

Phenomenology and political idealism

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Abstract This article considers the possibility of articulating a renewed understanding of the principle of political idealism on the basis of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology. By taking its point of departure from one of the most interesting political applications of Husserl’s phenomenological method, the ordoliberal tradition of the so-called Freiburg School of Economics, the article raises the question of the normative implications of Husserl’s eidetic method. Contrary to the “static” idealism of the ordoliberal tradition, the article proposes that the phenomenological concept of political idealism ought to be understood as a fundamentally dynamic principle. As opposed to the classical understanding of political idealism as the implementation of a particular normative model—political utopianism—the phenomenological reformulation of this idea denoted a radically critical principle of self-reflection that can only be realized on the basis of perpetual renewal. In order to illustrate this point, the article considers Husserl’s distinction between two types of ideals of perfection, the absolute and the relative, and argues for their relevance for political philosophy.

Keywords Phenomenology · Political philosophy · Political idealism · Utopia · Crisis

Our contemporary age is defined by a paradoxical relation to political idealism. On the one hand, especially since the collapse of the socialist states from the late 1980s onwards, it has become common to refer to the turmoil of idealist principles in both national and international politics. Following the analysis of Daniel Bell in *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (1962)—a work

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whose title was more like a prediction rather than a concrete analysis—our contemporary age has grown more and more hostile towards competing ideals as the fundamental core of political decision-making. Efficient governance and executive institutions, rather than open-ended deliberation on fundamental moral principles, are often seen as the true political doctrine of Western democracies. This has been the situation especially in post-1945 Europe, where the liberal and republican traditions have not parted their ways, as in the case of the US; rather, following the horrendous fate of Weimar Germany, both traditions have primarily stood for the principle of “rule of law” with a strong emphasis on (seemingly) neutral institutions, and on juridical and administrative power such as the European Commission or the European Central Bank.

In contemporary debates, this development is often linked to the doctrine of *neoliberalism*. This term, nowadays greeted by more foes than friends, has traditionally denoted a vast variety of ideas that are not all compatible with one another. Following the economic genealogy of the concept, neoliberalism has entailed the deregulation of labor, goods and capital both within states as well as internationally, the extension of the market logic to all social and political institutions, and thus, the gradual dismantling of the public sector and the welfare state. In terms of monetary policy, neoliberalism has ascribed to the monetarist doctrine according to which inflation and deflation are at the root of all great economic crises, and thus, independent central banks (and other executive institutions) are the only way for individual economies to protect themselves from imbalances. In this regard, neoliberalism is a deeply *idealist* doctrine in the sense that it believes in pre-given rules and principles as the only way to construct a viable system of production and exchange.

What, then, has all of this got to do with phenomenology? In his 1978–1979 Collège de France lecture course, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault (2010) points towards an interesting connection between Husserl and early German neoliberalism, especially the representatives of the so-called Freiburg School of National Economy.¹ This school, represented by economists such as Wilhelm Röpke and Walter Eucken, the son of the philosopher Rudolf Eucken, promoted what was then called the economic policy of *ordoliberalism*, that is, the idea of the free market economy with a strong emphasis on economic “order” (*Ordnung*) secured by politically neutral state institutions. This idea, as it was discussed and promoted since the beginning of the 1930s onwards, was of course in clear contradiction with the economic policy of the National Socialist government, which relied heavily on *ad-hoc* solutions such as “work creation bills,” price control, and heavy government spending. The influence of ordoliberalism was rather minor during the Nazi Regime—Röpke, for one, was forced into exile in 1933—but it served as an important point of reference for the so-called Austrian School of neoliberalism (Carl Menger, Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek) and for the post-war German economic model in general. Ordoliberalism is still acknowledged as one of the central traditions behind the current European economic constitution,

¹ See especially Foucault (2010), 103–105.

and it explains, for instance, the ideological differences between the European Central Bank and the Federal Reserve.²

As Foucault points out, both Röpke and Eucken were influenced by Husserl's phenomenological insights and emphasized the need to rebuild economics on the basis of the ideal of "rigorous science." Their basic idea can be presented roughly as follows: Whereas the liberalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took its point of departure from the existing institutions of the market-place—of exchange and competition—and tried to deduce certain principles of the functioning market economy from these institutions, the ordoliberalists treated this deduction as an example of what Foucault calls "naïve naturalism." Instead of deriving general principles (e.g. the "invisible hand") from the empirical reality of the market place, the domain of economy was to be constructed, from the beginning on, as a purely *ideal domain* of production and exchange.³ On the basis of their understanding of Husserl's "eidetic reduction" and the theory of types, ordoliberal thinkers refused to consider the different systems of production, competition and exchange as mere historical and cultural variations, but they were to be seen as modifications of the basic "ideal types" of economic rationalism. Rather than deriving the legitimacy of free-market capitalism from the natural tendencies of the human being, the normative question of a fair and functioning system of production was to be posed strictly within the logic of economy itself. As Foucault explains:

For what in fact is competition? It is absolutely not a given of nature. The game, mechanisms, and effects of competition which we identify and enhance are not at all natural phenomena; competition is not the result of a natural interplay of appetites, instincts, behavior, and so on. In reality, the effects of competition [...] are due to a formal privilege. Competition is an essence. Competition is an *eidōs*. Competition is a principle of formalization. Competition has an internal logic; it has its own structure. [...] Just as for Husserl a formal structure is only given to intuition under certain conditions, in the same way competition as an essential economic logic will only appear and produce its effects under certain conditions which have to be carefully and artificially constructed. [...] Competition is therefore an historical objective of governmental art and not a natural given that must be respected.⁴

