



# Gustav Shpet's Transcendental Turn

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## Abstract

Shpet's interpretation of Husserl's phenomenology has caused puzzlement because of the lack of clarity with which he treats the transcendental turn in *Appearance and Sense* (1914). I suggest that we find a more comprehensive discussion on the topic in Shpet's 1917 article, "Wisdom or Reason?" There, Shpet reacts to Husserl's treatment of a cluster of problems related to the latter's transition to transcendental idealism. I read "Wisdom or Reason?" not only in relation to Husserl's *Logos* article of 1911, but also to his 1907 lecture series "The Idea of Phenomenology." My analysis of Shpet's phenomenology reveals that he followed through with the transcendental turn, although his philosophy developed in a direction different from Husserl's transcendental idealism. Shpet postulates a collective consciousness, in which meaning-constitution takes place, and discovers the "word" as the foundation for any cognition. Shpet's phenomenology remains ontological, as he considers language or culture as the "form of being" in which human beings live. In "Wisdom or Reason?," Shpet argues that we can have direct knowledge of this meaningful reality: being is not "represented" but "presented" in a word. A certain compatibility thus exists between Shpet's phenomenology of cultural reality and Husserl's search for the absolute validity of knowledge.

**Keywords** Gustav Shpet · "Wisdom or Reason?" · Edmund Husserl · "Philosophy as Rigorous Science" · "The Idea of Phenomenology" · Transcendental turn · Ontologism · Phenomenology · Being · Meaning

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to introduce a new way of approaching Gustav Shpet's interpretation of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Although *Appearance and Sense (Iavelnie i smysl)* (1914) remains Shpet's seminal text in phenomenology, it has been noted that it does not offer a properly elaborated analysis of how

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Shpet draws his conclusions at the end of the book, i.e., of how the phenomenologist uncovers the entelechy of an object (such as the “chopping” of an axe), the meaningfulness of the object within “social reality” (Nemeth 2019b, p. 268). My thesis in the present paper is that we might find such an analysis in another, shorter, and less researched text by Shpet, namely, his article “Wisdom or Reason?” (“*Mudrost’ ili razum?*”) (1917). Analysing this text should therefore offer us a new outlook on Shpet’s phenomenology.

Shpet’s hermeneutic and ontological interpretation of phenomenology, first presented in *Appearance and Sense*, has been a topic of much research.<sup>1</sup> In the last chapters of this book, Shpet expresses his disagreement with Husserl’s analysis of meaning-constitution, which he considers to be unduly subjectivist.<sup>2</sup> Shpet postulates an intellectual intuition, which allows him to grasp the sociality of an object, that is, to discover its entelechy (Shpet 1991, pp. 148–160). As Thomas Nemeth clarifies, Shpet claims that we can “intellectually see” that the axe is for chopping, even though it is “naturally” just a bit of sharpened metal attached to a piece of wood (Nemeth 2019b, p. 268). With his postulation, Shpet’s focus is directed away from the structures of the experiencing consciousness and towards a shared reality existing outside of consciousness. According to Shpet, sociality is an inherent part of human nature: meaning-constitution can never happen merely subjectively, and instead meanings are created and shared in a language or culture, which, for him, is equivalent to human reality. He writes: “To forfeit the faculty of intellectual intuition, of comprehension, even granted the full perfection of experiencing and ideal intuitions, means to go mad—the sole escape from the social union” (Shpet 1991, p. 160).

In 1916, Shpet publishes the essay, “Consciousness and Its Owner” (“*Soznanie i ego sobstvennik*”), wherein he develops a non-egological conception of consciousness. This collective consciousness is something in which each individual “partakes” precisely when sense-bestowal takes place. According to Shpet, a rational guiding principle governs the form-giving actions of the collective consciousness, and this principle can be discovered at the root of any meaning. The “rational moment” is thus embedded, not in the subject’s transcendental consciousness, but in the collective consciousness, which manifests itself in culture. In the 1920s, a concrete “cultural reality,” composed of meaningful social objects, such as language, emerges in Shpet’s theory. His interest is from then on turned increasingly towards the structure of language and culture, and he never revisits the phenomenological foundations of his theory after that.

From the point of view of Husserl’s phenomenology, Shpet’s interpretation has caused puzzlement. One might suggest that Shpet follows the members of the early

<sup>1</sup> To mention two examples, Anna Shiyani has discussed the ontological undertones of Shpet’s phenomenology (Shiyani 2010) and Natalia Artemenko has tackled the hermeneutic turn in his philosophy (Artemenko 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Shpet writes, for example, that the “sense is not ‘created’ by the pure Ego; it does not paint the object with the subjective color of an arbitrary interpretation.” Instead, Shpet finds that the “sense belongs to that which constantly abides in the object and which remains identical in spite of all the attentional acts of the pure Ego” (Shpet 1991, p. 109).

Göttingen circle in adopting a realistic interpretation of phenomenology, rejecting Husserl's transcendental idealism and remaining faithful to the descriptive project of object-oriented phenomenology.<sup>3</sup> Yet, during his stay in Göttingen in 1912–1913,<sup>4</sup> Shpet was a vocal supporter of Husserl's new philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Alexander Haardt concludes that Shpet, on the one hand, “followed Husserl's turn to transcendental idealism, as presented in *Ideas I*, and yet, on the other hand, he also interpreted transcendental phenomenology as ontology” (Haardt 1991, p. xxv). Haardt believes that, for Shpet, “Husserl's regression from objects to the stream of consciousness appears *primarily* as a demonstration of a sphere of absolute being on the basis of which the contingent being of objects is to be grounded” (Haardt 1991, p. xxv).

Shpet's treatment of Husserl's reductions<sup>6</sup> in *Appearance and Sense* is indeed somewhat out of the ordinary. Nemeth argues that, whereas Husserl's predominant concern is with “delineating the essential sense-bestowing structures of consciousness that explain how the intentionality of consciousness is achieved” (Nemeth 2009, p. 126), Shpet's interest lies elsewhere. “While recognizing the value, even need, of Husserl's exploration of consciousness, the ultimate goal is broader: a delineation of all that actually exists, proceeding both descriptively and discursively” (Nemeth 2009, p. 126). Nemeth observes that, although Shpet accepts the phenomenological reduction, “his account of it is disquieting” (Nemeth 2009, p. 126). Whereas “for Husserl the reduction involves the methodic exclusion of nature and, concomitantly, of all intellectual and cultural formations that presuppose the natural attitude, for Shpet the reduction is the exclusion of relative individuals, leaving the entire eidetic realm to be studied” (Nemeth 2009, p. 127).<sup>7</sup>

My argument in the present article is that Shpet follows through with the transcendental turn, even if very differently from Husserl, and that a detailed description of this turn can be discovered in his 1917 article, “Wisdom or Reason?”<sup>8</sup> One of the main reasons for the originality of Shpet's phenomenology is its underlying ontologism, which is present in his thought in 1917 as much as in 1914. As Haardt and Nemeth rightly point out, Shpet's philosophy strives for knowledge of “what *is*” (Shpet 1991, p. 102) in all of its forms, and the study of consciousness presents him with an opportunity to study the eidetic realm of being. It seems to me, however,

<sup>3</sup> This interpretation has recently been supported by Anna Shiyan (Shiyan 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Shpet stayed in Göttingen for the academic year 1912/13, and again for a few weeks in the summer of 1914 (Shchedrina 2015, pp. 60–63).

<sup>5</sup> As Nemeth points out, “few, if any other, philosophers of the time were willing to go along to such an extent with the transcendental turn,” as did Shpet. “Even those personally closest to Husserl who had spent years under his tutelage were unwilling or unable to sound the clarion so forthrightly and so modestly, and this by a foreigner who could not have had any motive other than one based in conviction” (Nemeth 1991, p. x).

