last, definitive phenomenological method. In the passage that leads, from *The Crisis*, Husserl (1970a) describes his own method for achieving genuine objectivity—for making present and self-evident—about philosophy. Given now the a priori of the life-world and the a priori of history, it is both easy and appropriate for the rhetorical critic to substitute for “philosophy” the name of any phenomenon:

What is clearly necessary . . . is that we *reflect back*, in a thorough *historical* and *critical* fashion in order to provide, *before all decisions*, for a radical self-understanding: we must inquire back into what was originally and always sought in philosophy, what was continually sought by all the philosophers and philosophies that have communicated with one another historically; but this must include a critical [judgmental] consideration of what, in respect to the goals and methods [of philosophy], is ultimate, original, and genuine and which, once seen, apodictically conquers the will. (p. 17-18; his italics)

Synopsis of “The Origin of Geometry” (Husserl, 1970b)

1. “Science,” like “[e]very spiritual accomplishment,” necessarily must have a beginning: “first as a project and then in successful execution” (p. 356);
2. The goal of science, “objectivity,” was established by “mathematizing” the objects found in nature;
3. As such, it bases all of its validities (“facts”) on this “geometrization”;
4. To understand the “original motivation and movement of thought which led to the conceiving” of this idealization of nature, we must “inquire back into the original meaning of the handed-down geometry, which continued to be valid with this very same meaning—continued and at the same time was developed further, remaining simply “geometry” in all its new forms” (p. 353);
5. Galileo is the “consummating discoverer” of this idea; with him, it “appears for the first time, so to speak, as full-blown” (Husserl, 1970a, p. 52, 57);
6. Whatever in his surrounding world—formally or materially—motivated him to conceive “geometry” serves also as the phenomenological basis for all later “objectivity.” Whatever this is must have been self-evident to him. (Most likely, much was implicitly taken-for-granted by him. It falls to the phenomenologist to “unearth” what is tacitly presupposed.);

7. The “most obvious [material] commonplaces” Galileo “had at his disposal. . . that which must have served as the material for his generalizations” would have included at least space-time, shapes, figures, corporeality, motion, deformation, measuring, preferred shapes, smoothing, perfection. (These too are “objects,” and may, in fact, prescribe a whole other phenomenological investigation.) (1970b, p. 376);
8. These objects, in order to be generalizable, to exhibit “objectivity,” must have been made “ideal objects,” capable of outliving its discoverer as part of “the inner historicity of the individuals” (p. 372). That is, a continuity from one person to another, from one time to another, must have been capable of being carried out. It is clear that the method of producing original idealities out of what is prescientifically given in the cultural world must have been written down and fixed in firm sentences prior to the existence of geometry; furthermore, the capacity for translating these sentences from vague [passive] linguistic understanding into the clarity of the reactivation of their self-evident meaning must have been, in its own way, handed down and ever capable of being handed down. (1970b, p. 365)
9. Documentation—the capacity to inscribe—of these ideal objects makes their communication possible from person-to-person, and across time (pp. 360-361). In the documenting, what would have been originally self-evident to Galileo is substituted by words, symbols, and figures—an efficient “language” for the total geometrical structure: How the living tradition of the meaning-formation of elementary concepts is actually carried on can be seen in elementary geometrical instruction and its textbooks; what we actually learn there is how to deal with ready-made concepts and sentences in a rigorously methodical way. Rendering the concepts sensibly intuitable by means of drawn figures is substituted for the production of the primal idealities. (p. 365);
10. This efficiency, and the “extraordinarily far-reaching practical usefulness became of itself a major motive for the advancement and appreciation of these sciences” (p. 369). As more and more ideal objects began to encompass and extend “the world,” the original self-evidence, sedimented by language, and then later merely presumed, “made itself felt so little” that it was completely lost—not present—if only temporarily;
11. In not accounting for the original self-evidence, at least part of the historical world and the persons living in it, persons have been unaccounted for. Thus original, genuine “objectivity”—valid for all conceivable people, present, past and future—became for all sciences, merely “ideal objectivity” or “ideality” (pp. 365-366).

From this brief account, we can now understand *historically* how one phenomenon, geometry and by implication, all of science, has historically achieved

it “ideal objectivity,” or what we commonly reference as “objectivity.” *Critically*, we know now why this “ideal objectivity” falls short of science’s original goal—genuine objectivity. For rhetorical critics interested in the phenomenological approach, “The Origin of Geometry” offers at least an exemplar of Husserl’s method—of the epoche, for example. Better, it demonstrates this having already incorporated the a priori of the life-world and the a priori of history—that is, from within the natural attitude.

Extensions of Husserl’s Late Phenomenology

Beyond its exemplary function, Husserl’s approach to “The Origin of Geometry” can be extended in any number of directions. Any one of the steps enumerated above, for example, can serve as launching points for an entirely new phenomenological inquiry, to be conducted in the same, iterable fashion. In this sense, phenomenological inquiry is open—never really “finished.” “[A]n infinity of ever new phenomena” may be disclosed—

an infinity because continued penetration shows that every phenomenon attained through this unfolding of meaning, given at first in the life-world as obviously existing, itself contains meaning- and validity-implications whose exposition leads again to new phenomena, and so on. . . . just as any newly developed form [of meaning] is destined to become material, namely, to function in the constitution of [some new] form. (Husserl, 1970a, p. 112)

In addition, because “a whole class of spiritual products of the cultural world” enjoy the same “ideal objectivity” (as evidenced above in the range of phenomenon discussed in the literature review above), any one of this class of cultural phenomena can be examined in this manner. Because language is the fundament of this “ideal objectivity”—is how any such phenomenon is idealized, validated across subjects, communalized, this phenomenology can be comfortably conducted from within a rhetorical perspective. Finally, because “language itself, in all its particularizations (words, sentences, speeches), is, as can easily be seen from the grammatical point of view, thoroughly made up of ideal objects,” we not only begin to understand Kenneth Burke’s motive in the *Grammar*, but we are also and ultimately enjoined to disclose the phenomenon “rhetoric” (Husserl, 1970b, p. 357).

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