In this regard, Husserlian phenomenology would contribute to what Foucault takes as the basic doctrine of the neoliberal economism of the 20th (and 21st) century: the construction of a rational ideal of governance that can merely be *implemented* into the existing reality. Following what Arendt considered to be the basic fallacy of classical political philosophy, the negligence of opinion and common sense in front of truth, phenomenology would take its point of departure from predetermined ideas as the defining feature of the political domain.⁵ As political philosophy, phenomenology would appear to be a fundamentally non-

² See, for instance, Jürgen Habermas' (2013) recent contribution in the journal *Social Europe*.

³ Foucault (2010). See also Oksala (2012), 139–142.

⁴ Foucault (2010).

⁵ This point is also discussed by Held (2007).

historical way of thinking marked by a complete negligence in regard to existing relations of power and their historical genesis.⁶

This article aims at answering this suspicion by discussing the relation between Husserlian phenomenology and political idealism. It is the argument of the paper that despite the seemingly apolitical character of Husserl's own thought, his late phenomenology of ethics and generativity did in fact contain within itself a radical rearticulation of the principle of idealism as an ethico-political category. Against the "static idealism" of classic political philosophy, an idealism that simply articulated the normative *telos* of human communities in the form of a utopia, Husserl aimed at rearticulating the principle of idealism as a fundamentally dynamic notion that is realized only in the constant process of critique and renewal. Political idealism, as the insistence on thinking beyond existing forms of communality and governance, can only be fully appreciated as a teleological mode of reflection, which takes its point of departure from the existing tradition but which is able to orient itself according to an infinite horizon of future development. As I argue, Husserl presented this twofold task through his distinction between relative and absolute ideals. It is by considering this distinction that we are able to answer Foucault's implicit accusation according to which phenomenology, with its emphasis on discovering eidetic laws and features, would necessarily lead to a static conception of political idealism.

1 Husserl and the critique of idealism

Idealism is a concept that is known for its ambiguity and often conflicting meanings in epistemology, ontology and ethics. In political philosophy we are familiar with this notion in basically two senses. First, political idealism denotes a position according to which the constitution of the domain of politics depends fundamentally on ideas or idea-like principles, and the development of political movements and institutions can be explained by referring to their "founding ideas." The French Revolution, for instance, is often seen as a product of the Enlightenment ideas of liberty, equality and republicanism. Nurturing a revolutionary consciousness among the Third Estate, these ideas led to the formation of revolutionary political clubs and subsequent political turmoil. Especially in the nineteenth century, this sense of idealism was distinguished from the doctrine of historical materialism—often linked to the political philosophy of Marx—which refuted the conception of ideas as the fundamental force of societal development. As Engels put it in one of his late writings, materialism designates a conception of history, which

⁶ In regard to the question of the political implications of Husserl's phenomenology, Karl Schuhmann's (1988) *Husserl's Staatsphilosophie* may be considered the most thorough analysis. As the title of his work indicates, however, Schuhmann focuses primarily on the role of the state and governance in Husserl's own writings, for instance, by tackling Husserl's own descriptions of the "archontic role" of philosophy within the political domain. In this regard, Natalie Depraz (1995) provides a more structural argument on the political consequences of Husserl's phenomenological method that also has affinities with the argument presented in this paper. Other central contributions to the topic include Drummond (2000), Gniazdowski (2004), Hart (1992) and Held (2007).

[...] seeks the ultimate causes and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, with the consequent division of society into distinct classes and the struggles of these classes.⁷

Here, “historical materialism” directed its attack especially towards the kind of idealism promoted by Hegel in his lectures on world history, which explained the development and transition of social and political institutions on the basis of spirit (*Geist*) and its “objective” forms such as art, ethics and religion. While Hegel followed Rousseau in treating the human being as a fundamentally historical idea which allows itself to change according to different stages of development, his sense of idealism could never really acknowledge the actual freedom of historical actors, or the possibility of genuine historical choice. On the contrary, Hegel’s teleological idealism seemed to lead to a rather deterministic view of history, which also attached itself to a particular normative conception of the political domain.

Secondly, political idealism is also often employed in an explicitly normative sense, to describe a conviction according to which political reflection or decision-making ought to begin with the articulation of ideas and ideals, and correspondingly, it should hold their realization as its fundamental goal. In this regard, political idealism denotes the urge to transcend the mere idea of *power* as the founding principle of the political domain. In modern political philosophy, this stance is often linked to Kant, who argued for the intimate connection between morality and politics by defending idealist goals such as the realization of international law and the world republic as the ultimate *telos* of human history.⁸ Although it is possible to locate this sense of idealism already in the classical Greek authors, it is perhaps best known from its juxtaposition with the German concept of *Realpolitik*—a concept that was coined by the anti-revolutionary nationalists of the post-1848 era and that was used to denote the pragmatic or even Machiavellian politics of Otto von Bismarck. Even today, the concept of idealism is often employed in a negative sense to denote an unrealistic approach to political affairs which overlooks the selfish motives of states and state leaders. In international relations theory, for instance, the gap between realists and idealists is still one of the most pervasive divisions in the field.⁹

In regard to the latter distinction, it seems evident that Husserl’s sympathies were on the side of idealism. Especially in his writings from the post-WWI period, Husserl expressed the need to tackle all forms of “weak pessimism and ideal-free realism” for the sake of a truly humane culture living under the guidance of genuine ideals.¹⁰ Husserl criticized, for instance, Oswald Spengler’s pessimistic account of the decline of the West—what Husserl considered to be the “latest theory of weak-hearted philosophical skepticism”¹¹—which denied the active role of humanity in

⁷ Engels (1901: 17).