<sup>6</sup> Following Andreea Smaranda Aldea, by “reductions” I mean the *epoché* as well as the phenomenological, transcendental, and eidetic reductions (Aldea 2016, p. 25).

<sup>7</sup> Nemeth continues his analysis of Shpet's treatment of the reductions in *Appearance and Sense* in a more recent article (Nemeth 2018).

<sup>8</sup> My reading of Shpet's “Wisdom or Reason?” is here notably different from the one offered by Nemeth (in Nemeth 2018, pp. 281–282).

that Shpet's ontologism is not entirely incompatible with Husserl's transcendental phenomenology.

To discover the underlying similarities of the two philosophies, I suggest, rather than comparing *Appearance and Sense* to *Ideas I*, reading Shpet's "Wisdom or Reason?" alongside, especially, with Husserl's 1907 lecture series "The Idea of Phenomenology." Despite the ten-year gap between the lecture series and the article, there are noteworthy parallels in the two philosophers' outlooks. At this stage, both Husserl and Shpet are still only formulating the principles of their respective philosophies. Both works present a kind of meta-phenomenology and not, strictly speaking, an actual phenomenological analysis. And, finally, as I will argue, "The Idea of Phenomenology" and "Wisdom or Reason?" are both predominantly concerned with the possibility of indubitable and absolute knowledge. In short, both Husserl and Shpet present phenomenology as an entirely new field of philosophical research, which they believe can reach valid knowledge of the given.<sup>9</sup>

In "Wisdom or Reason?" Shpet re-orientes his phenomenological thought towards questions of language.<sup>10</sup> He discusses the special nature of the "word," which carries within itself the logic of meaning-constitution. According to Shpet, we can discover in language (in *slovo*) the underlying logic of any sense-bestowal, which happens when we direct ourselves towards reality. A transcendental turn of sorts is therefore built into Shpet's "linguistic turn." Moreover, because of his ontologism, it appears that Shpet equates the study of phenomena with a study of reality (culture or language as a special form of being), and that he considers the knowledge we gain through the analysis of these phenomena to be truth itself (as opposed to knowledge of mere appearances). In what follows, I attempt to bring to light the phenomenological foundations of these claims.

### "Wisdom or Reason?" and the Period of Husserl's Transcendental Turn

"Wisdom or Reason?" was published in the first issue of Shpet's own philosophical journal, *Thought and Word (Mysl' i slovo)*, in 1917. At first sight, the article appears to be a reaction to Husserl's "Philosophy as Rigorous Science" (1911), even if the text makes no explicit reference to Husserl.<sup>11</sup> Apart from that, Shpet's article

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of how Husserl argues for the possibility of transcendental philosophy to identify and validate truths that retain their necessity "amidst and in reference to the contingencies of nature and experience," see Jansen (2015).

<sup>10</sup> Shpet's linguistic turn is connected to his work on the logic of historical knowledge, which he finalized in the form of a dissertation in 1916: *History as a Problem of Logic (Istoria kak problema logiki)*. As Vladimir Feshchenko writes, this led Shpet to introduce the word 'semiotics' to his work as early as in 1915. Shpet noted then that a historical notion cannot be adequately understood, except if deciphered through a special kind of hermeneutics. Shpet's semiotics and hermeneutics are thus combined into a discipline, analysing the structures of the *understanding* (Feshchenko 2015, pp. 237–238). I believe that Shpet was interested in phenomenology precisely as method of finding a solid foundation for his larger hermeneutic project.

<sup>11</sup> The reason for this could be that Shpet had by 1917 adopted the phenomenological terminology—inasmuch as it served the purpose of his own thought—and begun to use it as his own. As his article

also offers a criticism of Lev Shestov's essay "*Memento mori. On Edmund Husserl's Theory of Knowledge*" ("*Memento mori. Po povodu teorii poznanja Edmunda Gusserlia*") (1917).<sup>12</sup> Shpet's article defends a view of philosophy as "pure knowledge." His ambition is analogical to Husserl's call for rigor and anti-psychologism, and both philosophers strive for philosophy conceived as absolute knowledge. Shpet argues not only against the tradition of religious thought in Russia, but also against any metaphysical theories that seem to him to draw conclusions about the nature of reality without a proper and solid, i.e., philosophically justified, foundation. Shpet calls these schools of thought "quasi-philosophy" and juxtaposes them to a rigorously philosophical method, which is always self-critical.

Shpet begins his article by commenting on Husserl's arguments in "Philosophy as Rigorous Science." But, as he proceeds in his search, his concerns become increasingly intertwined with broader and more fundamental questions regarding the methodology of phenomenology. It is important to bear in mind that "Philosophy as Rigorous Science" was written during Husserl's transition to a properly phenomenological method and that it serves as a link between his pre-transcendental and transcendental conceptions of philosophy. Posthumously published texts help us retrieve the genealogy of Husserl's thought from the *Logical Investigations* to the *Logos* article. The change that took place in his philosophy during this period was linked to a heavy professional setback in 1905 (Hardy 1999, p. 1), as a result of which Husserl introduced several crucial modifications to his earlier theory. These changes were then presented in the lecture series "The Idea of Phenomenology," delivered in Göttingen in 1907. The lectures, published only in 1950, profess a relentless search for the new method, in which a new question, requiring clarification, always appears before the philosopher. Many problems seem to remain without proper solutions at the end of the lectures, and Husserl describes transcendental phenomenology as the "wholly new dimension" and "entirely new point of departure" for phenomenology as a philosophical science (Mitchells 1965, p. 174). Kurt Mitchells characterises the five lectures of 1907 as "the very first presentation" of Husserl's new "task and method" (Mitchells 1965, p. 174). His "Philosophy as Rigorous Science," published four years later, is, therefore, already written from this properly phenomenological position.

Some of the themes and questions presented by Husserl in "The Idea of Phenomenology" lectures are also tackled by Shpet in "Wisdom or Reason?" Shpet never mentions "The Idea of Phenomenology"<sup>13</sup> and, rather than suggesting that Shpet was acquainted with the text, I conjecture that the issues presented in the lectures would have been a natural topic of conversation between the two philosophers

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Footnote 11 (continued)

advocates, phenomenology, in its general terms, meant for Shpet quite simply the properly philosophical method.

<sup>12</sup> Shchedrina and Pruzhinin (2016, p. 40), Nemeth (2019a, pp. 209–210). Shestov's article was published in the journal *Questions of Philosophy and Psychology* (*Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii*).

<sup>13</sup> Obviously, Shpet could not have known Husserl's text in the form in which it exists today.

during Shpet's stay in Göttingen.<sup>14</sup> The structure of Shpet's "Wisdom or Reason?" is similar to Husserl's "Idea of Phenomenology" in that it, too, unfolds as a progression of phenomenological reasoning, starting from the author's epistemological doubts and proceeding towards the problems of meaning-constitution. Indeed, an examination of meaning-constitution is the outcome of the analyses of both philosophers despite their evident differences. Husserl and Shpet are united in their driving concern for how to revise the Kantian problem of transcendence (the unknowability of the thing-in-itself) and overcome his distinction between form (as a cognitive property) and matter (as the contingent "given").<sup>15</sup> In this way, they are both seeking a path to the absolute givenness of the contingent world. Furthermore, they both find it in the necessary correlation between the structures of consciousness and those of reality.

