

The Eidetic

1. Psychologistic Scepticism

The psychologism against which Husserl battles identifies the subject of knowledge with the psychological subject. It insists that the judgment “This wall is yellow” is not a proposition independent of my expressing it and perceiving the wall. We could argue that “wall” and “yellow” are concepts definable by extension and intension independently of all concrete thought; is it necessary to accord them some existence in themselves transcending the subject and the real? The *contradictions* of realism concerning ideas (Platonism, for example) are inevitable and unsolvable. Yet if we admit the principle of *noncontradiction* as a criterion for the validity of a thesis (here, Platonism), do we not affirm its independence from concrete thought? We pass thus from the problem of the *material* of logic, the concept, to that of its organization, *the principles*; but psychologism is not disarmed on this new terrain: when the logician claims that two contrary propositions cannot be true simultaneously, he states only that it is impossible in fact, on the level of actual consciousness, to believe that the wall is yellow *and* that it is green. The validity of such general principles is based in my psychological organization, and if they are indemonstrable it is precisely because they are innate; from which it follows obviously that there is no ultimate truth independent of the psychological workings which drive it. How could I know if my knowledge is adequate to its object, as the classical conception of truth demands? What is the sign of this adequation? Necessarily, a certain “state of consciousness” by which all questions concerning the object of knowledge are found superfluous—subjective certitude.

Thus concepts become actual; principles become contingent conditions of psychological mechanisms; and truth becomes belief reinforced by success. Since scientific knowledge is itself relative to our organization, no law can be said to be absolutely true; it is simply a hypothesis in view of verification without end, and its validity is defined in terms of the efficacy of the operations that render it possible. Science thus weaves a network of useful symbols (“energy,” “force,” etc.) with which it dresses the world; its only objective is to establish constant relations among these symbols, permitting action. The question is not, properly speaking, about *knowledge of the world*. We cannot assert the progress of this knowledge in the history of science: history is a development without specifiable meaning, an accumulation of trials and errors. We must therefore renounce the posing of questions that science cannot answer. Finally, mathematics is a vast formal system of conventionally established symbols and operative axioms without restrictive content: all is possible in our imagination (Poincaré). Mathematical truth winds up being defined in reference to the axioms chosen from the outset. All these theses converge in scepticism.

2. *Essences*

Husserl shows (in the *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas I*) that this scepticism, resting as it does on empiricism, is its own contradiction. Basically, the assumption at the root of all empiricism is the claim that experience is the sole source of truth for all knowledge—but then this claim must rely, in turn, on the proof of experience. Yet experience, never furnishing more than the contingent and particular, cannot provide science with the universal and necessary principle of such an assumption. Thus, empiricism cannot be understood through empiricism. At the same time it is impossible to confuse, for example, the flux of subjective states experienced by the mathematician when he reasons, and reason itself, since the operations of reasoning are definable independently of this flux; we can only say the mathematician reasons rightly when by this subjective flux he rises to the objectivity of true reasoning. But this ideal objectivity is defined by logical conditions, and the

truth of reason (its noncontradiction) *imposes itself* on the mathematician as it does on the logician. True reasoning is universally valid, while false reasoning is tainted by subjectivity, and thus untransmissible. Even a rectangular triangle possesses an ideal objectivity in the sense that it is the subject of a collection of predicates, inalienable on pain of *losing* the rectangular triangle itself. To avoid the ambiguity of the word “idea,” we say that it possesses an *essence* constituted by all its predicates, whose negation would entail the negation of the triangle itself. For example, all triangles are, by their essence, convex.

Yet if we remain on the level of mathematical “objects,” the formalist argument that views these objects as conventional concepts retains its force; one could hold, for example, that the supposedly “essential” characteristics of the mathematical object are in reality deducible from the start from the axioms. For this reason Husserl expands his theory of essences, in the second volume of *Logical Investigations*, to apply even to that favored ground of empiricism: *perception*. When we say “The wall is yellow,” do we involve essences in this judgment? For example, can the color be grasped independently of the surface on which it is “spread out”? No, since a color separated from the space in which it is given would be unthinkable. If, in “varying” the color in the imagination, we withdraw its predicate “extended,” we negate the possibility of the color itself, and so arrive at a *consciousness of impossibility*; this reveals the essence. In judgments there are, therefore, limits to our fantasizing which are fixed for us by the judged *things themselves*, and which Fantasy itself discloses by means of variation.