⁸ See especially the essays “Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht” in Kant (1998), Akad.A VIII: 15–32; and “Zum ewigen Frieden” in Kant (1998), Akad.A VIII: 341–386.

⁹ On the classic distinction between realism and idealism in international relations, see Carr (2001).

¹⁰ Husserl (1988a) HuaXXVII: 4.

¹¹ Husserl (1988a) HuaXXVII: 122.

shaping its own destiny. Against this conception, Husserl promoted his own vision of idealism as the inner calling of human reason as fully conscious and reflexive responsibility for its own beliefs, actions and values.

This pursuit, however, was accompanied by a cautious, yet explicit reservation towards ideals. Husserl was well aware of the symbolic or imaginary dimensions of modern nationalism, which employed such archaic or quasi-religious ideals of sacrifice or comradeship for the sake of national unity and ethnic purity. What the modern nation states inherited from Romanticism was exactly an understanding of the revolutionary power of ideas and ideals, which express themselves in different symbolic forms, in phrases, flags, anthems and so on. What the WWI had revealed for Husserl was just how easily these ideals can become the playground of a shortsighted *Realpolitik* taking advantage of pre-existing beliefs and prejudices. Accordingly, what Husserl discovered in his students during the post-WWI period was a completely new kind of craving for genuine ideals against the empty rhetoric of war. “In thirty years,” Husserl wrote, “I have never had an audience driven by such a hunger for ideals [...] filled with such hatred against all phraseology, against every imaginary being.”¹² This was, of course, the background of Husserl’s post-war *Kaizo* essays and their analysis of the “loss of meaning” that characterized the most fundamental practices and institutions of European culture, what Husserl called its “inner untruth” and “meaninglessness.”¹³ Ideals are needed, but they can also lose their meaning and turn into empty shells of disillusionment and propaganda.

Husserl’s critique of idealism, however, had an even more profound dimension that seemed to involve the whole modern tradition of political philosophy. In his 1920/24 lecture course on ethics, Husserl criticized the political ontology of Hobbes for its uncritically idealist premises, which had their roots in his conception of human sociality. Although Husserl gave credit to Hobbes (who, with Machiavelli, is often considered to be the father of political realism) for aiming at an a priori account of the normative ideal of human sociality (what Husserl called *formalen Mathesis der Sozialität*), this project could only amount to a “one-sided construction” of the social realm.¹⁴ By returning the essential complexity of our practical motives—empathy, hunger, sexuality, love, and hate—to the will to self-preservation as the fundamental instinct of human life, Hobbes confined himself to a rather myopic view of the possibilities of political action: politics can only be understood as the constriction and regulation of power. As Husserl interestingly noted, “the empiricist Hobbes acts, without understanding this, as idealist. *He constructs pure, supraempirical ideas.*”¹⁵ Due to his conception of humans as fundamentally prone to conflict, a view that was more a result of his mechanistic

¹² “Nie habe ich in 30 Jahren eine solche Hörerschaft gehabt, von solchem Hunger nach Idealen getrieben [...] und von solchem Haß gegen alle Phrase, gegen alles und jedes Scheinwesen.” Husserl’s letter to Hocking, July 3, 1920, quoted in Husserl (1988a) HuaXXVII: xiii.

¹³ Husserl (1988a) HuaXXVII: 3.

¹⁴ Husserl (2004) HuaXXXVII: 58.

¹⁵ “Der Empirist Hobbes betätigt sich, ohne dass er sich selbst versteht, hier als Idealist. Er konstuiert reine, überempirische Ideen.” Husserl (2004) HuaXXXVII: 57.

psychology rather than existing reality, Hobbes could only provide a *negative function* for political institutions.

It is possible to interpret this idea as parallel to the well-known criticism of scientific-mathematical rationality in the *Crisis*, where Husserl accused Galileo of covering up the complexity of the lifeworld under the “garb of ideas” (*Ideenkleid*).¹⁶ Despite its seemingly “realist” approach to human affairs, the political ontology of Hobbes and his followers represented a thoroughly idealist approach to politics—a political ontology founded on an unchanging idea of human nature. The problem of politics could thus appear only as a question of the kind of sovereignty—for Hobbes, the absolute—that is able to mediate the eternal conflict between individual wills.

As Husserl seemed to insist, if political idealism was to be seen as a solution to the current crisis of European humanity, it was to be rearticulated starting from a critical account of the present moment itself. Instead of situating itself beyond history, idealism was to take its point of departure from what Husserl in the *Crisis* considered to be the starting point of critical reflection, that is, “the actual state of the present” (*die faktische Gegenwartslage*).¹⁷ Most importantly, rather than signifying a belief in eternal ideas and principles, this new sense of idealism was to take into account the factual dimension of human existence which is always bound to a historically constituted lifeworld, and accommodate within itself the ideas of change and renewal. This task, however, entailed a critical confrontation with the origins of Western political idealism in Greek philosophy.