### **"Wisdom or Reason?" and Husserl's *Logos* Article**

At the beginning of "Wisdom or Reason?," Shpet declares that a philosophical analysis should accept no pre-given theories and only include in its subject matter what is clearly experienced through different intuitions (empirical, eidetic, etc.). Shpet understands these intuitions as the immediate and sole connecting point between consciousness and the "external world." While other sciences take this "givenness" for granted, the task of philosophy is precisely to raise the question of the way reality is given to us through intuitions (Shpet 2019, p. 217). Likewise, in "Philosophy as Rigorous Science," Husserl reminds his readers of the naivety of the natural sciences. He points out that epistemology, "despite all the thoughtfulness employed by the greatest scholars in regard to those questions," has been unable to find a unanimous answer to the question of the certainty of knowledge (Husserl 1981, p. 172). If a theory of knowledge is to secure this certainty, Husserl states, it will have to consider reality "as the correlate of consciousness, as something 'intended'" (Husserl 1981, p. 173).

Husserl is searching for objectively valid truths, independent from the empirical sources of consciousness, i.e., attempting to distinguish a priori truths from contingent states-of-affairs and to bring them to absolute clarity. "We must question things themselves," Husserl writes, "[b]ut what, then, are things?" (Husserl 1981, p. 176). He remarks that, in our natural attitude, we are not yet in possession of a vocabulary that would allow us to describe these "fluid and ambiguous" phenomena that are the "contents" of our consciousness. Psychic phenomena have no "substantial" unity: they have no "real properties," "no real parts, no real changes, no causality"

<sup>14</sup> Apart from the private discussions Shpet had with Husserl, he also attended some of his courses, individual lectures, and seminars. For a chronological account of Shpet's acquaintance with Husserl, see Shchedrina (2015, pp. 60–63).

<sup>15</sup> Throughout his mature career, Shpet expressed a strong anti-Kantian position: he argued against Kant's "negative" philosophy, which begins with a "limitation" of the mind's capacities and supported a "positive" project of philosophy instead. This position can be seen as part of a long tradition in Russian thought. On Kant's reception and Kantianism in Russia, see Nemeth (2017).

in the sense that these words are understood in the natural sciences (Husserl 1981, p. 179). To investigate their “real” components, Husserl writes, would be like asking about the causal properties of numbers. In other words, they require an entirely novel method of investigation. The phenomena should be taken as they “give themselves” (Husserl 1981, p. 180).

Husserl appears to be describing the *epoché*, the suspension of the general thesis of the world's existence. He writes that it is difficult to overcome our inborn habits of “adulterating the psychical” naturalistically (Husserl 1981, p. 181) and of focusing on the causal “explanation” of the psychic phenomena instead of the phenomena themselves. And even after the reduction of the spatiotemporal, it is unclear to Husserl whether he has found what is required to obtain objectively valid knowledge. He writes: “If the immanently psychical is not nature in itself but the respondent of nature, what are we seeking for in it as its ‘being’?” In other words, what is there in it that we can “seize upon, determine, and fix as an objective unity?” (Husserl 1981, p. 181). Husserl's answer to this question in “Philosophy as Rigorous Science” is another reductive step, after which the essences of the intuited phenomena can be grasped as essential unities. Husserl asserts that, even though phenomena have “no nature” to be fixed in objective terms, they “still have an essence, which can be grasped and adequately determined in an immediate seeing” (Husserl 1981, p. 181).

It is the “spell of inborn naturalism” which makes it, according to Husserl, “so difficult for all of us to see ‘essences,’ or ‘ideas.’” Or rather, as he continues “since in fact we do, so to speak, constantly see them, for us to let them have the peculiar value which is theirs instead of absurdly naturalizing them. Intuiting essences conceals no more difficulties or ‘mystical’ secrets than does perception. When we bring ‘color’ to full intuitive clarity, to givenness for ourselves, then the datum is an ‘essence’” (Husserl 1981, p. 181). The phenomenological investigation must thus remain in the purely eidetic sphere and its statements must describe the phenomena in full clarity “by means of concepts of essence, that is, by conceptual significations of words that must permit of being redeemed in an essential intuition” (Husserl 1981, p. 181). When phenomena are grasped in essential intuition, Husserl writes, they will permit “of being fixed in definitive concepts and thereby afford possibilities of definitive and in their own way absolutely valid objective statements” (Husserl 1981, p. 181).

Correspondingly, Shpet suggests that philosophy must investigate deeper into the nature of ideas, the eidetic realm, or the content of consciousness. Furthermore, as philosophy should reveal the correlation between mind and reality, it must take ideas *as* they are directed towards reality. Considered in this way, Shpet argues, consciousness allows us to grasp all of reality: “As long as we simply ‘live,’ we find *everything* in our experience: One thing enters into it, another one leaves; one is added, another is taken away. Nevertheless, we *experience everything* and only it” (Shpet 2019, p. 230). Shpet writes that, once we accept this, we must simultaneously acknowledge the fact that our initial question regarding “what is” now appears differently: “Our question, as it were [...], removes us from the sphere of experience. [...] Something comes to a stop before us and stands like an enigmatic question mark. It lurks ‘behind’ everything and stops the continuous stream in which everything flows” (Shpet 2019, p. 230).

Shpet notices that, if what is properly given to us are, indeed, ideas *relating* to something other than themselves, then the external reality remains, strictly speaking, on the “other side” of the field of knowledge. The object before us, i.e., reality, now appears to him as a question. In the endless variation of appearances of being, Shpet asks, what is real and permanent? Similarly to Husserl’s *epoché*, Shpet emphasises the adoption of a critical attitude regarding our relationship towards the world: “We now look with *different* eyes on what there is” (Shpet 2019, p. 230). He writes that, while the empirical world is entirely made of fleeting appearances, there also remains something fundamental and unchanging, which is the object of absolute knowledge (Shpet 2019, p. 231). This something is “as it is” and not only “as it appears.” Following Parmenides and Plato, Shpet considers knowledge (*episteme*) as the knowledge of being, contrasting it with “opinion” or “belief” (*doxa*), which concerns only the appearance of being. For Shpet, the first task of “philosophy, as knowledge, is to distinguish what is illusory (*ta phainomena*) from what is real or essential (*ousia*) in given reality itself (*ta onta*)” (Shpet 2019, p. 221). Shpet believes that the “real and essential” can, indeed, be found in experience, and this, for him, is the object of phenomenology.

### “Wisdom or Reason?” and “The Idea of Phenomenology” Lectures

In the third lecture of “The Idea of Phenomenology” series, Husserl admits that, at the beginning, it is far from clear how a phenomenologist should proceed in his newly found field of research. He writes: “I am to make judgments, indeed, judgments that are objectively valid. I am to gain scientific knowledge of pure phenomena” (Husserl 1999, p. 36). But what kinds of statement can be made about the stream of phenomena before us? At first, it seems to Husserl that a description of the phenomena has no *objective sense*, but merely a *subjective* truth. While reducing the factual world can provide the philosopher with pure phenomena, they nevertheless remain singular, tied up to the concrete instance and factuality of their appearance. In this regard, Husserl asks, “[w]hat will these particular ‘seeings’ do for us, even if they bring the *cogitationes* to self-givenness with complete certainty?” (Husserl 1999, p. 65). The crucial task of phenomenology, Husserl writes, is to “*apprehend the sense of absolute givenness, the absolute clarity of being given,*” which excludes every meaningful doubt; to gain “*evidence that is absolute seeing and apprehends itself as such*” (Husserl 1999, p. 66). For the moment, Husserl writes, it is clear that the “higher dignity of objectivity,” which “the valid judgments of the exact sciences bring to an incomparably higher level of perfection,” is “entirely lacking here” (Husserl 1999, p. 36).

