



Practical concepts and intentional understanding: on the lineage of beginning phenomenology

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Abstract

The critique of pure sense data is a characteristic feature of contemporary philosophy, from Wittgenstein and Heidegger to Martha Nussbaum and Ernst Tugendhat. These authors variously call into question that the data of sensation should be taken as primordial. Other contemporary authors have responded to this general critique starting from considerations about the role of sensory states, often referred to as “qualia,” in our experiential awareness. In this paper, I suggest that the philosophy of science of Ernst Mach is especially paradigmatic in that it displays in one same intellectual effort the presence of these two polarizing views in the philosophical discussion of the twentieth century. In Mach a radical biological and epistemic pragmatism coexists with the most extreme sensual elementism. I show that Mach is at the same time the proponent of a phenomenological lineage that Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, is aware to take up and continue. What I propose is that Husserl’s phenomenology emerges as true juncture between the extremes of sensualism and pragmatism by way of a recasting of the modern intentionalist conceptions of experience beyond any mentalist and realist paradigm.

Keywords Sensation · Pragmatism · Positivism · Phenomenology · Causality · Intention

1 Introduction

A way to preface the few remarks that I am about to make in this essay is to say that a question mark in the title would have been more appropriate so as to indicate a problematic field rather than what may appear to be the simple statement of a thesis. Are concepts practical or only practical? Does meaning lie in use, as some

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main strains of twentieth-century philosophy argue? Is the interpretive character of experience motivated by practical spontaneity, and perhaps even structured according to social rules, or is the phenomenal field a field with a strong practical orientation which however remains conditioned by natural influence? What are the implications of choosing between these options for conceptual reflection and the rationality of our conceptual awareness? In what follows I will approach these very general questions with reference to a pivotal juncture in the history of philosophy of the past century. This juncture is also a watershed. I suggest that the philosophy of science of Ernst Mach is especially paradigmatic as displaying in one same intellectual effort the presence of two polarizing views framing the philosophical discussion in the twentieth century. In Mach a radical biological and epistemic pragmatism coexists with the most extreme sensual elementism (Part 2). Mach is at the same time the proponent of a phenomenological lineage that Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, is aware to take up and continue. What I suggest is that Husserl's phenomenology emerges as true juncture between the extremes of sensualism and pragmatism by way of a recasting of the modern intentionalist conceptions of experience beyond any mentalist and realist paradigm (Part 3).

If ideas and concepts are always ideas and concepts of someone who thinks them, then this simple – yet by no means naïve – point makes clear one main fundamental problem that underlies the struggle with the questions just outlined: namely that there is a very real history, filled with its contingency and openness, behind the well-definite rubrics of themes and concepts to be found in handbooks of philosophy. But as a matter of fact, concepts and the person or persons thinking them are so interlaced as to be the two faces of one sole phenomenon that we could call “sense.” Thus, I shall begin with a brief reference to circumstances that may well appear to be superficial and yet are also revelatory of the living trajectory of the philosophical ideas that have been bequeathed to us (Part 1).

2 Part 1: Friends and foes from Vienna to Amsterdam

In 1898, Ernst Mach held a chair at the University of Vienna devoted to “philosophy,” with a focus on “the history and theory of inductive sciences.” In the same year, Mach suffered a stroke, which made it increasingly difficult for him to fulfill his academic duties. He retired from his post in 1901. Now, the name of Edmund Husserl appeared among the prospective candidates for Mach's chair in Vienna. It was however Ludwig Boltzmann who was appointed to the vacant chair, succeeded by Adolf Stöhr, and, in 1922, by Moritz Schlick, one of the central figures in the Vienna Circle.¹

In 1901, Husserl went to visit Mach during the Easter holidays, and also communicated with Mach by correspondence in June of that same year. While both the meeting and the correspondence may not be unrelated to the fact that

¹ On the aspects of commonality between positivism and phenomenology, and not only the historical but also systematic plausibility of Husserl's candidacy, see Sommer (1988).

Husserl was shortlisted for Mach's chair, it is especially important to notice that the exchange between Mach and Husserl in 1901 took place *after* Husserl's resolute critique of psychologism in his first volume of the *Logical Investigations*, which included a critique of the theory of the "economy of thought" [*Denkökonomie*], and the biological and anthropological basis of all rational thinking advocated by Mach, as well as by Richard Avenarius.²

Mach had offered a brief reply to this critique in the fourth German edition of his *Science of Mechanics*, also published in 1901, a copy of which he sent to Husserl in May of that year. In a brief appendix to this work, Mach contests that "the investigations of Husserl have affected the results of my inquiries," while remaining essentially ambiguous as to the actual target of Husserl's critique. If Mach takes the "biologico-psychological investigation" of the sciences as a necessity, he then also adds that "[m]ental economy is [...] a very clear logical ideal." At the same time, he takes logical thinking as "an ideal limiting case" of a "biological and organic phenomenon," while also indicating that for him "the investigation can be begun at both ends."³

This status and place of ideality in logic, together with the objectivity attaching to it, was however precisely the kind of problem that Husserl aimed at clarifying and securing in his *Prolegomena to Pure Logic* against any misunderstanding about its dependency on psychological or biological data. In a letter written to Mach in June of 1901, Husserl reiterates his opposition to the "subordination of the epistemological clarification of the purely logical in science from the point of view of psychological genesis and biological adaptation." Yet he adds the point that the pure-logical and practical-logical approaches to knowledge "are not mutually exclusive," so that, he continues, "I dare say that between our respective investigations there is in principle no conflict."⁴

Mach's reply arrived only a few days later and in extreme conciseness struck a conciliatory tone: "I do not have anything to object to Your considerations and it is my hope to achieve full agreement." There is no follow-up on the part of Husserl.

