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Gödel and the Integrated Self, or: on the Philosopher’s Second Sailing

Juliette Kennedy

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*When the wind fails, the sailor turns
to his oars. He no longer relies on any
help outside himself.*—Seth Benardete

1 Introduction

In the *Phaedo*, Plato’s dialogue about the death of Socrates, Socrates speaks about a path in his thought that came to nothing, a *thwarted ascent* followed by a moment of revelation. An *epoché* of a kind, a suspension of belief in nature as it is in itself, what Socrates saw was the impossibility of reading the good directly from nature. The revelation was the beginning of Socrates’ philosophical life, he says, and it came to him when he realised that Anaxagoras’ theory of causality couldn’t be right, because it was informed by an incorrect theory of the mind—founders on the problem of “impossible casual sums.”

“When the winds fail,” the classicist Seth Benardete wrote of Socrates at this moment of the *Phaedo*, “the sailor turns to oars. He no longer relies on

any help outside himself.”¹

The story of Socrates’s second sailing, as he called it, “the Socratic turn in philosophy from the attempt to understand nature directly, in the Anaxagorean manner, to the recognition that one must also understand oneself, the would-be understander of nature”² was retold by Kurt Gödel in conversation one afternoon in 1975. Gödel spoke of *Husserl’s* second sailing, not that of Socrates—and by telling the story of Husserl’s second sailing, he told of his own.

Gödel also spoke that day about clinging to shore: about wrong exercises of reason. He chose Euthyphro, a character in the Platonic dialogue of that name, as his example; the problem, in particular, of Euthyphro’s *thoughtlessness*.

2 The Toledo Notes

The conversation referred to above was one of a number that took place in Gödel’s office at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in the period of March 1972 to July 1975, between Gödel and the proof theorist Sue Toledo. Gödel resigned from the Institute shortly afterwards, and died in 1978, so Toledo’s notes of these conversations are among the last documents we have from Gödel—a report of, as it were, his final thoughts.

The conversations ranged from Husserlian phenomenology to proof theory, to finitism, intuitionism, to, finally, the Platonic dialogue *Euthyphro*. In these remarks I will focus on the conversations which take up the bulk of the notes, on Husserl and on the *Euthyphro*, respectively.

¹[1], p. 2

²ibid

3 Gödel on Husserl

Phenomenology is the study of intentionality, the idea that our consciousness is directed outward toward the world. The central idea is that of *givenness*, so the emphasis is on how things are given to us in consciousness, rather than how they are in themselves.

The heart of the view, in the phenomenologist’s language, is this: “there is a necessary correlation between things in themselves and consciousness, in such a way that the latter [consciousness] is open to the former.”³

Now one would think that Gödel’s mind in these conversations would be on Husserl’s logical work—say, the *Logical Investigations*—but his mind is rather on a particular episode in Husserl’s life, a radical turning point in his thinking:

Husserl’s philosophy is very different before 1909 from what it is after 1909. At this point he made a fundamental philosophical discovery, which changed his whole philosophical outlook and is even reflected in his style of writing. He describes this as a time of crisis in his life, both intellectual and personal. *Both* were resolved by his discovery.⁴

The word “both” was underlined in the text, and this is what I want to underline too. This paper is just about that word *both*; about Gödel’s idea of what I would call the *integrated self*, the idea that reason cannot be separated from our moral practice.

³[8], p. 447

⁴[7], p. 200.