Facing similar doubts, Shpet asserts that philosophy is, for now, in no position to exclude any options regarding the true being of reality. In order to discover it, the essence must be found *in* the appearing reality itself. This is the fundamental and constant element in reality: the “essential, what abides in being, stays itself, ‘*the same*’” (Shpet 2019, p. 231). There is undoubtedly a certain affinity here between Shpet and Husserl. For Husserl, the apodictic evidence presents the given in a way that is “stable,” that remains “unchanged” in its variations; it is the



thoroughly reduced form of the given which could not appear in any other way. For example, if we are presented with different shades of the colour red, Husserl writes, “can we not judge that they are similar to each other—not these particular, individual red phenomena, but rather the species, the nuances as such?” (Husserl 1999, p. 42). Shpet agrees with Husserl, but conceptualises the idea differently:

We do not find reality divided, as it were, into two parts, one positioned “alongside” the other, or one “behind” the other, or one “above” the other, or something else that a figure of speech could incorrectly convey to us. Instead, we do find a *single* reality. It is only that our gaze dwells sometimes on the contingent “surface” of reality and sometimes probes “deeper” through its essential “core.” The two sorts of intuition directed on what is given to us are a *single* intuition, but only different degrees of seeing. (Shpet 2019, p. 232)

The difference arising between Shpet's and Husserl's theories is, however, of a fundamental nature. Shpet has interpreted the concept of essentiality not as the objectively valid and reduced self-given, which the phenomenologist looks for “in” his cognition, but as an essentiality that he finds by “probing deeper” into reality. From this point onwards, whilst Husserl analyses the structures of the reduced, phenomenological gaze, Shpet's philosophical interest is directed towards the inward structures of reality. Indeed, the most crucial and significant steps of Shpet's phenomenological theory are taken only after he has determined this starting point through the reductions. In what follows, I will discuss the two main points of the latter half of “Wisdom or Reason?”: Shpet's view on the problem of meaning-constitution and on the “word” as a foundation of all knowledge.

## The Problem of Meaning-Constitution

Having established a foundation for his phenomenology, Shpet returns to our vision of reality as we perceive it in the natural attitude. In our field of vision, there are objects that are in constant movement and others that seem to remain stable and identical with themselves. Through theory, Shpet thinks, we learn that, in fact, everything changes in relation to space, time, form, etc. And, finally, if we take into account our own position as the point from which we perceive everything, the changing nature of it all becomes more easily evident. All the physical qualities around us change immediately, as our observing position is altered. Shpet writes:

It turns out precisely for this reason that in wishing to make some part or “piece” of reality the object of our study we not only extract it from the whole, as if tearing a thread that connects this piece to the whole, but even, it turns out, “freeze” this fixed “piece.” At the same time as reality itself and all of our experiences have passed and are passing somewhere into the distance we remain, strictly speaking, in “the past,” a past that *itself* is not given, so to speak, directly to us, but only *reproduced* by us. (Shpet 2019, p. 234)

Husserl raises a similar concern in his conclusive “Train of Thought in the Lectures” of “The Idea of Phenomenology,” as he speaks about the “transcendencies” that remain, even after the reductions, as if behind the truly self-given. Husserl gives the example of hearing a sound or a melody:

If we look closer and now notice how, in the experience of a tone, for instance, even after the phenomenological reduction the *appearance and that which appears stand over against each other*, and do so *in the midst of pure givenness*, that is, within genuine immanence, then we begin to wonder. The tone lasts for a while; then we have the unity of the tone and its temporal span with its temporal phases — the now-phase and the past phases — in evident givenness; on the other hand, when we reflect, the phenomenon of the tone duration, which is itself a temporal phenomenon, has its own now-phase and phases of “having been.” (Husserl 1999, p. 67)

The “above indication already suffices to make us aware of something new,” Husserl continues: “the phenomenon of tone perception, even the evident and reduced phenomenon, requires a distinction within immanence between the *appearance and that which appears*” (Husserl 1999, p. 67). Thus, we have now two forms of absolute givenness, the givenness of the appearing and the givenness of the object. For things simply to be there is a “matter of certain experiences of a specific and changing structure, such as perception, imagination, memory, predication, etc.; and things are in them not as they might be in a case or container, rather, things *constitute themselves*” (Husserl 1999, p. 68).

For Shpet, the same concern is evident in relation to any act of perception. He writes that any “slice” of experience, after the actual moment of its experiencing, can be brought back into consciousness, but only as a “copy” of the original: it is not the perception itself. Shpet concludes from this that “we always see the factually given as given mediately. It demands that it be the object of examination, of a *representation*” (Shpet 2019, p. 234). On the contrary, he adds, it is difficult to reach that which is “actually originarily given here, what is *presentatively* given, what, to put it another way, ‘remains’ after removing everything that is introduced by our ‘imagination,’ ‘recollection,’ ‘understanding,’ ‘desire,’ ‘apperception,’ etc.” (Shpet 2019, p. 234). Thus, in this rather striking contrast to Husserl, Shpet rejects the latter’s view of constitution as perceiving something *as it is imagined, remembered, desired*, etc. According to Shpet, in order to access the essential content of experience, we must somehow “get to it” without the contingency of the appearances, the forms of givenness, typical of empirical being. For Shpet, these are merely viewpoints enshrouding the essential.

This brings Shpet back to the question of the problematic nature of the eidetic. The eidetic, he says, “is often depicted as a system closed unto itself, abiding in a state of static equilibrium” (Shpet 2019, p. 234). In this system, “each ‘idea’ occupies a strictly determined and carefully doled out ‘spot.’ For this reason it cannot be ‘budded’ without breaking its connection to the whole, without breaking certain ‘laws of logic,’ without creating—and this would be the kiss of death!—a ‘contradiction’” (Shpet 2019, p. 234). Shpet suggests that the misunderstanding regarding eidetic beings is that they have been understood as “empty forms,” general concepts

or abstract universals that must be “filled” with actual content in order to be exemplified in reality. On the contrary, according to Shpet, we should view eidetic beings as generalisations *from* reality, found as they are, with their contents. Shpet is after a new kind of logic, which would not reduce the ideal to a static structure. In other words, the eidetic realm should be considered in all its richness of forms, even if contradictory, because the limitations of our minds should not be surmised to be also limitations of ideal being. In order to find the essences of individual phenomena, we must look for them directly in our experience of reality.

According to Shpet, eidetic beings also form a dynamic field: “*eidos* not only always fills [...] forms with an active content, with a *sense*, but even in the most exacting manner reflects, by its own ‘movement,’ the slightest demands on the part of the object’s formative content” (Shpet 2019, p. 235). Indeed, logical forms of thought are, for Shpet, empty and static only when they are detached from their context. The instantiation of the eidetic being allows it to appear as part of a whole, a meaningful structure, the changes of which are reflected in each individual meaning, and vice versa. Roughly put, whereas Husserl’s meaning-constitution occurs in a combination of different cognitive processes, for Shpet, meaning is created by a context “out in the world.” The nature of the contextualised essence, which Shpet also calls “concept,” is dynamic: “Its dynamic is the dynamic of sense” (Shpet 2019, p. 235). Thus, in Shpet’s theory, the question of sense or meaning (*smysl*) comes to replace the Husserlian question of constitution, and it is precisely meaning that is the content of the “filled” eidetic form.<sup>16</sup>

In this new kind of seeing of essences—as a meaningful part of a whole—Shpet finds the true opposite of the natural attitude: the properly philosophical outlook. Whereas he characterizes the perception of facts as a mere grasp of moments and secondary representations of the actual being, he considers the intuition of essences instantiated “out there” as direct and absolute. This originally given (*pervichno danoe*) is accessible “as itself” (*samolichno*) and, because of its perdurable nature, it remains as something that consciousness can always “detach” itself from, and then “return” to it, and find it unchanged (Shpet 1917a, p. 32; Shpet 2019, p. 235). Thus, Shpet finds it possible to view this intuition as truly and directly *presenting* its object. The only way in which the *eidos* changes