However, when Husserl speaks of the deracinating theorizing that, stemming from objective science, has come to determine our common view of the human being and of life in the world (the scientific idealizations, especially those crystallizing around the physicalistic naturalism of modern natural science, are said to be in the *Crisis* a "cloak of ideas"), then Husserl explicitly recognizes genuine agreement between his phenomenological project and Mach's epistemology and philosophy of science.

In the Amsterdam lectures, delivered in 1928, when talking about the origin of phenomenology, Husserl states his opposition to the "bottomless theorizing" in the sciences and points out a continuity between his own thinking and that of

² For a summative account of *Denkökonomie* and Husserl's critical treatment of this theory, see Lübke (1972, 37–42); Sommer (1988, 311–319).

³ Mach (1919, 579–582).

⁴ Hua Dok III (VI), 255–257. Volumes in *Husserliana* and *Husserliana Dokumente* are cited as Hua and Hua Dok respectively, with Roman volume number and Arabic page reference.

“phenomenological predecessors.” “At the turn of the century,” Husserl writes, the “new science” of “*phenomenology*”

was developed through a certain radicalizing of an already existing phenomenological method which individual natural scientists and psychologists had previously demanded and practiced. The sense of this method in men like Mach and Hering lay in a reaction against the threatening groundlessness of theorizing [*die Bodenlosigkeit des Theoretisierens*] in the exact natural sciences. It was a reaction against a mode of theorizing in mathematical speculations and concept-forming which is distant from intuition [*anschauungsferne Begriffsbildungen*], a theorizing which accomplished neither clarity with insight, in any legitimate sense, nor the production of theories.⁵

Husserl’s phenomenology, as recognized by Husserl himself, followed into the footsteps of “phenomenological” predecessors like Mach insofar as Mach’s project presented itself as a critique of knowledge [*Erkenntniskritik*].⁶ What is distinctive of Husserl’s own critique of knowledge is that the renewed radicalism of his epistemological clarification of cognition is grafted on a wholesale project of the critique of reason and rationality that has both theoretical and ethical import. This project aims to supply a “space of reason” [*geistiger Raum*] in the vacuum of reason left by the “groundless” theorizing in the natural sciences, which for Husserl must coincide with the forfeiting of ultimate scientific intelligibility itself.⁷ Husserl’s task of a critique of reason thus responds to a deeper crisis of reason underlying the history of modern philosophy. In spite of Descartes’ radicalism about the foundations of knowledge, the project of modern science that Descartes intended to justify was driven by the practical ideal of mastery over nature.⁸ The technocratic orientation of modern science remains a determining factor in the definition of the task and meaning of human rationality in the nineteenth century, as evidenced eminently by the work of Hermann von Helmholtz, for whom scientific knowledge aims at achieving “the progressive mastery over natural powers.”⁹ In light of this instrumental teleology of modern reason, the theoretical concern about a lack of adequate critique and clarification of knowledge and its possibility as objective or “ideal” will assume an increasingly ethical significance in the face of the tragedy of the World War and the spreading of the intellectual relativism of “world-views,” both of which would become for Husserl the most dramatic symptoms of the abdication of scientific self-responsibility on the part of European humanity. In

⁵ Hua IX, 302.

⁶ In the first draft of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* article, Husserl reinforces the point about the continuity of phenomenological lineage: “The term *phenomenology* is generally understood to designate a philosophical movement, arising at the turn of this century, that has proposed a radical new grounding of a scientific philosophy and thereby of all sciences.” Hua IX, 237. About this reference, cf. also Hintikka (2001, 6–7); Lübke (1972, 42–43).

⁷ Cf. de Warren (2009, 12ff.).

⁸ See Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, Part VI.