We know from looking at the annotations in various books in Gödel's library that Gödel had been reading some of Husserl's posthumously published personal remarks, published in 1956 as *Persönliche aufzeichnungen*, in which Husserl reported on the severe depressions he had suffered prior to 1909, stimulated by unresolved issues in the *Logical Investigations*. As Gödel says, both Husserl's depression and the gap in his philosophical world picture were resolved by a kind of awakening, a realization of the importance of a concept he had not taken into account before then, and that is the notion of the *absolute self*; the idea, as it is called nowadays, of the (transcendental) subject. This is a very "thick" notion of subjectivity and it underlies the whole theory of Husserl's monumental 1911 work *Ideas*, the theory he set down on the heels of his awakening called transcendental phenomenology. Husserl describes this enhanced notion of the self thus:

The phenomenological ego is therefore nothing peculiar, floating above many experiences: it is simply identical with their own interconnected unity.⁵

Along with this thick notion of self there is another essential idea in transcendental phenomenology, and that is the idea of setting aside questions of truth and existence, or in the terminology "bracketing" them, meaning not to consider those questions in any way that excludes the standpoint of the perceiving subject; rather the perceiving subject is at the centre.

We do have a so-called natural attitude to the world, to the things around us, a kind of pre-theoretical belief in the appearances of things and in the existence of objects having those appearances. That is how humans survive! With bracketing one gives up these pre-theoretical beliefs in favour of

⁵For the translation of this passage from Husserl's earlier work, *Logical Investigations*, see [8], p. 451.

a standpoint that begins and ends with the perceiving subject's experience, while withholding judgement on the question whether the experience of the objects generating the given experience is a viridical one or not. One can regard this as a form of skepticism, if you like, but it is not necessary to see it that way. There is a positive theory behind it, a theory of subjective constitution.

Husserl's name for this idea of setting aside questions of truth and existence, a word he took from Hellenistic philosophy, was *epoché*, meaning a suspension of judgement, or what Gödel calls "a complete exclusion of criticism."⁶

Gödel is very preoccupied with the idea of the *epoché* in the notes; the standpoint of the *epoché* is, as he says: "the middle ground between existence and non-existence." To actually experience it, he says, to experience this suspension of the natural attitude to things, is like a religious experience. "It cannot be transferred from one person to another," he says. "The whole world appears in a different light."

Gödel also draws an analogy between phenomenology and psychoanalytic practice: Thus he tells Toledo that phenomenology "is analogous to psych[o]analysis except that here one is involved in a self-analysis of one's own cognition." He says that if you "read Husserl from time to time, you will become very clever wrt to your own [inner?] experiences." "It has an almost physiological effect."

He likens this, finally, to the experience of reading Plato. When you really

⁶According to the classical philosopher Rose Cherubin, "The root verb is present as early as Homer, and one of its several meanings is "hold back, keep in check" (not said of judgment, but e.g. of physically holding people back). By the 5th-4th centuries BCE in Athens it also gets the sense of 'suspend,' 'stay' (in a transitive sense), often of payments or court proceedings. However, the noun isn't attested before about the 3rd century BCE [when] it's used as a technical term for 'suspension of judgment' in the Stoics and Skeptics."

understand Plato's concept of the good, he tells Toledo, this is a "transcendental insight."

Did Gödel experience such an insight? In conversations with Hao Wang that mirror those with Toledo, and which could have taken place anytime between 1972 and 1977, Gödel denies, to Wang, ever having such an experience. Wang recounts their conversation thus:

At some time between 1906 and 1910 Husserl had a psychological crisis. He doubted whether he had accomplished anything, and his wife was very sick. At some point in this period, everything suddenly became clear to Husserl and he did arrive at some absolute knowledge. But one cannot transfer absolute knowledge to somebody else; therefore, one cannot publish it. A lecture on the nature of time also came from this period, when Husserl's experience of seeing absolute knowledge took place. I myself have never had such an experience. For me there is no absolute knowledge: everything goes only by probability. Both Descartes and Schelling explicitly reported an experience of sudden illumination when they began to see everything in a different light.⁷

Despite these remarks to Wang, one has the impression that in describing Husserl's awakening to Toledo, Gödel is speaking about an awakening of his own. Thus these notes are, in a way, a kind of self-portrait. And in fact Gödel did convert to Husserlian phenomenology in 1961, a genuine conversion which lasted for some time; and it followed the very difficult period he had in the years 1951-60, when he reached a kind of stalemate in his own philosophical project, the attempt to ground the notion of mathematical existence directly, that is to say without taking the subject into account.

