

FROM EGO TO SELFHOOD

A Question of Method

An inquiry into Ricoeur's philosophical method is a complex and difficult endeavor. Although Ricoeur explores the details of his methodology in numerous concisely written articles, his methodological procedures are never divorced from the "understanding" that results from their application. In fact, Ricoeur's entire philosophical project is predicated on the unity of methodological "explanation" and hermeneutical "understanding" of meaning (TH 43–62). Therefore, every conversation about meaning is also about method, and dialogue concerning method is in turn revelatory of meaning. Here lies the difficulty: Ricoeur's method cannot be isolated from meaning and, as I will argue, from life, without betraying its original intent. Focusing on methodological considerations simply gives us an opening onto the much broader landscape of selfhood as a question. Explanation and understanding are intimately connected. Apart from the "world" of meaning, methodological explanation remains lifeless. Ricoeur's method can only be fully understood through careful consideration of the field of application, which for him is the interpretation of selfhood.

Unique to Ricoeur's philosophical method is a critical moment or "space of reflexivity" (HB 89) at the center of his dialectic of explanation and understanding. Ricoeur does not deny the importance of critical analysis and the necessity of methodological precision for understanding the questions of existence. In his insightful exposition of Ricoeur's conception of the *cogito*, Jervolino explains that Ricoeur's "search for a 'methodical' hermeneutics, such as to found and justify in a credible fashion a method or a plurality of methods of interpretation and demystification, corresponds to so deep and pressing a need for clarity, understanding and self-understanding in mankind today that the undertaking must at least be attempted, avoiding any hardening of the

Gadamerian opposition between ‘truth’ and ‘method’ ” (Jervolino 5). By rejecting such a dualism of “truth or method,” not necessarily found in Gadamer,¹ Ricoeur attempts to incorporate, at the very heart of the experience of belonging, a methodological moment that he refers to as “distanciation” (TH 60). Posing a question in relation to Gadamer’s philosophy,² Ricoeur asks: “How is it possible to introduce a critical distance into a consciousness of belonging which is expressly defined by the rejection of distanciation?” To which he answers: “It is possible, in my view, only insofar as historical consciousness seeks not simply to repudiate distanciation but to assume it” (TH 60). Employing a combination of Husserlian “imaginative variation” and a quasi-Kantian dialectic of reproductive and productive aspects of the imagination, Ricoeur develops a method that creates an opening at the core of experience itself where critical reflection can distance itself from the sedimentation of meaning by exploring imaginative possibilities for existing in the mode of selfhood offered by the world of the text.

1.1 Distanciation and Phenomenology

The notion of distanciation is perhaps the key feature that distinguishes Ricoeur’s philosophical position from others within the phenomenological-hermeneutical tradition. As Ricoeur himself notes, “the theme of distanciation gives me the opportunity to mark my personal contribution to the hermeneutical-phenomenological school; it is quite clearly characterized by the role I assign to critical distance in all the operations of thought belonging to interpretation” (FTA xiii–xvi). “Distanciation,” however, is more than a mere contribution to the phenomenological-hermeneutical school. Ricoeur’s modest evaluation of his own position belies the unique transformation of phenomenological hermeneutics that takes place as a result of the insertion of a “space of reflexivity” into the heart of belonging. Building on the strengths of both the phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions, Ricoeur develops a position that avoids their weaknesses.

The notion of distanciation addresses the demand for methodological clarity while avoiding the idealism associated with the phenomenological tradition. Likewise, by rooting thought in an interpretative process that pays homage to textual autonomy in conjunction with the appropriation of the referential world of meaning up front in the text, Ricoeur avoids the hermeneutical excesses of both subjectivism and objectivism. By positioning the imaginative play of critical reflexivity at the center of his methodology, Ricoeur in fact places the two philosophical traditions in service of each other, where “*phenomenology remains the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics . . . [and where] phenomenology cannot constitute itself without a hermeneutical presupposition*” (PH 101). This dialectic of phenomenology and hermeneutics, mediated or

bridged by a “third term” characterized as a “space of reflexivity,” brings us to the methodological and epistemological core of Ricoeur’s project. Repetition of this pattern on a variety of levels of analysis opens existence for an interpretive examination.