⁹ Helmholtz (1896, 373–374). Cf. Ash (1998, 56–57).

this context, while Mach's "analysis of sensations," as I shall outline below, became the catalyst for a renewed epistemological radicalism, Mach's pragmatic view of scientific knowledge remained insufficiently critical with respect to its historical and conceptual presuppositions stemming from the modern period. On the other hand, Husserl drew inspiration from the rationalist and transcendental traditions in philosophy for his radical recasting of the scope, aims, and idea of human rationality as such, but he intended to renew the original intuition about the *apriori* character of reason from and beyond these traditions. The outcome of this refashioning of reason was to revisit the very sense of the teleological structure of reason beyond its theoretical inadequacies and instrumental limitations, and thus shed genuine light on the enigma of the "deepest essential interrelation between reason and being as such."¹⁰

3 Part 2: Sensualism and pragmatism in Mach's philosophy of science

One of the aims of the *Prolegomena to Pure Logic* is the determination of the theoretical significance of logic beyond its mere normative import for the empirical orientation of procedures of thinking.¹¹ This determination of logic as pure theoretical science is established upon the distinction between the ideal and the real, which Husserl calls "the most fundamental epistemological distinction."¹² At the same time, at the bottom of Husserl's concern in the *Logical Investigations* is the descriptive study of the kind of experience which a cognizing subject has when he or she takes hold and grasps idealities, such as those of logic. Again, this is for Husserl not to be taken as the determination of actual processes that can be observed empirically in a psychic or biological substance. Yet in the way Husserl approaches the study of consciousness and knowledge, especially as capable of grasping ideal meaning, a question central to much of twentieth-century philosophy arises and is dealt with from the beginning, that is, the question about the relationship of our idealizing achievements in theoretical and scientific explanation to their experiential origin. For Husserl this is more specifically the question about how conceptual meanings, as ideal, have their ultimate source and ground in perceptual experience and what comes to be given in it.¹³ It is in light of the kind of radical thrust to base all conceptual knowledge on the level of sensible experience that Ernst Mach emerged as a crucial figure in the background of this discussion at the turn of the twentieth century.

¹⁰ Hua VI, 12.

¹¹ See in particular in the *Prolegomena*, chs. 1 and 2; ch. 8, pars. 41–43; ch. 11.

¹² Hua XVIII, 190–191.

¹³ At issue in this question, especially in the later texts on the *Crisis of the European Sciences*, there was not only the status of the rational performance of science as such, but to a large extent also the question of how the implications of scientific methods and findings should be interpreted *within* the efforts of scientific rationality.

Mach's radically positivistic project is a dramatic display of that "phenomenological method" emerging at the turn of the century to which Husserl links up his own project as "phenomenological," and which aimed at a radical reconstruction of scientific philosophy. For Mach, in order to achieve a radical reform of the epistemological presuppositions of science, what needs to be striven for is a purely presuppositionless description of the data of experience. However, the first given is here not physical bodies, brains, sense organs, or even consciousness, but *sensations*. Sensation is nothing immediately subjective for Mach, but rather something neutral and indifferent to any distinction between subject and object, matter and soul, or the physical and the psychical.¹⁴ Thus, sensation is really just a placeholder for *what is first* in experience. It is therefore understandable that another term for "sensation" is *element*: "As to sensation, one must not try to explain it: it is something so simple and fundamental that it is impossible, as least at present, to reduce it to something even simpler."¹⁵ Everything is sensation, and this premise is meant to ground the very possibility of science and its "concepts."¹⁶

Now the aim and task of science is precisely that of keeping "firm hold on the immediately given" and of investigating the "connections between the characteristics of the given."¹⁷ All we need to do is to describe the way in which the sensations or elements are related to each other as they display consistent patterns of various degrees of permanence: "what the special sciences can really explore" is "the complex interdependence of the elements."¹⁸ Science is ultimately "the finding out of the direct connections between the elements."¹⁹

At the same time, the *aim* of the concept is that of enabling an orientation among the complex intertwining of facts.²⁰ The "scientific concept" is "the *consciousness*, which is tied to the *word* or name, of the *reactions* that ought to be expected from a certain class of objects (facts)."²¹ All natural science thus aims to find out

¹⁴ Cf. Mach's letter to Gabrielle Rabel from 1906, quoted in Sommer (1988, 323).

¹⁵ Mach (1906, 44). "Nature is composed of sensations as its elements." Mach (1919, 482).

¹⁶ On this point, see Sommer's reference to Richard Höningwald's study on Mach's philosophy in Sommer (1988, 321–322).

¹⁷ Mach (1906, 13n1).

¹⁸ "Indem das, was zu erforschen überhaupt keinen Sinn hat, ausgeschieden wird, tritt das wirklich durch die *Spezialwissenschaften* Erforschbare um so deutlicher hervor: die *mannigfaltige, allseitige Abhängigkeit der Elemente voneinander*." Mach (1906, 15). Elements, or sensations, Mach writes in *The Science of Mechanics*, "are not signs of the thing; but, on the contrary, a thing is a thought-symbol for a compound sensation of relative fixedness." Mach (1919, 483).

¹⁹ "Auch dem Naturforscher kann unsere Überlegung nur *ein Ideal* weisen, dessen annähernde allmähliche Verwirklichung der Forschung der Zukunft vorbehalten bleibt. Die Ermittlung der direkten Abhängigkeit der Elemente voneinander ist eine Aufgabe von solcher Komplikation, dass sie nicht auf einmal, sondern nur schrittweise gelöst werden kann." Mach (1906, 16). See also Mach (1906, 30, 203, 282, *et passim*).