⁷[9], remark 5.3.30, pp. 169-70.

Gödel reports on this stalemate in his 1959 letter to Schilpp, the editor of a volume dedicated to Carnap, when he wrote that he would not be contributing his paper called “Is Mathematics a Syntax of Language?” to the volume after all. The reason, he writes, is that he has been able to formulate a number of negative arguments, arguments against the view that mathematics is nothing but a syntax of language, or alternatively that mathematics is devoid of content; but he has been unable to articulate any positive argument.

It was a difficult period for Gödel philosophically, beginning in 1950 and lasting through 1959-60, but his difficulties were resolved—at least for a time—by phenomenology, in particular by his adoption of the phenomenological *epoché*.⁸

Another issue Gödel brings up in this part of the notes is his sense that Husserl went, in a way, underground, philosophically, after 1909. Husserl’s style of writing changed to a more complicated and obfuscatory style—“complicated sentences are there to slow you down,” Gödel says—so this was done deliberately in Gödel’s view. As for the theory itself, although there are some detailed phenomenological analyses in the *Logical Investigations*, which were made before 1909, as Gödel tells Toledo, Husserl never provided any worked out phenomenological investigations after 1909—even so that he had found their correct theory.

By the way, Gödel’s reading of Husserl’s intellectual and personal transformation is by no means an idiosyncratic one, it is just what Husserl says himself in *Ideas*. Here is a passage from *Ideen 1*, underlined by Gödel in his own copy of the text:

In the *Logical Investigations* I advocated a skepticism with respect to the question of the pure ego [der Frage des reinen Ich], but which I could not adhere to as my studies progressed.⁹

⁸See [8] for an extended discussion of Gödel’s turn to phenomenology.

⁹[5], p. 133.

There are a number of other remarks in this vein in Husserl's *Ideen 1*, that are annotated in Gödel's copy with exclamation marks and underlinings and so forth.

So that is the first conversation and we will return to it below.

4 The Euthyphro

The *Euthyphro* concerns some of the events leading up to the trial of Socrates. The dialogue recounts a thwarted ascent,¹⁰ an inquiry into the nature of a concept, in this case holiness, which comes to nothing. The definition of holiness—its form—is never found.

The dialogue is as follows: Socrates runs into Euthyphro outside of the law courts one day, where Euthyphro has just come from prosecuting his own father for the murder of a servant. Socrates himself is on his way to the law courts because he is being indicted for impiety and corruption of youth.

The facts of the case involving Euthyphro's father are these: One night Euthyphro's servant got drunk and killed another servant while they were both working in the fields; whereupon Euthyphro's father had the servant arrested, bound and thrown into a ditch, where he died of exposure. The charge brought by Euthyphro against his father, then, would have been negligent homicide.

The dialogue begins with Euthyphro complaining to Socrates that it is being said about him in Athens, that it is unholy for a son to prosecute his father, especially on behalf of a non-relative. But those who express this criticism are ignorant about religious matters, in particular they do not understand the distinction between what is holy and what is unholy.

From Gödel's point of view, the fact that Euthyphro's case is complex is

¹⁰in Benardete's terminology

important. A long chain of misdeeds begins with a murder—but the “first” murderer is not the one who is being prosecuted, it is Euthyphro’s father. But Euthyphro’s father didn’t commit a *second* murder, rather the second victim died of the elements while the father was making inquiries of the authorities, what to do with the man. The complication of Euthyphro’s case *slows down the reader*; makes vivid the contrast between the understanding Euthyphro requires in order to prosecute his own legal case—a genuine understanding of piety—and Euthyphro’s ignorance of what holiness is.