2 Idealism and the normative turn

Husserl’s late reflections on Greek philosophy are actually marked by a raised consciousness of its political implications. Especially in his later manuscripts, Husserl linked the birth of philosophy to the overall geopolitical transformations that characterized the Greek city states in the wake of the Classical era—transformations that fundamentally changed the traditional modes of reflection for the sake of a new type of communal reasoning, philosophy. Rather than signifying a merely individualistic conversion, philosophy was motivated by the insistence to mediate between the cultures of individual city states, their myths, practices, religious doctrines and so on. The attitude that created the basis for this investigation was called *theoretical*, because in its pre-philosophical sense, the Greek concept of *theoria* referred to a kind of anthropological field study or “travelogue” that aimed at providing information on the beliefs and practices of individual city states.¹⁸ Philosophy, Husserl emphasized, was born out of this demythologization (*Entmythisierung*) of individual traditions, and it aimed at acknowledging the analogous features of different cultural and religious

¹⁶ Husserl (1976) HuaVI: 52.

¹⁷ Husserl also speaks of “our present situation” (*unsere Gegenwartssituation*). Husserl (1976) HuaVI: 8, 16.

¹⁸ Nightingale 2004, 3. This point is also discussed by Held 1989, 23ff.

descriptions.¹⁹ By fostering the idea of a world divested of the primacy of a particular city state and its culture, philosophy set out to discover a field of objectivities that would not be tied to any particular lifeworld, but would transcend these and constitute a field of investigation common to all rational beings.

From Plato onwards, these universal truths were called by the name *eidos* or *idea*. Referring originally to the lasting aspects or elements in perception, the concept of idea was now made the focal point of philosophical investigation, which pointed to the basic essence or form of each particular thing. Following the influential interpretation of Hermann Lotze's *Logic* (1874), Husserl opposed the schoolbook interpretation of Plato's theory of ideas as a delineation of a separate region in the physical universe, the kind of "place beyond heaven" that Plato, with the aid of metaphor, described in *Phaedrus*.²⁰ Instead, Husserl wanted to liberate Platonic idealism from the metaphysical presuppositions of classical interpretations from Aristotle onwards, presuppositions that presented Plato as a theorist of supra-worldly reality.²¹ Instead, as Husserl argued in his lecture series of 1919/20, Plato's theory of *eidos* was to be considered the first "discovery of the [domain of] a priori,"²² that is, a discovery of those conditions of experience that are common to all rational beings. Instead of unchanging forms, the domain of ideas was to be conceived in regard to the question of *evidence* (or what Lotze had called *Geltung*, validity), that is, as a question of those norms on the basis of which we take something as true, valid and meaningful in the first place. As Husserl put it:

Platonic idealism, through the fully conscious discovery of the "idea" and of approximation, opened up the path of logical thinking, "logical" science, rational science. Ideas were taken as archetypes, in which everything singular participates more or less "ideally," which everything approaches, which everything realizes more or less fully; the ideal truths belonging to the ideas were taken as the absolute norms for all empirical truths.²³

Thus, geometrical ideas like the idea of a triangle, for instance, do not reside in a different reality in contrast to empirical triangles; rather, they stipulate those features or conditions that we necessarily presuppose when we think about triangles or speak about them. For this reason it is understandable that Plato refused to locate idealities in the sphere of perception (*aisthesis*)—they are invisible (*aides*)—and argued that they could only be reached through cognition (*dianoia*).²⁴ As empirical forms, particular triangles are of course different in size and shape, but what makes them fall under the category of triangle is their ideal form, that is, they are all closed

¹⁹ HuaXXIX: 41–46. See also Husserl (1976) HuaVI: 340; Husserl (1988a) HuaXXVII: 189, 194ff.

²⁰ Plato, *Phaedr.* 247c.

²¹ See, for instance, Husserl (1950) HuaIII: 48ff.

²² Husserl (Husserl 1919) F I 40/58b.

²³ "Der platonische Idealismus brach durch die voll bewußte Entdeckung der "Idee" und der Approximation die Bahn des logischen Denkens, der "logischen" Wissenschaft, der rationalen. Ideen wurden gefaßt als Urbilder, an denen alles Singuläre Anteil hat, mehr oder minder "ideal" denen es sich annähert, die es mehr oder minder voll realisiert, die zu den Ideen gehörigen reinen Ideenwahrheiten als die absoluten Normen für alle empirischen Wahrheiten." Husserl (1976) HuaVI: 291.

²⁴ Plato, *Phaedo* 79a.

figures consisting of three line segments with the sum of the interior angles being 180° .

Although Husserl emphasized the role of geometrical ideas in the emergence philosophical ideality, the scope of philosophical ideas was of course much wider. In addition to the pure and exact idealities that we find in geometry and logic, philosophy disclosed a field of inexact idealities encompassing the whole of the spiritual world—idealities that can never be grasped absolutely and decisively. The ideas of the “human being” or “righteousness,” Husserl argued, were projected as kinds of limit values or “ideal poles” that can only be gradually approached, but never fully realized. For instance, it is indeed possible to approximate the idea of a human being through definitions like “two-legged mammal” or “an animal possessing speech”; however, these definitions were to be understood merely as partial descriptions of the complete idea or “essence” of a human being. Instead of a theory of two worlds, Platonic idealism was to be understood as “a completely new type of universal world-view, a world-philosophy [...] characterized as *teleological idealism*.”²⁵ As opposed to the kind of striving or producing that finds its fulfillment in the attainment or consummation of a particular goal (e.g. eating, handicraft), the theoretical attitude gave birth to a class of *ideal goals* that can never be fully attained in practice. Instead of a static doctrine, the idealism of philosophy appeared as a task, “a more or less successful attempt to realize the guiding idea of the infinity and the totality of truths.”²⁶ Instead limiting itself to a selected ethnic group or a single generation, this task disclosed a novel sphere of generativity that was fundamentally open both culturally as well as temporally, leading to a complete “revolutionization of the whole culture, a revolutionization in the very manner in which humanity creates culture.”²⁷