²⁰ "Der Zweck des Begriffes ist es, in der verwirrenden Verwicklung der Tatsachen sich zurecht zu finden." Mach (1906, 135). "Die Naturgesetze sind nach unserer Auffassung ein Erzeugnis unseres *psychologischen* Bedürfnisses, uns in der Natur zurecht zu finden." Mach (1906, 453–454).

²¹ "Auf der höchsten Stufe der Entwicklung ist der *Begriff* das an das *Wort*, den Terminus, gebundene *Bewußtsein* von den *Reaktionen*, die man von der bezeichneten Klasse von Objekten (Tatsachen) zu erwarten hat." Mach (1906, 133–134).

“constancies of nexus,” and thus “the *connection of reactions, of dependency of reactions among themselves.*”²²

In other words, the subject who applies a concept knows that certain modes of behavior of the object will be observed as a result of the setting up or production of certain circumstances. This is why the “concept” is also said to be a “directive” of the possible reactions of the animal or human organism in relation to facts:

The concept, however, is not a finished idea, but body of directions [*Anweisung*] for testing some actually existing idea with respect to certain properties, or constructing some idea from given properties. The definition of the concept, or the name of the concept, releases a definite activity, a definite reaction, which has a definite result. The manner of the reaction, as well as the result, must find its expression in consciousness, and both are characteristic of the concept. A body is electric when it exhibits sensible properties in certain reactions. Copper is a body of which the bluish-green solution in dilute sulphuric acid exhibits a certain behavior when subjected to a certain treatment, and so on.²³

A “concept” is in science nothing but the prediction of a series of *sensible features* that appear as a result of *certain* instrumental, technical *operations*, thus the application of the concept represents a “system of operations.”²⁴ The operational determination of the concept in Mach stresses the role of contextual possibilities of action of experiential things in our surroundings as a condition for establishing conceptual identity. What concepts explicate is an essentially open nexus of conditional sentences having an instrumental operation as their antecedent and a sensible feature that comes to display itself in the thing as a result of this operation as their consequent.²⁵

After these rather sketchy remarks, there are two points that I would like to make:

First, “sensation” has been traditionally regarded in terms of passive receptivity. This idea of pure *sense data* has been variously attacked in the course of the twentieth century, in particular calling into question that the data of sensation should

²² “So wie es biologisch wichtig ist, durch Beobachtung den Zusammenhang von Reaktionen – Aussehen einer Frucht und deren Nährwert – zu konstatieren, so geht auch jede Naturwissenschaft darauf aus, *Beständigkeiten* des Zusammenhanges oder der *Verbindung der Reaktionen, der Abhängigkeit der Reaktionen voneinander* aufzufinden.” Mach (1906, 135). According to this view, the natural law is defined as a “narrowing of possibilities” or “of expectation” (*Einschränkung der Möglichkeiten, Einschränkung der Erwartung*). See Mach (1906, 450, 452). In a statement from *The Science of Mechanics*, the economic-pragmatic implication of this point is made even more forcefully: “The function of science, as we take it, is to replace experience [...] Experience alone, without the ideas that are associated with it, would forever remain strange to us. Those ideas that hold good throughout the widest domains of research and that supplement the greatest amount of experience, are the *most scientific* [...] The idea makes experience intelligible to us; it supplements and supplants experience.” Mach (1919, 490–491).

²³ Mach (1986, 381).

²⁴ See on this point, Rang (1990, 101).

²⁵ “Ein naturwissenschaftlicher Satz hat immer nur den *hypothetischen* Sinn: Wenn die Tatsache A genau den Begriffen M entspricht, so entspricht die Folge B genau den Begriffen N; so genau als A den M, so genau entspricht B den N.” Mach (1906, 456). Cf. also Mach (1906, 266–270).

be taken as primordial. According to this critique, what is given in sensation, and its corresponding passive “impression,” is not at all what is first in experience but rather already an abstract construct. Yet Mach’s radical commitment to a description of the phenomenally given world was not just a naïve form of elementism. The main point of Mach’s theory of sensation is that things in our experience are combinations of elements, and elements – colors, sounds, etc. – are themselves nothing but ordered systems of relations in a nexus with other elements. In this sense, perceptual phenomena appear originally as relational wholes or we could also say, according to the psychological tradition, as “forms” (*Gestalten*).²⁶ In this way, Mach intended to offer a radical critique of the physicalist prejudice about *real substantial* elements as final ontological components of the actually existing world and as underlying the appearances of the sensible world. This is the proper “phenomenological” aspect of Mach’s positivism that arose as the antecedent of Husserl’s brand of phenomenological philosophy. Jan Patočka recognized this central point very early in his habilitation thesis: “Positivism has the merit of inquiring into *the phenomenon as phenomenon*, a question that materialism does not consider of primary importance. And this is the question that leads, by virtue of its inner logic, to the discovery of the problem of the natural world as the ‘subjective’ basis upon which the search for objectivity and progressive objectification first becomes meaningful.”²⁷ In other words, the work of various psychologists, physiologists, and philosophers such as Mach, Avenarius, Hering, but also, albeit inspired by a different tradition, Franz Brentano, among others, began to refashion the traditional concepts of experience, reality, and knowledge together with the epistemological problems arising from them by variously turning to the workings of sensation as a primordial manner of givenness. In one way or another, these authors shared the common conviction that concepts originate from sensible experience.²⁸