The proceedings of imaginal variation give us the essence itself, the being of the object. The object (*Objekt*) is “anything whatsoever,” for example the number two, the note C, a circle, any proposition or perceptible datum whatsoever (*Ideas I*). We perform the “variation” arbitrarily, obeying only the present and actual evidence of the “I can” or the “I cannot.” The essence, or *eidos*, of the object is constituted by the invariant that remains identical throughout the variations. Thus if we operate the variation on the perceptible thing as object, we obtain the ‘way of being’ of any such thing: a spatio-temporal whole, endowed with secondary qualities and presented as substance and causal unity.

The essence is therefore experienced in an actual, concrete intuition. This “vision of essences” (*Wesenschau*) has nothing of a metaphysical character, nor is the theory of essences itself framed within a Platonic realism where the existence of the essence would be assumed; the essence is only that in which the “thing itself” is revealed to me in an *originary givenness*.

This involves a return “to the things themselves” (*zu den Sachen selbst*), a closing off of all metaphysical avenues. But the empiricists remained metaphysical in confusing this demand to return to the things themselves with the demand to found all knowledge on experience, taking as given, without question, that experience alone gives the things themselves—a pragmatist-empiricist prejudice. In reality, the ultimate source of justification for all rational assertions is in “seeing” (*Sehen*) in general, that is, in primordial dator consciousness (*Ideas I*). We have presupposed nothing, Husserl says, “not even the concept of philosophy.” While psychologism wishes to identify the “*eidōs*” obtained through variation with the “concept” of psychological and empirical origin, we reply simply that in so doing it says more than it realizes if it wishes to hold to the originary intuition that it pretends to take as its law. Perhaps the number two, as concept, is constructed from experience, but as I obtain this *eidōs* number by variation, I claim that this *eidōs* is “prior” to all theory about the construction of the number, and the proof of this is that all genetic explanation relies on the present knowledge of “something” which this genesis must explain. The empiricist interpretation of the formation of the number two *presupposes* the originary understanding of this number. This understanding is thus a precondition for all empirical science; while the *eidōs* it yields us is only a pure possibility, there is a priority to this possibility with respect to the real which concerns science.

3. *Eidetic Science*

Here it proves possible to grant this science its validity. The incertitudes of science—perceptible already in the human sciences, but reaching ultimately even to those which act as models, namely physics and mathematics—have their source in a blind

concern for experimentation. Before doing physics one must study the essence of the physical fact; the same applies, of course, to the other disciplines as well. From the definition of the *eidos* grasped by ordinary intuition, we can draw methodological conclusions that orient empirical research. It is already clear, for example, that no serious empirical psychology can be undertaken if the essence of the psychological has not been grasped in a manner avoiding all confusion with the essence of the physical. In other words, we must define the eidetic laws that guide all empirical knowledge: this study constitutes the general eidetic science or ontology of nature (that is, the study of being or essence). This ontology has been grasped in its truth, as prolegomenon to the corresponding empirical science, in the development of geometry and the recognition of the role it plays in the purification of knowledge in physics. All natural things have spatial being as their essence, and geometry is the eidetics of space; but it does not encompass the entire essence of the thing, nor the scope of other disciplines. We should thus make hierarchical distinctions, beginning with the empirical: (1) material essences (that of clothing, for example) studied by ontologies or sciences of material eidetics; (2) regional essences (for example, cultural objects) directing the former and explicating by regional eidetics; and (3) the essence of the object in general, according to the previously given definition, which is studied by a formal ontology.¹ This last essence, which directs all the regional essences, is a "pure eidetic form," and the "formal region" which it determines is not a region coordinated with material regions, but the "empty form 'region' in general." This formal ontology is identifiable with pure logic; it is the *Mathesis Universalis*, the goal of Descartes and Leibniz. Clearly this ontology must define not only the notion of theory in general, but all the possible forms of theories (the system of multiplicities).

Such is the first great movement of the Husserlian process. It rests upon the fact, defined as "the individual and the contingent"; the contingency of the fact is related to the necessary essence, since to think of its contingency is to think that it belongs to the essence of the fact that it could be otherwise. Fac-

1. The hierarchy is obviously a network, not linear in form.

ticity thus implies a necessity. This process apparently restates Platonism and its “naivité.” But it also contains Cartesianism, since it strives to present the knowledge of essences not as the end of all knowledge, but as the necessary introduction to knowledge of the material world. In this sense the truth of the eidetic is the empirical, and this is why the “eidetic reduction,” by which we are invited to pass from the contingent facticity of the object to its intelligible contents, can still be called “mundane.” To each empirical science there corresponds an eidetic science concerning the regional *eidos* of the objects studied, and phenomenology itself is, at this stage of Husserlian thought, defined as the eidetic science of the region consciousness; in other words, in all the empirical human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) we find an essence of consciousness necessarily involved, and it is this implication that Husserl attempts to articulate in *Ideas II*.