Socrates infers from Euthyphro’s contempt for those who know nothing of religious matters, that he must be an authority on religious matters himself. And this is just what Socrates wants to hear, as he himself is badly in need of legal advice. Socrates remarks that he will make himself a student of Euthyphro, so as to be better able defend himself against the charge of impiety and of corruption of the young.

And if his defense is not successful, Socrates says, he will ask those prosecuting him to arrest Euthyphro for corruption of the elderly, and not Socrates, as after all, Euthyphro is Socrates’ teacher.

Euthyphro responds in a joke that if he were to go up against Socrates’ prosecutor, Meletus, the man would be much the worse for it.

This is one of the few passages Gödel draws Toledo’s attention to in their brief conversation about the dialogue. It is a clue to what is, for Gödel, the meaning of the entire dialogue, to wit: a sign of the insincerity or what Gödel calls the “half-heartedness” of the friends of Socrates.

At this point Socrates and Euthyphro go through various definitions of holiness, actually five, to be precise, one of which is: what is holy is what is pleasing to the gods. (Gödel also emphasizes this passage.) Euthyphro agrees to the definition at first, but he eventually gives in to Socrates’s pressure and abandons this definition, as he does all of the other putative definitions of holiness.

In a crucially important passage of the dialogue Socrates and Euthyphro think of defining holiness as “god-belovedness.” But then under the same general principle, Socrates says, one would have to say, of something, that it is being carried by someone, because it possesses the property: “being carried-ness,” and not because someone is carrying it. Similarly we would have to say that something is in a state of being led precisely because it possesses the defining property “being led-ness.” And so on. And this cannot be right. Something is in a state of being led because someone is leading it.

Similarly something is holy not because it is god-beloved. It is just that the gods love what is holy.

Thus, concerning the problem what is the nature of the holy? what the dialogue establishes is that Euthyphro thinks he knows what it is, but in fact he has not been able to find the form of the holy, what it is that resides in everything that is holy. Euthyphro’s thinking is trapped in an immobilising haze of wrong causes. Not wanting to continue the discussion any further, Euthyphro takes his leave.

We saw that Socrates objected to Euthyphro’s desire to *define* holiness through what is only an attribute of it; but Socrates had a second objection to defining holiness this way—as that which the gods love—and that is that the gods love different things; they fight a lot about what they love and what they don’t. This is an important Platonic thought, namely that certain judgements are objectively grounded—are valid for reasons “exterior” to the circumstances of those making the judgement. Even in the case of the gods, the validity of their judgements about piety is constrained by the concept of piety itself, or that is to say, its form, which resides in everything that is holy.

Thus in the dialogue Socrates looks to mathematics: if Euthyphro expresses an opinion about “which of two things was more numerous,” and Socrates expresses a different opinion, “we would resort to counting in such

disputes, and soon be rid of them,” says Socrates, and Euthyphro agrees.

As concerns less traditionally metaphysical matters, a standard interpretation of the dialogue holds that Socrates is pointing to a conflict between Athenian religious and secular values—“orthodox” as opposed to “rational” religion, in Gödel’s terminology. On the one hand from the point of view of orthodox religion it is impious to prosecute a family member, especially on behalf of a non-relative. On the other hand from the rational point of view, which one may identify here as the point of view of the state, it is in the state’s interest to prosecute those who have committed an injustice. In part Socrates is asking Euthyphro, which principle trumps the other? Is asking, in other words, whether there is an objective moral standard, a community standard as it were, which is not subject to the will or approval of the gods.

As for Gödel, the dialogue is not about the problem of objectivity—which was Gödel’s lifetime project! The meaning of the dialogue is rather “why the friends of Socrates didn’t prevent his execution—they were half-hearted, didn’t take a firm stand against the authorities for Socrates.”

Here is a transcription of Gödel’s remarks on the *Euthyphro*:

E. a friend of S., says he is the heart of the state. Both are enemies of orthodox authority. M. [= Meletus, who is prosecuting Socrates for corruption of youth JK] is a representative of orthodoxy.