<sup>16</sup> In the present article, I make no distinction between the terms ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ in Shpet’s discussion but use them interchangeably to translate ‘*smysl*.’ I am therefore not entirely following Nemeth’s translation of “Wisdom or Reason?” where he systematically translates Shpet’s ‘*smysl*’ as ‘sense.’ Nemeth reserves ‘meaning’ for specifically linguistic concerns, thereby following Husserl’s distinction between *Sinn* (meaning as the object intentionally construed) and *Bedeutung* (expressed meaning, or *Sinn* linguistically expressed). In the case of Shpet’s theory, I believe that linguistic and pre-linguistic meaning-constituting processes need not be distinguished. Shpet’s phenomenology is focused (more narrowly than Husserl’s) on investigating the source and structures of meaning and, for him, all meaning is by nature linguistic. Shpet turns Husserl’s question of meaning-constitution as a whole into a question of “conceptual” meaning and leaves no room for pre-predicative meanings. What Shpet finds important in Husserl’s phenomenology is, instead, the discovery of the correlation between the structures of consciousness and the structures of the object of consciousness. For him, this correlation is found in our shared reality, which is inherently and fundamentally *meaningful*. I thus interpret Shpet’s ‘*smysl*’ as a broad concept, incorporating all kinds of considerations on the question of meaning-constitution.

in our perception is in relation to its form (i.e., whether it is perceived, remembered, desired, etc.) or its “clarity”: “The object toward which consciousness is directed is located at a distance of more or less *nearness*. It is found farther away or closer to the clearest ‘center’ of consciousness. But with all these modifications of consciousness [...] the essence intuited in it remains invariably and calmly *one and the same*” (Shpet 2019, p. 236). Shpet declares that his philosophical analysis has thus critically reinterpreted the “dogmatic” division of the forms of being (into empirical and ideal). He writes: “Since every consciousness is a consciousness of ‘something,’ this essential correlativity gives us the possibility, while studying consciousness itself, to expose the object in all of its wealth and its entire content completely” (Shpet 2019, p. 237). The “something” of phenomenological intentionality turns out, in Shpet’s theory, to be the content of an idea.

However, Shpet points out that the mind or consciousness of any actual person, like any other real object “appears to be entirely an empirical fact, a ‘contingency’” (Shpet 2019, p. 237). Thus, empirical experience only gives us sense experience (*opyt*) of things, which, in the course of a person’s life, “accumulates passively or is actively enlarged, classified, ordered, etc.” (Shpet 1917a, p. 35; Shpet 2019, p. 238). Shpet adds that, “whether experience itself can be called cognition even in a broad, improper sense is doubtful” (Shpet 2019, p. 238). For him, the mere consciousness of something does not, properly speaking, amount to knowledge. In order to free himself from the merely empirical consciousness, the philosopher must “stop considering experience itself as a ‘dogmatically’ given thing of the real world” (Shpet 2019, p. 239). To reach the strictly philosophical outlook, where reality is considered “through consciousness,” it is necessary “to take consciousness not as an empirical experience of an individual, not as the data of ‘observation’ or of ‘self-observation,’ but as consciousness given to consciousness, *consciousness in a reflection on itself*” (Shpet 2019, p. 239). Through this modification we reach “pure intentionality as the consciousness of any object and of any objective content” (Shpet 2019, p. 239), without any metaphysical “baggage”; without any singular viewpoint, through which we would be tempted to jump into “pseudo-philosophical” conclusions. As Shpet writes, “[t]here is no need to construct hypotheses and explanations here. Since nothing ‘depends’ on consciousness in its essence, it neither ‘acts’ on anything nor does anything ‘act’ on it. It is not a ‘thing.’ It is not a ‘reality.’ Rather, it is an ‘essence’ and an ‘idea’” (Shpet 2019, p. 239).

A philosopher must thus remain firmly critical towards his own thought, constantly analysing the contents of his own consciousness *as* the contents of his consciousness: the attention is now directed at the nature of this content. Indeed, as long as this position is held, i.e., as long as thought studies thought, Shpet finds that reaching pure knowledge is possible. He asserts that the “guarantee of philosophical rigor lies simply in the ‘purity’ of its descriptions, in the actual communication of what ‘we see’ in the essential analysis of consciousness” (Shpet 2019, p. 241). This clarificatory task of philosophy is eternal and never-ending, “invariable and stands outside time” (Shpet 2019, p. 241), even if philosophers tend to rush. But the mistakes made by philosophers, Shpet reminds us, do not in any way affect the potential truthfulness of philosophy itself.

However, Shpet finds that in their tradition of critical (and self-critical) thought, philosophers have been unable to accomplish this task properly. In his opinion, they typically chose the wrong foundation:

One of the few points where negative philosophy has shown a certain consistency was its assertion of the “I” as the pivot that supports everything and the center around which everything moves. The “I” turned out to be the criterion, the measure, the source, the owner, and even — as it sometimes happened — the guarantee not only of its own arguments but also of “all things” and of *truth* itself. (Shpet 2019, pp. 241–242)

The philosophising “ego” is a poor foundation for philosophy, according to Shpet, because of the subjectivism that it inbuilds into any theory. Shpet expresses the concern that, if we grant the ego the “power to legislate,” if we consider it able to “construct everything,” we soon slip into relativism. Indeed, on closer inspection, we can see that the ego appears merely as a “point of location,” “a ‘self-asserting’ non-entity: the grey shadow of an individual in whose pallor we saw its right to a pan-philosophical ‘meaningfulness’” (Shpet 2019, p. 242). In Shpet’s opinion, what we have merely grown accustomed to take as the “individual consciousness” is only a “unity” within something larger and non-personal. In Shpet’s opinion, a unity of this kind can “under no condition [...] serve as an ‘epistemological’ guarantee” (Shpet 2019, p. 242):

In reality, the “I” is always a unicum, a social “unit,” a *so-and-so*. Certainly, each *so-and-so* is also a “unity” of consciousness, but this unity is surely a factual, empirical, and historical unity. If a unity of cognition, as essential, forms a certain “part” in the “whole” of consciousness, then obviously the *philosophical* problem of cognition simply goes past the *so-and-so*, “without touching” it. To an equal degree, it can neither give nor not give guarantees of knowledge. (Shpet 2019, p. 242)

Shpet here distinguishes between two terms closely linked in Russian, *soznanie* (consciousness) and *poznanie* (cognition).<sup>17</sup> He writes that this distinction remains unclear only insofar as we fail to see that, when taken as the subject matter of philosophy, consciousness must be treated in its essential form, as an eidetic consciousness, which is “*ideal and not real*.” Thus, it is not “*my* consciousness, or that of any other *so-and-so* or in general, of any *real* being” (Shpet 2019, p. 242). What, then, is the relationship between consciousness and cognition? The question brings Shpet back to the problem of experience as passively received “*opyt*,” which now appears to us under new light:

When we say that our knowledge is obtained from *experience*, taking the concept of experience in its broadest sense, as that which we *live through*, we correctly indicate the source of our cognition, but upon a closer examination such a formula for the *principium cognoscendi* is too *crude*. (Shpet 2019, p. 243)

<sup>17</sup> In Russian, another term for epistemology is “theory of cognition” (*teoria poznania*).