This positivist phenomenology coexisted all the same with the positivist tendency that interpreted the object of perceptual experience as an assemblage or bundle of basic sensible *elements*.²⁹ Yet the aspect of the *datum* or the given stresses even in this context the essential fact that in sensation there is at play a doing that I do not do. Sense perception, rather than being an act of subjective imposition giving form to some sturdy material substance, again according to a long-standing history in philosophy, displays an impositional sense quite distinct from that of physicalist

²⁶ Cf. Lübbe (1972, 61); Cassirer (1950, 100–101); Rang (1990, 334n128); Patočka (2016, 16; 137).

²⁷ Patočka (2016, 137).

²⁸ For the thesis about the sensible origin of concepts within the positivist program of a “neutral monism,” see Patočka (2016, 137). In connection to Franz Brentano’s thesis of the origin of consciousness in a sensible form of affectivity, see de Warren (2009, 73–74). It should be noted that Husserl’s own phenomenology must reject both programs as two different forms of naturalism since both take mental life or “spirit” as ultimately grounded either in a bundle of atomic “elements” and their composition or in the physiology of the human organism in the context of a physical reality that alone counts as the “real” world. Husserl rejects these metaphysical “realisms” by crafting his brand of phenomenology in the shape of a transcendental idealism that recasts and combines elements of transcendental criticism with positivist phenomenology and intentionalist psychology.

²⁹ Cf. Lübbe (1972, 60–61). For a paradigmatic critique of the positivist assumption about sense data, specifically directed towards Mach, see Cassirer (1950, 102).

naturalism and more descriptive of the way the actuality of the world and its happenings come to be experienced concretely in the life of an incarnated and sentient being.

However, and this is the second point I would like to make, while Mach claimed that the single sensation is neither conscious nor unconscious, he also added that “nothing can become the object of experience or science unless it can in some way enter consciousness,” and he must therefore conclude that “*sensation becomes conscious through its inclusion in the experiences of the present.*”³⁰ But then one ought to ask where else one would have to begin in order to meaningfully describe the given if not precisely from this living present in which something begins to be actually there for me *in* the flow of sensations – even though no proper “me” is there in full reflective awareness. Sensible complexes, if they are to have any meaning at all, ultimately must indicate those aspects of the world for which we are receptive, and which are received precisely in that they somehow affect us in our ongoingly present living. Yet the givenness of sensible qualities as actual and as actually mattering to us by way of affection can hardly be interpreted in terms of sheer passivity outside of any combination with some kind of “action.” In connection with his theory of concept, Mach writes that “[t]he first movements of newly born animals are responses to outward or inward excitations, and these excitations are effected mechanically without the intervention of the intellect (the memory), and have their foundation in inherited organization.”³¹ This is not at all “action” in the sense of the taking up of actions I choose to carry out and that I can assign to myself but rather the activation of the passivity itself as capacity to be affected by contents that only then can be said to be truly “experiential.” In other words, one cannot properly speak of sensation *data* without at the same time implying the aspect of the *feeling* and even aspects pertaining to *drives*, all aspects that may be non-egoic or “unconscious” but that are intrinsic to the way in which reality becomes manifestable and thus accessible to full fledged conscious intentional grasping in perceptual experience.

Thus, a fundamental tension seems to run through Mach’s analysis of experience and knowledge along what could be called “aesthetic” and “practical” axes. On the one hand, when the issue for him is the critique of the metaphysical dualism of scientific physicalism, then pure description of the sense-experiential takes the lead to establish the sensible dimension as the ultimate ground for the integrative springing forth of reality. What this means is that any scientific conception making assertions about what should be taken as truly basic reality depends ultimately on what actually comes to be available for investigation within the essential restrictions imposed by sense-experiential demonstrative observation and verification. Here the focus is on the aesthetic-natural aspect of experience. On the other hand, when the issue is that of the epistemological grounding of an especially successful scientific

³⁰ Mach (1906, 13n1 and 44).