E. is half-hearted in his opposition to the orthodoxy, thus no real danger.

meaning of the dialogue:

why the friends of S. did not prevent his execution – they were half-hearted, didn’t take a firm stand against the authorities for S.

their shortcomings expressed in the dialogue – joking hint of E. at S.’s trial.

E.’s wishy-washy position, never thinking anything through, is the cause of him remaining in what is really an authoritarian position.

his running off and not carrying through his case is an example of his half-heartedness.

E. prosecuting his father, who had done a criminally negligent thing (is) part of rational religion.

We see that for Gödel, the *Euthyphro* is a narrative of betrayal: Euthyphro is half-hearted, according to Gödel, in that he takes a step in the direction of “rational religion” by prosecuting his father, but he does not really understand the meaning of his act. If he did, Gödel seems to say, if instead of running off he *had* thought things through, he might have been in a position to prevent Socrates’s execution.

In identifying the meaning of the dialogue to reside in the fact that Socrates’ friends let him down, because they didn’t think things through, Gödel seems to be saying that the constraints that limit Euthyphro’s understanding of the concept of holiness seem to be the same as the constraints that limit Euthyphro’s understanding of Socrates’ dire situation.¹¹ (Remember that Euthyphro makes a joke in response to Socrates’ asking Euthyphro for his help.) Euthyphro’s lack of empathy, his undeveloped self-understanding, is at the same time a flaw in his intellect, in this case in his understanding of the nature of piety; and this in turn explains why he is in no position to act in the courts on Socrates behalf.

¹¹As Benardete put it: “The constraints under which an understanding of justice becomes possible seem to be the same as the constraints that limit the understanding of the good.” [1], p. 11

If a lack of self-understanding may be thought of as constraining one's intellectual capacity, Gödel often expressed the opposite thought, that self-knowledge is at the same time knowledge of the world, or alternatively it grounds one's knowledge of the world. For instance he told Hao Wang in the 1970s:

Don't collect data. If you know everything about yourself, you know everything. There is no use in burdening yourself with a lot of data. Once you understand yourself, you understand human nature and then the rest follows. It is better [in the study of philosophy] to restrict [your view] to the individual than to look at society initially.¹²

If you know everything about yourself, you know everything. Or as Bernardete writes of the moment in the *Republic* when Socrates asks the geometers “to stand back from what they are learning and ask what they are doing in their practice”:

Only an end-directed being with self-knowledge can discover ends and, in discovering ends, become ordered. . . There is no ascent from the cave without self-knowledge.¹³

On the basis of Gödel's remarks to Toledo, the suggestion here is that it is possible that Gödel's Platonism at this point (and possibly all along), was as much a theory about the objective existence of, say, mathematical abstracta, as it was a theory of the self—the self as it is and the self in light of the possibility of philosophical revelation. Recalling his remark to Toledo

¹²[9], remark 9.2.6, p. 298.

¹³[1]

that reading Husserl from time to time makes one become very clever with respect to one's own [inner?] experiences, that it has an almost physiological effect, one he likens to the experience of grasping Plato's concept of the good, Gödel's Platonism seem to pay witness to the desire for wholeness and to the Platonic idea that this comes about through the exercise of reason—not for its own sake, but because by exercising one's reason one exercises one's connection to the good.

Now as in Euthyphro's case there are wrong exercises of reason; a lack of coincidence between one's intellectual capacity or talent, and, to quote Benardete again, one's own complete good. For Husserl, this misalignment was crisis. Husserl's depressions, for Gödel, are a sign that he did not think through what he said in the *Logical Investigations*.

We will return to Gödel's interpretation of the *Euthyphro* after a short digression into set theory.