The picture of experience changes, in Shpet's opinion, as soon as we consider more closely the fact that it is given by two very different kinds of intuitions: the empirical and the ideal. The object towards which our consciousness is directed is one and "the same," but it is presented to us with empirical or essential content depending on our attitude. In other words, the same transcendental object can be perceived equally well through the eidetic intuition as through the empirical one. This, Shpet argues, cannot be explained if we understand "experience" in its simple sense. Regardless of the species of intuition, we do not intuit passively, but in fact actively switch from one intuition to another. To modify Husserl's earlier colour example, we may choose to see red at a certain moment, as the colour of a particular apple and, at another moment, the colour red in general. In Shpet's opinion, this is revealed in the philosophical gaze directed towards consciousness itself *as* it is directed towards reality. In this standpoint, he argues, objects of experience appear to us in already "formulated" ways (empirically or ideally); they are revealed as the contents of consciousness. This requires an act of understanding: the given object is understood *as* the given object. Simple and passive consciousness (of objects) now turns into cognition (which grasps the form in which the objects are given). Shpet concludes that the final form which objects of experience "take" in cognition is, undoubtedly, that of the "word." The linguistic sign combines the empirical with the ideal and can signify transcendental objects in all their possible forms. "A word plays such a role in our cognition that I am ready to alter the formula to read: *a word is the principium cognoscendi of our cognition*" (Shpet 2019, p. 244).<sup>18</sup>

### The Word as the *principium cognoscendi*

In the final part of "Wisdom or Reason?" Shpet examines the nature of the word as the *principle of knowing*, or as the foundation of cognition, and the implications of this discovery for the philosophical task before him. The function of the word becomes central precisely when we place our own experience under examination. Shpet finds that "it is worth our while to pause on whatever is involved in cognizing consciousness, and we find it to be immediately impressed in words" (Shpet 2019, p. 244). Illustrating this, Shpet cites Plato: "When the mind is thinking, it is simply talking to itself, asking questions and answering them, affirming and denying"

<sup>18</sup> As Thomas Seifrid points out, there is a "potent ambiguity inhabiting the word '*slovo*' in the Russian tradition." It can mean a lexical unit (like the standard use of the English "word"), but it can also designate a "speech" or a "discourse" (Seifrid 2005, p. 42). Shpet's philosophy profits from this equivocality as it allows him to construct a theory of the "word" as a single overarching principle of all thought. Starting from *Appearance and Sense*, he occasionally uses the term *logos* to designate this broad meaning of the word (see, e.g., Shpet 1991, p. 162; Shpet 2005, p. 604). Shpet formulated his philosophy of language especially in his later works, *The Inner Form of the Word: Etudes and Variations on Humboldtian Themes (Vnutrennaia forma slova. Etiudy i variatsii na temy Gumbol'ta)* (1927) and the posthumously published manuscript *Language and Thought (Jazyk i smysl)* (most likely written in 1921–1925). For a concise discussion of Wilhelm von Humboldt's influence on Shpet's understanding of language, see Lähteenmäki (2015, pp. 112–115).

(Shpet 2019, p. 244).<sup>19</sup> According to Shpet, we must distinguish several forms (*formy*) present in a word: at least the grammatical, the stylistic, the aesthetic, and the logical.<sup>20</sup> Whereas the other forms are either structurally defined by the language they are a part of (grammatical forms) or can be used to express the speaker's subjective nuances (stylistic forms), logical forms are found at the root of every meaning formation.<sup>21</sup> They are, Shpet writes, "particularly important to us. They are neither fortuitous nor empirical, but essential and necessary, as stable and uniform as the formative object is identical in itself" (Shpet 2019, p. 244). In other words, Shpet considers the logical forms of language (which he also calls "the inner forms of the word") as coinciding with the logical forms of thought. For Shpet, this is an answer to the question of how meaning is bestowed upon raw experiential data, similarly to Husserl's theory of constitution. For him, the inner form of the word, i.e., its logical form, serves to conceptualise the very point of meaning-constitution. The logic of this constitution appears "transparently" in the inner form: our inherent logic of thought is the logic of the inner form. The given, as it is given, is directly *presented* in the word, instead of merely represented. According to Shpet, the word, thus, can be seen as "holding within" itself the richness of the logic of thought itself: "a word in its comprehensive form is a sentence or clause; in its curtailed form it is a concept" (Shpet 2019, p. 245). Therefore, logic should study words as expressions of the mind's content. This prospect of a new logic, Shpet finds, could ideally lead to a whole new level of scientific explanation:

If a word, as an ideal inner form, could be immediately transmitted, perhaps our science would be as error-free as the truth itself that science wants to transmit. However, the essential source of error and delusions lies in the fact that the ideal logical forms in a word itself are closely connected with other forms and that the final empirical impression of a word is itself empirical. (Shpet 2019, p. 245)

Shpet admits that, with all that he has established, his view of reality and of how philosophy should address it turns out to be tightly interconnected with logic. This, he adds, is perfectly permissible as the logical form of thought should be located at the very core of knowledge itself. As he writes, we "see all of our knowledge only through this stratum. Consequently, it, as knowledge, cannot be other than in the logical forms necessarily peculiar to it" (Shpet 2019, p. 245). Shpet's conclusions strike as somewhat radical: since the given is given directly in the logical forms of language, Shpet equates it with truth, with *episteme*, as opposed to *doxa*. In the word, we can thus find a direct expression of being itself. For Shpet, however, this is not a metaphysical statement, but rather a methodological notion, which he opposes to the "irrationalist" currents in contemporary philosophy: "This is why all the

<sup>19</sup> The original quote is from *Theaetetus* 189e-190a.

<sup>20</sup> By "forms," Shpet seems to mean different "aspects" of one word as it can be understood or "looked at" as a grammatical structure or as an aesthetically pleasing word, for instance.

<sup>21</sup> The aesthetic form of the word is a subject of separate research for Shpet. He approached the topic repeatedly in the 1920s, most notably in his *Aesthetic Fragments (Esteticheskie fragmenty)* (1922–1923).

ruckus about logic by certain representatives of contemporary pseudo-philosophy is essentially absurd. A ‘protest’ against logical forms of thought is just as absurd as a protest against a solution to a mathematical problem using the principles and techniques of mathematics” (Shpet 2019, p. 245).

The new dynamic logic of concepts Shpet proposes would be a “non-formalistic” logic. What is required first, though, is a reinterpretation of the notion of “concept” (*ponyatie*) itself. Shpet writes that the “irrationalist” argument against logic consists exactly in the fact that logical concepts “impoverish” the lived experience, that they are “boring,” “static,” and “formalistic.” All of this, he thinks, is correct to a certain extent, “as long as it is the matter of the logic that looks on ‘concepts’ as delimitations of one content from another purely in terms of their respective *extensions* and when it is concerned only with the relations between concepts in terms of their extension” (Shpet 2019, p. 248). But Shpet claims that such a restricted understanding of concepts is not a necessary quality of logic, historically speaking; it was not the case with Aristotle’s or the Stoics’ logic, with the logic of the Middle Ages, with Port Royal Logic, or with the later rationalist logic. The novel term Shpet proposes to describe his logic is “semasiology” (*semasiologia*).<sup>22</sup> Indeed, he looks upon words as *signs* (*semata*) that have the potential of denoting their content, i.e., their *meaning*, directly. As Shpet underlines, this is not a case of representation, but of presentation: it is the presentation of the logic of thought itself. We can still understand or fail to understand these signs, Shpet argues, but this is a question of our fallibility, not that of the sign. In fact, the act of interpretation is not a simple task, as the sign must be understood in its context. That, properly speaking, is where meaning becomes constructed. Shpet writes:

A concept considered semasiologically in essence cannot be characterized as “static” or as a “snippet.” On the contrary, it is fundamentally dynamic, as dynamic as is its meaning. Such a concept is not a “snippet” but a living organ. An *understood* concept lives and moves. Any verbal particle is understood only in *connection* with others and with the greater whole. And this whole is understood again in a new whole of which it is a part. A word, a sentence, a period, a conversation, a book, an entire speech — there are no cessations here to endless penetrating acts of understanding. (Shpet 2019, pp. 248–249)

Shpet’s argument is that all the contextual connections are indeed “found” within each word (or some other part of speech): they are implied by its inner logical form. The interpretative task is redirected, as it were, up to the level of an entire discourse, which is made up by the totality of concepts, expressions, and other uses of language. The work of phenomenological analysis thus moves ever further away from the consciousness of the transcendental ego in Shpet’s theory. However, discourse, or “language” now seems to “embody” the impersonal cognition, which he considers to be the true foundation of knowledge. It does not “belong” to anyone in

<sup>22</sup> In the tradition of Russian formalism, Shpet is indeed looked upon as a “proto-semiotician.” For a discussion of Shpet’s “deep semiotics” in relation to the theories of Peirce and de Saussure, see Feshchenko (2015).



particular, but is instead constituted collectively, through every real use of language. In the end, it appears to create an entire hermeneutic “reality” of concepts, created and understood, which covers “everything.” As Shpet writes, we “have still another name for the *whole* [*vse*], as the empirical whole, and it is ‘*history*’ [*istoria*]” (Shpet 1917a, p. 50; Shpet 2019, p. 249). According to Shpet, we can grasp reality as a “whole” when we understand it hermeneutically. Herein lies the difference between philosophical understanding and empirical knowledge. For Shpet, empirical attention focuses always only on a part, on a “moment,” of the flow of our total experience. Hermeneutic philosophy, in contrast, attempts to grasp everything as a moving and changing whole, i.e., as history. For this reason, this whole is by its nature dynamic, and the logic that describes it is *dialectics* (Shpet 2019, p. 249).