³¹ Mach (1986, 378). This aspect of affectivity is linked to activity not only on the level of instinct but also on the level of voluntary action as producing expected qualitative contents in appearance as a result of an increased mastery of experience.

paradigm, then the practical-mechanic aspect of experience takes the lead. The Machian (human) animal establishes and pursues goals, chooses means for their achievement, has needs and desires, it is driven towards the solution of practical problems, has interests. Even “science” ultimately “has its origin in the needs of life.”³² Here it is the very interested activity of living experience that produces what *should* be experienced *given* certain determinants in behavior and action. Here appearance as such is taken as a practical phenomenon, that is, as the result of a practical selection according to practical interests. Even the concept for Mach remains rooted in the biologico-practical interests of life. The profound natural character of our experience that is expressed by reference to the starting point of sensation and its essentially *felt qualitiveness*, is fully reabsorbed into a pragmatist view asserting the primacy of spontaneous activity and the essentially conventional nature of appearance.³³

Thus, the tendency to a sensual elementism and to a pragmatist conventionalism are both present at the same time in Mach’s theory. These can be taken as the extremes of a polarity setting the framework for the main conflicts of views around the experience and knowledge of reality in twentieth-century philosophy. In the rest of the paper I will point out how Husserl links these two together, and claim that this is not without importance for the way Husserl understands the achievement of knowledge as the demonstrative showing of a subject matter by way of the accomplishing of a clear and firm grasp of some general meaning or “concept.”

4 Part 3: Between sensualism and pragmatism: Husserl’s phenomenology of intention

It has already been stressed that Husserl’s central concern was anti-psychologism, a concern that was aimed to validate concept-based formal science apart from all psychology and factual science.³⁴ Yet, arguing for the ideal objective significance of a meaning-unit as such against psychologism and the empiricist theories of abstraction, only prepares the ground for Husserl to return to his real concern: How is the self-identity of ideal objectivity experienced in the flow of the concrete individual experiences of psychic life?

How does the ‘in itself’ of objectivity get represented and so therefore become again in a certain sense subjective? What does it mean that the object is ‘in itself’ and ‘given’ in knowledge? How can the ideality of what is general (as

³² Mach (1919, 497).

³³ In contrast to the phenomenological tradition coming out of Brentano, which took intentionality as a criterion of psychic life, for Mach there is in principle no distinction to be made between the physical and the psychical, the only distinction being determined by purely practical interests. See Ash (1998, 89).

³⁴ “Gegen den herrschenden Psychologismus gewendet, suchen die *Prolegomena* also di Idee einer *reinen* Logik neu zu beleben, aber auch neu zu gestalten. Sie führen zur Abgrenzung einer theoretischen von aller Psychologie und Tatsachen wissenschaft unabhängigen Wissenschaft[...].” Hua XVIII, 261.

concept or as law) enter into the flow of real psychic experiences and become the knowledge-property of the thinking subject?³⁵

And here disagreement in one sense does not prevent agreement in another sense. First, for Husserl the starting point to answer this question must be a starting point of *neutrality*, so as to not allow any preconceived interpretive assumption to function uncritically outside what careful descriptive analysis brings to bear with regard to what is experientially given.³⁶ Second, in this turning to what gives itself in experience in a manner guided by attentive self-critique with respect to the factors and conceptual schemas that one is obliged to employ in the analysis, one must begin again with sensation given Husserl's renowned call "to the things themselves."

Now this is a feature of Husserl's phenomenology that one finds everywhere displayed in his work. Yet the concrete analysis of constitution in the second volume of the *Ideas*-project, which followed the introduction to phenomenology of the first volume, begins with a preliminary systematic study of the role of sensing for the coming about of perceptual experience.

As is well known, in *Ideas II*, Husserl analyzes how the first proper becoming manifest of "sense" within human experience is established by "kinesthesia" and "kinesthetic complexes of sensation" (*kinaesthetische Empfindungskomplexe*)³⁷ in conjunction with the sensations of the senses. Any initial form of stability or permanence in the changing and shifting of appearances comes about in the interplay of a living dynamic of movement and changes in the sensing of the senses as basic factors for the experience of *sensible qualitiveness* (*sinnliche Qualifiziertheit*).³⁸ For instance in the optic field nothing if ever is simply standing still, but there are constant changes, whether slight or considerable, in the background of my surroundings, a small movement of my head or body influences the variations of lighting, the position of the eyes also is never simply the same but it is rather an ongoingly scanning movement. Now the temporalizing of consciousness is one absolutely essential condition in order to see *something* as some identifiable objective sameness (e.g. as *this* color) in the constant change of visual conditions. Without the gathering of sensible contents of experience in a temporalized "now," right here in my concrete living experiencing, no proper permanence of sameness could ever appear. This is also a well known feature of Husserlian phenomenology. But for an identical something to be given as actually there in the full evidence of its material features, a context of relatedness ultimately involving the whole

³⁵ Hua XIX, 12-13. Cf. the following rephrasing of the same central question in the lectures on *Phenomenological Psychology*: "How do the hidden psychic lived experiences look, which are correlated to the respective idealities and which must occur as quite determinately appropriate producings, in order that the subject can have consciousness and evidently knowing consciousness of these idealities as objects? This designates the proper theme of the *Logical Investigations* and, in corresponding amplification, of all phenomenology." Hua IX, 26.

³⁶ "Eine erkenntnistheoretische Untersuchung, die ernstlichen Anspruch auf Wissenschaftlichkeit erhebt, muß, wie man schon oft betont hat, dem *Prinzip der Voraussetzungslosigkeit* genügen." Hua XIX, 24.

³⁷ Hua IV, 128.