5 Set Theory

Set theorists are searching for the form of the infinite. As to the philosophical discourse around set theory, a *Euthyphro* problem seems to hover over it. On the one hand, the existence of mathematical objects, in particular sets, is needed in order to ground the set theorist's talk of truth. This is the idea of the mathematical object as "truth maker", an object that converts what we say about it—when what we say is correct!—into truths. But then to say that mathematical statements, when correct, are true because they are about truth-makers—objects that have the property, that what we say about them is true—seems to be the same as saying that a jug of water, if it is carried this is because it has the property of being-carriedness. Or that a donkey which is being led, is led because it has the property of "being-ledness." Or that:

... Socrates sits in prison because his muscles and bones are arranged in certain ways and with certain capacities, and he converses with Cebes because of the vibrations in the ear and movements of sound in the air.¹⁴

Socrates is pointing out to his followers that one can mistake proximate causes for other kinds of causes, or for definitions. One can describe the action of sitting by saying that to sit is to have one's bones and muscles arranged in certain ways with certain capacities; but Socrates sits in prison because he has been detained by the authorities.

In philosophy of mathematics the so-called indispensability argument, due to W.V.O. Quine, seems to belong to this family of mistakes in reasoning. The argument is as follows: because "reference to (or quantification over) mathematical entities such as sets, numbers, functions and such is indispensable to our best scientific theories ... we ought to be committed to the existence of these mathematical entities. To do otherwise, as Putnam has said, is to be guilty of "intellectual dishonesty"."¹⁵

In other words, a mathematical object is asserted to be in a state of existence, because our existence statements—when correct—must apply to it. The indispensability argument thus takes the form of Euthyphro's specious one: reading "X" for mathematical object and "Y" for existence: "X is asserted to be in state Y because it has the property of being in state Y." Or modally: "We ought to be committed to the statement that X is in state Y because our class of assertions includes the statement that X is in state Y."

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give an account of Gödel's full-blooded notion of existence. Suffice it to say that his notion lies in stark contrast to the notion delivered by indispensability considerations, though Gödel does gesture toward what appear to be indispensability-type argu-

¹⁴[1], p. 3

¹⁵Colyvan, [2]. Colyvan quotes Putnam's "Philosophy of Logic," in [6].

ments from time to time.¹⁶ “There exists” is, for Gödel, a transfinite concept, whose meaning is “object[ive] existence irrespective of actual producibility.”¹⁷

6 Conclusion

Gödel has two thoughts in this part of the Toledo conversations. First, about Husserl’s revelation regarding the importance of the concept of the absolute self, how that revelation was a deeply personal revelation as much as an intellectual one, leading to a kind of philosophical silence on Husserl’s part; and secondly the thought that the integrated self, the self which has access to its own complete good, also has access to ends, to the truth of things.

Gödel’s remarks to Toledo, and for that matter to Hao Wang, help us to see that Gödel’s notion of Platonism expands, albeit nascently, in the direction of the *integrated self*. Perhaps it is time, then, for analytic philosophy to reassess Gödel’s Platonism. To take seriously the role of transcendental insight in Gödel’s thought; to draw out his notion of selfhood; to see why self-understanding is at the same time an understanding of “everything”; and finally to craft a notion of existence, in particular of mathematical existence, that harmonises with this extended notion of the self.

The task, in short, is to see the man whole; and in so doing, to create the conditions for a philosophical revelation of our own.

Is there any *other* reason to do philosophy?¹⁸

¹⁶See e.g. [3].

¹⁷See “Is Mathematics a Syntax of Language?”, in [4], p. 341, fn. 20.

¹⁸Jan Zwicky has pointed out to the author that attributing perspective dependence to Plato misinterprets Plato’s core view, which is firmly centred on perspective *independence*. As for Husserl’s notion of the self after 1909, it has been pointed out by the anonymous referee that Husserl did in fact provide extensive elaborations on the concept of the absolute self after 1909 (see, e.g., The Bernau Manuscripts, and the Late Texts on Time Constitution), yet none of these have any connection or substantial reference to the absolute self

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as a field of self-understanding in moral or utilitarian terms.

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