Despite the fact that philosophy, through its original motive of wonder (*thaumazein*) grew out of the suspension of all practical interests, it did not leave behind the sphere of praxis, of acting and doing. As Husserl emphasized, theory itself was to be thought of as a “function of practical reason,”²⁸ which fundamentally relates to normative questions of righteousness and the good life. Already in his 1906/07 lectures on logic and epistemology, Husserl referred to the idea of “the normative turn” (*normative Wendung*) characteristic of logical propositions, meaning that the laws of logic also embody within themselves a normative force.²⁹ The ideal forms of reasoning such as classical Aristotelian

²⁵ “Es ist also nicht ein zufälliger, sondern not-wendiger Zusammenhang, der sich in der historischen Tatsache ausspricht, dass Platon nicht nur der Entdecker der Idee <ist>, sondern in eins damit der Entdecker jenes neuen Typus universeller Weltanschauung, Weltphilosophie, den wir als teleologischen Idealismus bezeichnen haben.” F I 40/43a.

²⁶ “Die jeweils historisch wirkliche Philosophie ist der mehr oder minder gelungene Versuch, die leitende Idee der Unendlichkeit und dabei sogar Allheit der Wahrheiten zu verwirklichen.” Husserl (1976) HuaVI: 338.

²⁷ “Wissenschaftliche Kultur unter Ideen der Unendlichkeit bedeutet also eine Revolutionierung der gesamten Kultur, eine Revolutionierung in der ganzen Weise des Menschentums als kulturschaffenden.” Husserl (1976) HuaVI: 325. Translation modified. See also Schuhmann (1988), 159ff.

²⁸ Husserl (1959) HuaVIII:201.

²⁹ Husserl (1985) HuaXXIV: 30.

sylogisms are not merely theoretical descriptions of the fundamental features of the thinking subject, they also *prescribe* the general conditions of “good reasoning” as well. If we accept the propositions “I must treat other human beings as ends in themselves” and “Socrates is a human being,” then it necessarily means that I must treat Socrates as an end in himself. Naturally, the laws of logic are not sufficient conditions of righteous thinking, but they are nevertheless necessary and normatively binding for all forms of reasoning, both theoretical and practical.

The same concerns the idea of philosophical reason itself. What Husserl claimed was that as soon as we recognize the genuine calling of theoretical reason as the search for universal justification, “it becomes necessarily practical as a goal of the will, and thereby a new, higher stage of development is introduced which is under the guidance of norms, normative ideas.”³⁰ As the idea of infinite horizon is acknowledged within the individual and within communal domains, their respective ideas of what it means to be “a good person” or “a good community” experience a radical transformation.³¹ The prevailing humanity or society are seen as essentially incomplete forms in regard to their ideal norms, that is, as something whose true meaning can only be partially discovered in the light of these ideal forms. For the infinite ideas of humanity are such that they can only be gradually approached but never completely reached.

Indeed, it is possible to interpret the political philosophy of the Classical era on the basis of the principles of idealism and the critique of tradition. Greek political thought took its point of departure from the idea that a certain form of political rule cannot simply take its authority from tradition, nor can it insist on the natural relation between a particular people and a form of governance. Instead, all forms of governance (democracy, aristocracy, monarchy, etc.) should be exposed to an all-embracing critique, which does not acknowledge tradition or convention as the authority of a particular political system. As Plato put it in the *Republic*, the philosophers “will take the *polis* and the characters of men, as they might a tablet, and first wipe it clean,” for “this would be their first point of difference from ordinary reformers, that they would refuse to take in hand either individual or state or to legislate before they either received a clean slate or themselves made it clean.”³² As a result of this peculiar political *epoché*, Plato articulated the principle of “presuppositionlessness” as the fundamental premise of political philosophy, thus releasing the idea of *polis* from all typical empirical contours.

In contrast to what Plato calls the “ordinary reformers” who realistically assess the implementability of political ideas in relation to existing conditions, philosophers start from scratch: they need to construct their political ideals without any reference to a particular political *doxa*. For Husserl, it was precisely this feature that constituted the fundamental philosophical dimension of Greek political thinking. The imminent consequence of the Platonic ideal of the state, writes Husserl, was

³⁰ Husserl (1976) HuaVI: 320.

³¹ As Socrates says to Phaedrus, one should attribute the title “wise” (*sophos*) only to God, whereas human beings are merely worthy of being referred to as “lovers of wisdom” (*philosophos*) in the sense of God-like spectators (*Phaedrus*, 278d). This idea is also developed by Aristotle (1988) in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.7 1177b31–1178a8.

³² Plato, *Rep.* 501a.