³⁸ Hua IV, 37.

range of factors of affective as well as motoric living bodily experiencing is also indispensable. This point is concisely stated by Husserl as follows:

Simply to look at a thing, i.e., to bring to givenness its extension and the concomitant sensuous fullness (thus the momentary schema of it) is not yet the same as having actually experienced the thing as a material thing.³⁹

It is the central point of §15 to establish that the material thing is experienced as this “substantial-real unity” or “substrate of thingly-real properties”⁴⁰ only if taken in relation to “circumstances”:

The thing is constant in that it comports itself in such and such a way under the circumstances which pertain to it: *reality* (or, what is here the same, *substantiality*) and *causality belong together inseparably*. Real properties are *eo ipso* causal ones. To know a thing therefore means to know from experience how it behaves under pressure and impact, in being bent and being broken, when heated and when cooled, etc., i.e., to know its behavior in the nexus of its causalities: which states does the thing actually attain and how does it remain the same throughout these states.⁴¹

If real properties, as Husserl notes, are causal properties, then *what* a thing is, is only to be made known *in* this if–then–nexus of outer circumstances and the modes of behavior of things related to them:

The modes of behavior, as real modes in the material sphere, refer back to “real circumstances,” and it is only in the reciprocal play between modes of behavior and circumstances of behavior [*im Wechselspiel von Verhaltensweisen und Umständen des Verhaltens*] that the substantial-real property manifests itself primordially in the framework of originally giving experience.⁴²

What is experienced as an actual property of a thing is what comes to display identity in the dispositional-causal regularities of experience.⁴³ But this account is for Husserl essentially complemented by the absolutely central point in phenomenology affirming that the realm of the given, even at the very bottommost level of analysis as “sensation,” is a realm of *sense* or “meaning” taken as the basic phenomenal integrative unity that one is to describe. The world and reality as pure

³⁹ Hua IV, 122.

⁴⁰ Hua IV, 43; 120–121.

⁴¹ Hua IV, 45.

⁴² Hua IV, 124.

⁴³ Bernhard Rang has shown the systematic connection of Mach’s operational-practical theme for describing the genesis of conceptual meaning with Husserl’s theory of material nature. See in particular Rang (1990, 99ff. and 333ff.). While something like Mach’s dispositional-causal theory of experience and knowledge is couched by Husserl at the very bottom of his analysis of original constitution of the unity of things and their properties, this theory loses in Husserl its strong pragmatistic underpinnings. Causalities are not result of a functional “narrowing of expectation” but are rather “seen,” “perceived.” See Hua IV, 43.

complexes of sensation however would precisely be the elimination of all possible “sense” in experience:

The possibility of a phenomenological maelstrom [of sensations] as unique and ultimate Being [...] would be [...] so meaningless [*sinnlos*] that there would be no I and no Thou, as well as no physical world – in short, no reality in the pregnant sense.⁴⁴

In Husserl’s view, there is rather the strong point that:

[e]very perceived reality (real thing) can perhaps not be, and thereby in principle each and every thing posited in perception and also in memory might not be. Hence it is possible for there to be nothing real. But every perception is a *rational positing* [*Vernunftsetzung*] of something (which possibly is not), a foundational positing, and that also holds for things revoked through conflict.⁴⁵

Primordial experience is the formation of or at least the pre-tending to the formation of unity, thus in a fundamentally enlarged sense experience has “sense” or is “rational.” From this general yet pivotal frame for understanding phenomenology I would like to draw two equally general yet hugely important corollaries:

1. The first corollary is that the way in which things begin to become manifest to anyone by way of a *causality* taking shape in the “reciprocal play” of sensible appearances and circumstances, is inseparable from the sense of an intentional *taking* both *retentionally* and *protentionally* of what becomes manifest in various modalities of sense-appearing such as the visible, audible, and tactile, etc., which thereby enables objective sameness to appear in the full range and richness of sensible features, from shape to color, texture, surface variation, but also heaviness, elasticity, softness, and so on. These are the primary features of things and events in the world as I experience them *as real* precisely beginning with their visibility, audibility, tactility.
2. The second corollary has to do with the fact that phenomenology for Husserl really coalesces around a project aimed at rethinking rationality “from the bottom up,” namely from the very springing forth of *meaningfulness* that is intrinsic to the appearing of primordial material nature up to what appears specifically as sense taken as linguistic and conceptual meaning.

This programmatic point can be shown with reference to two selective but paradigmatic passages that in a way open and close Husserl’s phenomenological program. In the lectures on *Thing and Space* from the summer semester of 1907, which are part of a lecture series on “*Basic Elements from Phenomenology and the Critique of Reason*,” Husserl concludes his analysis about the “thing” by indicating that rationality resides “in the actual and possible nexus of appearances” and makes

⁴⁴ Hua XVI, 289.

⁴⁵ Hua XVI, 290.

possible “the steadfast unity of the thing and of the world.” As such, rationality is an “irrational *factum*.”