At the end of his article, Shpet returns to the question of how such a dialectical and hermeneutic construction may be connected to reality. He clarifies:

The issue here is that in a concept, as an internally formed word, we see not only the “concept” but also — and this is essential — its eidetic content, which contains the sense or meaning of the concept. We penetrate to this sense not by means of a simple “conceptualization,” but through an act of “establishing” that includes within itself — insofar as it is in itself only a formative act — a *sui generis* act of “intelligible intuition.” It is this act that gives us an “understanding” of the corresponding sense. (Shpet 2019, p. 251)

The word-concept, which is not just an “extension” and a “class,” but also a *sign*, requires an act of interpretation. Shpet describes this act as a penetration “into” the concept’s meaning, “into, as it were, its ‘intimate something,’ into the ‘living soul’ of the word-concept” (Shpet 2019, p. 251). The hermeneutic act of understanding a concept thus corresponds to the phenomenological practise of analysing the constitutive acts of cognition. In Husserl’s “Train of Thought in the Lectures,” meaning-constitution was presented as an act of consciousness, directed towards the strictly speaking separate moments of experience. Through eidetic reduction, Husserl attempted to get to the essential structures of experience, through which something external to consciousness would become an object for consciousness. Indeed, the correlation between consciousness and the world showed him not only that consciousness is always a “consciousness of...” but that the world is always a “world for consciousness” (Jansen 2015, p. 53). For Shpet, the constitutive act is something else. According to him, when we first turn to investigate the acts and contents of our consciousness, this consciousness spontaneously turns into an interpretative one and its contents convert into meaningful signs: consciousness becomes permeated with language. The meanings “found” in consciousness are not constituted subjectively by the philosophising ego, but they are formed through the collective meaning structure, i.e., through language. Seeing the whole of reality thus saturated with meaning, which changes dynamically with the historical changes in language (and its objects, the world), Shpet alters the saying “*nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu*” to “*nihil est in intellectu, quod non fuerit in historia, et omne, quod fuit in historia,*

*deberet esse in intellectu*” (Shpet 2019, pp. 251–252).<sup>23</sup> As Nemeth comments, this is Shpet’s adaptation of the Scholastic doctrine that there is nothing in the intellect that does not come from the senses (Shpet 2019, p. 252).

A notable detail about Shpet’s theory of words is that they do not, strictly speaking, refer to a reality outside of themselves. As Shpet makes clear, words are signs that have a content, or a meaning, which they disclose. A sign (*znak*) expresses its meaning (*znachenie*), which is the “pure object” *as it is formulated into* a cognisable object. In what comes to the philosophical search for “truth,” Shpet writes, echoing Husserl’s argument in “Philosophy as Rigorous Science,” that the true nature and final goal of philosophy should be found, quite simply, in clarity of description. “To avoid lapsing into fantastic pseudo-philosophical revelations, what we have to say about this further deepening of our philosophical understanding must—whether we like it or not—have a ‘purely’ instructional character [*harakter chistyh ukazanii*]” (Shpet 1917a, p. 54, 2019, p. 252). Anyone who attempts to reach farther will, in Shpet’s opinion, risk climbing too far on the “philosophical heights,” where “only the rare head was spared from spinning,” and will have us “bombarded with words written with a capital letter: Truth, Reason, Will, I, the Good” (Shpet 2019, p. 252).

In Shpet’s theory, rationality rises to a prominent role as a philosophical principle. His conviction is that this is not a convention or a theoretical outlook, but rather a necessary condition of human thought. The mind’s “movement” from a sign to its meaning in the hermeneutic or understanding intuition is, for Shpet, a primary (*pervichnyi*) and immediate (*neposredstvennyi*) act, so that this meaning is perceived in an immediate intuition (Shpet 1917a, p. 57). “A semasiological acceptance of the essence *eo ipso* forces us to seek in it, as the ‘beginning,’ the *sense*, which is revealed to us as the *rational foundation* inherent within the essence itself” (Shpet 2019, p. 254). In other words, the very correlation of consciousness to the world is rational: the world, “for us,” is rational. Ontological and epistemological viewpoints are thus all but merged in Shpet’s theory, and he appears committed to seeing *word*, *language*, or *history* as a kind of ontology, as a theory of “that which is.” Perhaps paradoxically, this is, at least partly, due to the phenomenological roots of Shpet’s theory.

That being said, Husserl himself, in his search for the absolute validity of knowledge and apodictic evidence, came close to a foundational theory.<sup>24</sup> He strove to reduce the two “absolute data,” namely, the givenness of the appearance and the givenness of the object itself, into only one absolute givenness. At the end of his laborious search, Husserl came to discover the “wonderful correlation between the *phenomenon of knowledge* and the *object of knowledge*” (Husserl 1999, p. 68). Indeed, some commentators of Husserl have highlighted the task of phenomenology as that of understanding “being.” According to Søren Overgaard, for example, Husserl’s phenomenology incorporates both a transcendental and an ontological aspect.

<sup>23</sup> “Nothing is in the intellect that has not been in history, and everything that was in history should be in the intellect” (Shpet 2019, p. 252).

<sup>24</sup> The question of Husserl’s foundationalism has been discussed, for example, by Hans Bernhard Schmid (2001).

In the case of the former, his phenomenology concerns the conditions of possibility of the manifestation of beings. In the case of the latter, phenomenology inspects “the *modes of being* peculiar to different entities” (Overgaard 2004, p. 205). In Husserl’s thought, the ontological “question of being” is formulated as an “as-what” question (Overgaard 2004, p. 206).

## Conclusion

It could be suggested that Shpet anticipated his “transcendental turn” in his undergraduate thesis entitled *The Problem of Causality in Hume and Kant (Problema prichinnosti u Iuma i Kanta*, Kiev University, 1906).<sup>25</sup> As Nemeth demonstrates, Shpet there infers that, from Kant’s standpoint, Hume’s conclusion regarding the subjectivity of causal relations was due to the fact that Hume had in mind “things in themselves,” rather than their “appearances” (Nemeth 2019c, p. 280). According to Shpet, Kant’s conclusion was that “[o]nce the correction is made, Hume’s doubt in the necessity of causality vanishes” (Nemeth 2019c, p. 280). In Shpet’s opinion, this is precisely the dangerous and erroneous step, by which Kant jeopardised the whole future development of philosophy; he put the question of “what seems to be” before the question of “what is.” Nemeth writes that for Shpet, however, “Hume never doubted the *real* necessity of the causal connection, only its *logical* necessity, i.e., the possibility of epistemologically proving such necessity” (Nemeth 2019c, p. 280). According to Shpet, this logical necessity was precisely what Kant set out but failed to prove. “But then again,” Shpet concluded, “it was not necessary to prove anything” (Nemeth 2019c, p. 280). Indeed, Shpet saw Hume as a “negative” philosopher who had rendered a service to philosophy by drawing attention “to new aspects and new types” of being, i.e., the being of the mind in its connection to the being external to it. According to Shpet, Hume’s reservation “led him to the brink of pursuing the ‘positive’ problem concerning *how* we relate to the world” (Nemeth 2019c, p. 280).