“that there is an absolute norm of reason not just for any *polis*, but for the whole of humanity that stands in the unity of culture-creative communal relations.”³³ Against the political ethos of the Classical period, which accentuated the role of particular deities as the foundation of *polis*, the philosophical critique introduced an idea of universal justification that could be applied to the political domain as such.

But it was exactly here that the Greek political philosophy found itself in conflict with the teleological horizon of philosophy. Rather than defending the fundamental inexhaustibility of the ideal *polis*, both Plato and Aristotle committed themselves to the idea of a *single normative model* of good governance that can simply be implemented into existing political reality. As Plato argued in the *Republic*, the righteous “figure of governance” (*schēma tēs politeias*) was founded on a heavenly model of ideal *polis*, a model that was eternal and immovable.³⁴ Aristotle, likewise, saw that “in all places there is only one form of government that is natural, namely, the best form.”³⁵ Despite cultural differences and the level of development in societies, all political communities would find their consummation in this singular ideal.

Accordingly, Husserl’s critical confrontation with the idealist tradition of Western political philosophy was based on a twofold reading of its Greek origins. On the one hand, Husserl appreciated the fundamentally idealist motive of Greek political philosophy, which refused to take any historical form of governance as a given, but rather subsumed all of them into critical inspection. Following this political reduction, the thinkers of the Classical period distinguished between two types of political discourse, the real and the ideal, and argued for the normative primacy of the latter. However, rather than accommodating the discourse on the ideal *polis* into the teleological horizon of philosophy, both Plato and Aristotle defended the possibility of defining the characteristics of this *eidōs* in an exact and definite manner. They thus modeled their reflections on a particular type of ideality, namely, the *exact ideality* characteristic of mathematics, geometry, and logic. Politics, understood in this sense, could not accommodate within itself any kind of change or development, nor was it capable of answering the concrete demands of a particular, historical lifeworld.

As Husserl seemed to insist, this idealism was to be rearticulated in regard to both the infinitely open horizon of philosophical production as well the actual state of the present moment. Political reflection, rather than appearing as a search for a single, static model of governance, was to be made both dynamic as well as responsive to actual circumstances of the present moment. As I claim, Husserl prepared this novel

³³ “Denn die naturgemäße Konsequenz seines entworfenen Staatsideals ist es, daß nicht nur für irgendeine Polis, sondern für die ganze in Einheit kulturschaffender Gemeinschaftsbeziehungen stehende Menschheit eine absolute Norm der Vernunft bestehe, daß sie sich, wenn sie zu einer wahren und echten Menschheit werden soll, organisieren muß zu einer von autonomer Vernunft und der Vernunft in der objektivierten Form echter universaler Philosophie geleiteten Menschheit.” Husserl (1988a) HuaXXVII: 87. As Depraz (1995), 11) points out, Husserl also speaks of a “universal ethical *epochē*” (cf. Husserl (1959) HuaVIII:319), which she reads in terms of an acquiring of a non-ideological standpoint for a political community.

³⁴ Plato, *Resp.* 592b.

³⁵ Aristotle (1988), *Nic. Eth.* 1135a4-5.

concept of political idealism that is both dynamic as well as responsive to the present moment in his post-war writings on individual ethics. While he did not fully elaborate the consequences of this teleological understanding of ethics for political reflection, I believe it is possible to launch a sustained critique against the typical understanding of political idealism, including that of the ordoliberal tradition.

3 Absolute and relative ideals: rethinking political idealism

Husserl's post-war reflections on individual ethics were based on a new emphasis on the self-reflective capabilities of the human individual and the teleological character of ethical striving as a whole. Instead of the formal-axiological approach characteristic of his early ethical writings, Husserl began to approach the question of ethical justification from an Aristotelian standpoint, that is, from the development of moral capabilities within human life as a whole. The basic question of ethics, Husserl argued, was to be located in the development of the "true personal self" understood as complete self-responsibility for ethical decisions, convictions and acquired norms. Thus, instead of a search for universal norms, ethical life was understood as a constantly developing idea—an "ideal self" that can only be approached in the constant self-inspection of the ethical individual.³⁶

Thus, in the context of *Kaizo* essays, Husserl defined this ethical striving in regard to two distinct "ideals of perfection" (*Vollkommenheitsidealen*).³⁷ First, the ethical ideal of the true and real self can be understood as a *relative ideal* denoting a form of life that is justifiable on the basis of those concrete conditions and actual possibilities that define the particular situation of the individual. A wealthy heir obviously has different possibilities of doing good things than, for instance, a single mother who is forced to do three-shift work in order to provide for her family. Accordingly, this relative ideal corresponds with the ethical imperative formulated by Brentano: "Do the best among the achievable!"³⁸ This relative ideal, however, does not exhaust the sphere of ethical ideals. Instead, it serves as a point of departure for what Husserl calls the "absolute ideal" of the ethical human being, which denotes not only the best possible justification of one's acts but the full realization and perfection of rational capabilities *in toto*. This absolute ideal, which Husserl sometimes calls the "idea of God", denotes nothing less than a life defined by the full transparency of one's decisions, convictions and norms—an idea of absolute justification that is able to overcome the finitude of individual perspectives for the sake of an all-encompassing view of the possibilities and consequences of ethical acts. As such, this absolute ideal is, of course, unattainable and can only be anticipated in an "undefined generality," for instance, by referring to certain exemplary figures that have transcended existing ideas of what it means to be a good person.³⁹

³⁶ On the ideal self, see e.g. HuaXIV: 174ff.