[T]he rationality residing in the actual and possible nexus of appearance and making possible the steadfast unity of the thing and of the world — this rationality would be an irrational fact [*ein irrationales Faktum*].⁴⁶

In a capital manuscript composed thirty years after the presentation of his new idea of phenomenology as a critique of reason, Husserl gives an explicit albeit summative statement about the guiding idea of rationality as highest and most authentic kind of human function and orientation in and towards reality:

[A]s I said, humankind understanding itself according to reason, understanding, namely, that it is rational humanity in wanting to be rational; [understanding] that this means an infinity of living and striving toward reason, that reason is precisely that which the human being as human, in his innermost being, is aiming for, that which alone can satisfy him, make him “blessed;” that reason allows for no differentiation into “theoretical,” “practical,” and “aesthetic;” that to be human is to be teleological and an ought-to-be [*Sein-Sollen*], and that this teleology holds sway in each and every activity and project of an ego.

We see here in full clarity not only the immense dimension that a descriptive phenomenology has had to cover in order to lay the proper foundations for philosophical work and for interpretation to begin but also *such beginning* being actually already underway in the ethical and metaphysical disclosure of humanity as rational. The whole question of the nature of “reason” in a phenomenological *philosophy*; the question about the sense that metaphysical implications assume within phenomenology; the way to define this in the context of the ongoing demonstrative work of a *pure phenomenology*; and thus the question about whether and how the metaphysical significance of phenomenology differs from the import of phenomenological descriptive analysis are all questions that impose themselves at this point, and that Husserl bequeathed to the phenomenological lineage after *his* beginning.

There are some interpretive signposts that I would like to propose in way of conclusion:

I. Both Husserl and Mach display essential agreement around the basic role of sensation: the sensing capability emerges from the very beginning of human life in the world as the deepest and ever continuing ground of interrelation of human being and world. Moreover, the analysis of the conceptual deepening of experience is based in each thinker on this integrative linkage as governing all characteristics of human life, not just biological and perceptual but also cognitive and scientific.

⁴⁶ Hua XVI, 289n1. The term “*Faktum*” is used by Husserl in the literal sense of the past participle *factum*, as “done” fact, and as such “what-is-already-done” is only to be acknowledged and received. Thus what is designated as *Faktum* does not allow further accounting since it is something absolutely basic upon which everything else is dependent for its accounting. Cf. Hua XV, 669.

II. Husserl considerably radicalizes Mach's phenomenological method by the primary aspect of intention. Here one can also see that the distinction that is often made in phenomenology between *intentionality* and *causality* is not that between two absolutely incompatible terms if these terms are taken in their proper descriptive context. What is first in experience is a two-edged dynamic that is both intentional as well as causal. Sensible affectivity as given primordial influence causes the living sentient being to become active and yet this activity is somehow already at work in a kind of intentionality that is hardly to be construed in terms of the thematic cognitive act-constituting "action" of an "I" or consciousness. What sounds almost as the platitude of Husserlian "intentionality" receives back some of its original freshness if connected to the fact that for Husserl phenomenology is really and originally a project aimed at clarifying reason and rationality starting from below or from as low as one possibly can. We see Husserl disclosing these *rationes seminales* right at the core where experience begins to spring up in sensation. For Husserl there is "sense," there is "meaning" from the start of any beginning experience, which is therefore taken throughout as an *intentional* field. If this radical move brings something like consciousness all the way down as one possibly can – what a triumph for the philosophy of consciousness! – what he finds on the level of this springing up of the most basic elements establishing integrative coherence around and in me is the working of something that is as a matter of fact no "me" at all. What we see happening when this bottommost level is disclosed phenomenologically is that suddenly a sense of "causality" is no longer incompatible with intentionality as criterion of consciousness. Rather, intentionality on this level is only graspable at all in connection with the "causality" at work in the "reciprocal play" of sensation, with all the impositionality of physical materiality that this involves, only not anymore in a physicalistic, but now in a pre-scientific and phenomenological sense.

III. The double dimension of original experience as a sensible-causal dynamic and as intentionally oriented gives Husserl a broader starting point to interpret the rationality of human reason as ultimately operating by way of "concepts" over against any sensual elementism or epistemic pragmatism. For Husserl the "concept" is not simply to be reduced to an increasing functional adaptation as linked to the constant improvement of our research hypotheses and predictive epistemic skills. Rather conceptual activity is also and essentially about the critical deepening of our grasp of reality in a sense that is not simply aimed at the determination of manipulable aspects of our experience and thus at the mastery of the future. The rationality of the concept is not just about practical interest in skillfully selecting especially economical ways to deal with the world or in gathering and storing more and ever new information. The "teleology" of genuine rationality is rather concerned with understanding reality, which means learning from the past in a way that can and must make it relevant for the present and that therefore has transformative potential for our self-understanding. Linking together in a coherent way the increasing practical orientation enabled by our conceptuality and the critical understanding that not only knows how to act, but that is also able to receive and *contemplate*, is essential to the ideas about renewal of reason and "conceptual" life in times of "crisis" that Husserl will put forth in his last attempt at a presentation of his phenomenology.

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