In Husserl’s phenomenology, Shpet discovered a way to argue against Kant. Being strictly against the separation of the mind from the world, Shpet agreed with Husserl, calling for their “unity” and “correlation.” Likewise, Shpet came to argue that the philosophical (or phenomenological) viewpoint, which considered reality as it is *experienced through consciousness*, is the unique way in which reality can be grasped in its entirety and fullness of forms. In “Wisdom or Reason?” Shpet suggests that this totality can be discovered in language. For him, the way we conceptualise reality and express it in language is an indication of the forms of correlation between the mind and its object: of the logical core of any meaning-constitution. Furthermore, Shpet argues that this logical core has its origin in a collective consciousness, which is the foundation for a shared rationality. A certain rational motivation is to be

<sup>25</sup> Shpet’s thesis was published in five parts in the journal of the University of St. Vladimir, *Kievskie universitetskie izvestia*: 5 (1906): pp. 1–16; 6 (1906): pp. 17–49; 7 (1906): pp. 51–82; 12 (1906): pp. 83–164; 5 (1907): pp. 165–203. Nemeth refers to the fifth and last part of the thesis.

found at the very basis of all of our minds' constitutive processes and, as it is shared by everyone (as members of a shared language or culture), it creates an objective picture of reality. The collective consciousness can even, theoretically, grasp "all the points of view" we might ever have in relation to reality.

In his article, Shpet presents a critique of the traditional logical views regarding the nature of ideas or essences. For him, ideas should be considered in the way we discover them in concrete reality, not as empty abstractions, but as filled with content. Shpet prompts us to look for essences of individual phenomena and draws the conclusion that, in reality, essences are to be found as manifested in language or other signifying expressions. It is precisely sense, or meaning, which Shpet discovers to be the content of the *eidōs*. Meanings live and evolve along with historical changes in the collective consciousness and language. Therefore, the word denotes an essence, but not as an absolute, i.e., not as a Kantian transcendent thing-in-itself. Instead, the word embodies the phenomenologically considered correlation between a thought and its object; between *noēsis* and *noēma*.

Andreea Smaranda Aldea has argued that the tension, often deemed inescapable, between Husserl's early transcendental eidetics and his later method of historical reflection<sup>26</sup> should be reconsidered. Her suggestion is that the structures and conditions for the possibility of transcendental eidetic variation in fact *rely* on "historically sedimented" epistemic and normative resources. In other words, in order to

access the transcendental attitude critically construed, the reductions alone do not suffice as propaedeutic measure. Beyond immediately bracketing basic attitudinal commitments, the phenomenologist must also critically engage the relevant, yet covert, epistemic and normative practices, in their history of sedimentation. Thus, we attain the neutrality and theoretical freedom of phenomenology not solely through sweeping bracketings, but through a resolute transcendental self-reflective engagement of "our" epistemic and normative history. (Aldea 2016, p. 43)

Aldea argues that, in our attempt to grasp the necessary and universal structures of meaning-constitution, we must simultaneously penetrate "deeper" into the sedimentations of meanings, values, and commitments (Aldea 2016, p. 22). She cites Husserl, who asserts that, with this method, we can "strike through the crust of the externalized 'historical facts' of philosophical history, interrogating, exhibiting, and testing their inner meaning and hidden teleology" (Aldea 2016, p. 42). Bridging the gap between the later, historical, and hermeneutic versions of Husserl's phenomenology and his early discoveries of the transcendental method certainly helps to bring Shpet and Husserl closer to each other; in both cases, a certain historically determined teleology or motivation, lying as it were "under" all meaning-constitution, is discovered.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Husserl formulated this method in his final work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936).

<sup>27</sup> Shpet's hermeneutic and ontological phenomenology has often been associated with Husserl's later viewpoint of genetic phenomenology. For a recent analysis of this connection, see Savin (2016). Marina

Nevertheless, the difference between Shpet and Husserl's theories should not be understated. Shpet's conception of cultural reality is the result of a strong ontological and hermeneutic emphasis in his philosophy. Husserl suspends judgment about the existence of the world in order to enable a more radical questioning of just what is meant by "world."<sup>28</sup> In contrast, Shpet ends up, as it were, postulating a special kind of cultural reality and his phenomenology is oriented towards a study of the structures of this reality. However, as was shown earlier, the structures of this reality are in Shpet's theory identical to the sense-bestowing structures of collective consciousness. Therefore, we can also suggest that the outcome of Shpet's theory is surprising in view of his own initial goal. His ambition was to study being "as it is," in contrast to "as it appears," and to reach *episteme* instead of mere *doxa*. Yet, we might be inclined to think that, as his phenomenology focuses on questions of language and culture, its subject matter consists of historically contingent phenomena. In other words, it is difficult to accept Shpet's claim that truth itself can be found within the meaning of an expression. Nonetheless, I suggest that Shpet found the answer to his "question of being" in his treatment of meaning-constitution. Analogically to Husserl, he discovered the fundamental philosophical problems and their solutions in the act of taking "what we know" and investigating "how we know it," i.e., discovering the structures of knowledge, thought, and word. For Shpet, "Truth" with a capital letter remained outside of the scope of philosophy as pure knowledge.

This trait of merging the ontological with the transcendental sets Shpet's philosophy somewhat apart from the general tradition of Russian philosophical ontologism. In fact, Shpet explicitly distinguished himself from this tradition in two critical reviews on ontological themes in the same *Thought and Word* issue in which "Wisdom or Reason?" appeared. In his review of Nikolai Lossky's *Matter in the System of Organic Worldview (Materia v sisteme organicheskogo mirovozzrenia)* (1916), Shpet argues that Lossky's work is beyond the grasp of philosophical criticism insofar as it is by nature *mythological* instead of philosophical. In Shpet's opinion, Lossky's book draws an *explanation* of reality relying on something absent from the direct givenness of reality. Thus, he claims, Lossky mistakes what only "seems to be" for that which actually "is" (Shpet 1917c, pp. 368–369).<sup>29</sup> Shpet's assessment of Vladimir Ern's book, *Filosofia Dzhoberti* (1916), is likewise negative. He argues that Ern has, in fact, misinterpreted Vincenzo Gioberti's thought. Shpet believes that Gioberti's philosophy has considerably less to do with Plato (Shpet 1917b, pp. 346–349) and more with Kant and Hume (Shpet 1917b, pp. 349–351) than Ern describes it. According to Shpet, Ern would do better to characterise

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Footnote 27 (continued)

Bykova (2016) connects Shpet's interpretation to the subsequent versions of hermeneutic phenomenology by Heidegger and Gadamer.

<sup>28</sup> As Kwok-Ying Lau clarifies, the neutralization of the general ontological thesis about the world does not mean the negation of the existence of the world. Likewise, "it does not mean that we give up the search for the truth of the world" (Lau 2020, p. 16).

<sup>29</sup> Shpet discusses the "positive philosophy," which approaches reality "as it is" instead of simply "as it seems," in his dissertation, *History as a Problem of Logic (Istoria kak problema logiki)* (1916). See, e.g., Shpet (1916b, pp. 12–13).

Gioberti's thought as a *theologism*, rather than as an *ontologism* (Shpet 1917b, pp. 336). The ontologism of Shpet's phenomenology should thus be treated apart from the religious tradition of Russian thought.<sup>30</sup>

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## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that Shpet never used the term *ontologism* to characterise his own philosophy.

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