³⁷ Husserl (1988a) HuaXXVII: 33ff.

³⁸ Husserl (1988b) HuaXXVIII: 221.

³⁹ For Husserl on Christ as an exemplary figure, see Husserl (1988a) HuaXXVII: 100ff. See also Depraz (2000).

Accordingly, this Husserlian understanding of ethical idealism allows itself to be characterized in two distinct regards. As such, it differs from the typical Kantian understanding of ethical justification that it be bound to the universal and indefinite repeatability of a particular act, formulated by Kant's maxim: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law."⁴⁰ This idea of ethical justification that takes the form of universal law, however, does not say anything about the relativity of our historical, cultural and social situation. As already pointed out, different people have indeed different possibilities of acting and doing good things: even after paying taxes, I may have the possibility of donating a small sum of money for charitable purposes, but I cannot demand this from everyone. Even though this act lacks universality, Husserl would argue, it is still confined to the relative ideal of ethical life and its imperative to strive at "the best possible at a given moment" (*das zur Zeit bestmögliche*).⁴¹ This relativity of the ethical criterion, however, does not entail simple relativism. Instead, it simply elucidates the essentially finite character of our human striving, our embeddedness in a concrete lifeworld and its structural confines. We can only do our best on the basis of those capabilities and conditions that have been given to us.

Now, if the relative ideal already contains within itself the idea of the "best possible", what purpose does the absolute ideal serve? Again, Husserl's answer breaks with the Kantian understanding of ethical justification. First, following the theory of the "transcendental person," it belongs to human life that once we commit ourselves to certain goals and norms, they tend to become a part of our personality and our abiding directedness to the world. In other words, convictions and choices become conventional or habitual in the sense that we do not think of their grounds and justification. Quite the contrary, it is often through these conventions (e.g. eating, worshipping, working) that we become social beings in the first place. Here, the horizon of infinite perfectibility that defines the absolute ideal simply reminds us of our finitude and warns against the kind of premature satisfaction that arises from individual good acts. Thus, it is precisely the *relativity* of the "relative ideal" that the absolute ideal reveals. But it also shows that unlike for Kant, for Husserl the ethical subject cannot be understood as a formal transcendental principle, an empty pole of reference devoid of any particular attributes. Rather, in the manner of the transcendental ego the ethical self is "always mine," that is, a concrete, constituted subject with certain facilities and capabilities. For this reason, ethical justification is not a matter of mere external principles or law, but is fundamentally related to the self-reflection of the ethical subject. As Husserl himself puts it—in the manner that reminds one of the "paradox of subjectivity" formulated in the *Crisis*—the ethical subject is both "the subject as well as the object of her striving."⁴²

On the basis of this line of thought, it is possible to understand why Husserl emphasized the role of "renewal" (*Erneuerung*) as the "guiding theme of all

⁴⁰ "[H]andle nur nach derjenigen Maxime, durch die du zugleich wollen kannst, daß sie ein allgemeines Gesetz werde." Kant (1998), Akad.-A IV, 421.

⁴¹ Husserl (1988a) HuaXXVII: 36.

⁴² "Er ist Subjekt und zugleich Objekt seines Strebens, das ins Unendliche werdende Werk, dessen Werkmeister er selbst ist." Husserl (1988a) HuaXXVII: 37.

ethics.”⁴³ The idea of responsibility, which is at the heart of all ethical justification, does not concern mere individual acts or decisions, but it must be understood as a dynamic principle that concerns the ethical life in its concreteness, in its historically and culturally varying forms. This life is realized not only on the basis of best possible evidence but on the basis of a recurring critical reflection that is targeted towards one’s beliefs, pretensions, habits and capabilities: ethical responsibility is fundamentally *self-responsibility*. For this reason, the ethical life that realizes itself in the striving for ideals makes sense only as a teleological idea: I can naturally replace bad or unfounded habits and convictions with new ones, but without reflecting my previous decisions and life as a whole, I can never be sure that they are a turn for the better. In fact, ethical reflection is fundamentally *inexact* in the sense that I can never fully trust that any of my choices allow themselves to be absolutely justified. The absolute ideal of ethical life can only be understood on the basis of this “infinite task” of striving for the better on the basis of relative ideals and their renewal.⁴⁴ Ethical idealism, as Husserl emphasized, can only be appreciated as a kind of self-elevation (*Selbsterhöhung*) that elevates the subject from “valuelessness to a lesser valuelessness.”⁴⁵ Ideals themselves are not to be realized in this world.

It is exactly here, I argue, that phenomenology provides a radical alternative to the classical understanding of political idealism. As Husserl himself put it in his social-ethical texts, it is necessary to distinguish between the “absolute ideals” of the best possible world and the best possible humanity on the one hand, and “factual ideals” of this world on the other—a distinction that can be understood as parallel to the distinction between absolute and relative ideals in individual ethics.⁴⁶ To say that the normative ideal of a community is to be understood as a “valuable *becoming* towards the infinite [...] as the infinite pole-idea of absolutely realizable value,”⁴⁷ is to say that, fundamentally, particular visions of governance that univocally delineate the “best polity” cannot consummate the full sense of political idealism. Instead, this idealism can only be understood as a dynamic principle governing the teleological development of humanity at large. As in the case of individual ethics, absolute political ideals can only be anticipated in an undefined generality, for our understanding of the “best possible” is always defined by a culturally and historically relative situation. From the Husserlian point of view, what traditional political philosophies have lacked is the distinction between “relative” and “absolute” ideals of perfection. In most cases, these philosophies have simply *absolutized* a particular relative form such as the Platonic “schema,” the Aristotelian “natural form,” or the ideally functioning “political economy” of ordoliberal thinkers. Political idealism, according to this view, must be fundamentally dynamic, not static.

What this new kind of political idealism entailed for Husserl was hinted at, though somewhat vaguely, in his lectures on Fichte’s political philosophy. By discussing the

⁴³ Husserl (1988a) HuaXXVII: 20.

⁴⁴ On the ideal ethical self as an “infinite task”, see HuaXIV: 174.

⁴⁵ Husserl (1988a) HuaXXVII: 38.

⁴⁶ Husserl (2004) HuaXXXVII: 320.

⁴⁷ Husserl (1959) HuaVIII:200.

distinction between the tasks of the philosopher and the politician characteristic of German idealists, Husserl referred to the idea of “the noble politician who finds his blessedness by working on the preservation and formation of the order of an ideal community in accord with the particular ideas which are normative for this community.”⁴⁸ Every righteous politician (or political critic) must be a bit of a philosopher as well, for it is always necessary to distance oneself from the spell of power or the weight of tradition and take full responsibility for one’s views and choices. Ethical politics, in this regard, is always fundamentally idealistic: it is necessarily critical of the given political reality. At the same time, a genuine politician must also be equipped with reflexivity towards the actual social reality. In a world of finite resources, s/he must understand the concrete constraints of the material world. But it is also necessary to take into account the concrete history of a particular community. Simply dismissing existing traditions for the sake of a formal ideal would entail that one does away with the very process of constitution that characterizes the community in the first place, the bonds that knit together the social fabric.

As we know, it is specifically here that we encounter some of the most difficult problems of modern-day societies, the conflicts of interest that characterize conservative and radical demands on how societies should organize themselves. In the presence of a nearing ecological catastrophe, what kinds of demands is it possible to impose on people and their concrete situations, their typical habits of production and consumption? How is it possible to promote ideals of freedom and equality in societies without simply destroying existing forms of social cohesion? In this regard, I would argue in line with Husserl’s self-description, phenomenology is “fundamentally apolitical.”⁴⁹ It does not touch upon the substantial side of the political realm, the concrete decisions and solutions characteristic of the Lefortian *la politique*, day-to-day politics. The political implications of phenomenology are primarily formal in the sense that they deal with the conditions of possibility of the constitution of the political realm and its critique. As Eugen Fink once argued, phenomenology does not lead to a “humanitarian ideal of democracy” and it may turn out to be weak in opposing “the fascist doctrine attacking the idea of humanity.” “The whole setting of the problem,” he wrote, “leads into the other side of the political struggle, the battle for the philosophical meaning of the human being.”⁵⁰ This battle, however, takes place within the scope of an infinite task.

4 Conclusion

As I have argued in this article, Husserl’s phenomenological reformulation of political idealism ought to be conceived of in two regards. First, political philosophy should be idealistic, and this primarily in the sense of fundamental anti-realism:

⁴⁸ “Endlich auch der edle Politiker, der seine Seligkeit dann findet, an der Ordnung sozialer Gemeinschaft nach den für sie maßgebenden besonderen Idealen erhaltend und gestaltend zu arbeiten [...]” Husserl (1986) HuaXXV: 289.

⁴⁹ See Husserl’s letter to his son in Schuhmann (1988, 18–19).

⁵⁰ This statement is quoted in HuaXXIX: xx.

instead of merely confining itself with existing institutions of power, it should make possible the realization of genuine responsibility and the creation of new modes of communality. Political imagination, as a worldly activity, can only realize itself in the form of relative ideals. But even more importantly, philosophical reflection should constantly remind us of the finitude and one-sided character of these ideals. Following Jean Baudrillard, philosophy should be critical of “achieved utopias”⁵¹ that are often at the heart of national imaginaries—it should warn us from taking the existing political institutions or forms of governance as the final truth of the political domain. Instead of providing final solutions, political idealism ought to prepare us for the difficult task of genuine political critique, a critique which is not simply destructive but which can nurture the creation of new ideas and ideals on the basis of an open horizon of future development. Political utopianism, understood in this sense, is necessarily dynamic and reflective of the actual reality.

In this regard, phenomenology provides a radical alternative to our current political imaginary that is laden by the constant demands of different crises: political, social, and economic. For it belongs to the concept of crisis, through its medical background, that it constantly focuses our attention on the demands of the present *and the present only*. By rendering political choices into simple decisions between “life and death” (e.g. austerity for poorer countries vs. the collapse of the euro zone, bailing out the banks vs. complete economic catastrophe), crises not only lose the temporal horizons of past and future but they often simply end up playing by the accepted “rules of the game.” Crises, rather than appearing as genuine decisions on what ought to be done, commit themselves uncritically to pre-existing ideas of the political domain and its respective rationalities (e.g. price stability, the functioning of the market place). Therefore, it is necessary to confront critically the kind of idealism that decides, in advance, what are the goals and *raison d’être* of politics in the first place for the sake of a more radical idealism that is able to challenge all pre-existing doctrines of what politics should be about. This idealism of fundamental critique and renewal, I argue, was in the scope of Husserl’s phenomenological project.

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⁵¹ Baudrillard (1988, 73).

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