Ricoeur’s most explicit and detailed account of his methodology is found in an article entitled “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics” (1975).³ Here Ricoeur attempts to reinterpret phenomenology in the light of hermeneutics without giving up the central phenomenological description of intentionality. Rather than eliminating phenomenology as a relic of the modern philosophical project, Ricoeur wishes to strip phenomenology of the “*idealistic* interpretation [given] by Husserl himself.”⁴ Although each tradition presupposes the other, Ricoeur’s credo that “*phenomenology remains the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics . . . [and conversely] phenomenology cannot constitute itself without a hermeneutical presupposition,*” implies a foundational role for phenomenology even though phenomenological description has “a hermeneutical presupposition.” However, as is evident from Ricoeur’s threefold arc of mimetic representation,⁵ which begins with phenomenological description and then gives way to hermeneutical reflection as a means for offering a poetic solution to the aporetic character of historical consciousness, the interpretive process takes precedence over and above phenomenological description. Although phenomenology provides a preliminary foundation that structures hermeneutics, hermeneutical reflection qualifies and completes the phenomenological quest for meaning. To clarify this hermeneutical qualification, I need to explore in some detail Ricoeur’s appropriation of both phenomenology and hermeneutics.

In “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics,” Ricoeur discusses a number of themes that are characteristic of Husserlian idealism. Taking the “1930 ‘Nachwort’ to the *Ideen* as a typical document of Husserlian idealism,” Ricoeur explains that the “Nachwort,” “together with the *Cartesian Meditations . . .* constitutes . . . the most advanced expression of this idealism” (PH 102). This designation of the “most advanced expression” of Husserl’s idealism is of considerable debate. It is of particular importance for our examination of Ricoeur’s conception of selfhood that we include within the category “most advanced,” the first part of Husserl’s *Ideen*. Essential to the development of my argument is the manner in which Ricoeur contrasts his own position with the philosophies of the “*cogito* and *anticogito*.” In order to understand this contrast more clearly, it will be beneficial to detail Husserl’s descriptions of absolute consciousness found in the first part of *Ideen*.

One might argue, however, that it is somewhat inappropriate to utilize *Ideen* as paradigmatic of Husserlian idealism, due to the fact that Ricoeur himself stipulates that the promise of the transcendental reduction is not fulfilled in *Ideen*, and that the reduction Husserl discussed in *Ideen* remains only a psychological *epochè*, without the presence of the full transcendental reduction.

Further, Ricoeur states that *Ideas* "is a book whose sense lies hidden; one is inevitably inclined to search for this sense elsewhere. At every turn one gets the impression that the essential is not being said, that the effort is to impart a new vision of the world and of consciousness, rather than to say something definitive about the world and about consciousness, something which perhaps could not be understood at all without the acquisition of the new vision."⁶ Yet, as Ricoeur points out, the speed with which the reduction is performed in Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* is in stark contrast with the "interminable preparations and precautions of *Ideas*" (HL 87). To understand the full meaning of Husserl's description of absolute consciousness, I will have to detail the development of the reduction that Ricoeur wishes to pass by in haste.

Aside from my desire to contrast Ricoeur's understanding of selfhood and identity with Husserl's reduction of reality to absolute consciousness, there are additional reasons for focusing on *Ideas*. In this regard Theodore De Boer's work is particularly insightful. Disagreeing with Ricoeur's interpretation of *Ideas*, De Boer explains that Husserl does say at the end of the second chapter "that his meditation has 'reached a climax.' All that comes later is simply addition and elaboration." De Boer continues, however, and argues that "Husserl does speak of these chapters as a 'transcendental preliminary consideration,' which is something different from the 'pre-transcendental consideration' that Ricoeur makes of them. Husserl speaks of a 'preliminary consideration' (*Vorbetrachtung*) because we can grasp the possibility of transcendental reduction only after this analysis" (De Boer 383). In either case, the question is not when Husserl's phenomenology is idealistic or not, but rather when Husserl fully initiates the reduction of the real to the ideal. The point is that idealism remains a theme throughout Husserl's philosophical project. In fact, De Boer notes that "the doctrine of the relativity of the world and the absoluteness of consciousness remained the central point in Husserl's phenomenology even in his very last works. It is the heart of his transcendental idealism" (De Boer 358).

This is also stated by Ricoeur: "In Husserl himself the [phenomenological] method was mixed with an idealistic interpretation which takes up a major portion of the published work and tends to place phenomenology on a plane with turn-of-the-century Neo-Kantianism" (HL 4). Further, "the phenomenology elaborated in *Ideas I* is incontestably an idealism, even a transcendental idealism" (HL 24). But Ricoeur goes on to explain that confusion of interpretation has arisen due to the discrepancy found between Husserl's phenomenological theory and practice: "The fact is that the idealistic interpretation of the method does not necessarily coincide with its actual practice, as many of his disciples have pointed out" (HL 7). Confusion reigns due to the various levels at which Husserl's use of idealist language can be interpreted. "Finally, 'pure consciousness,' 'transcendental consciousness,' 'the absolute being of consciousness,' and 'originary giving consciousness' are names for a consciousness that

fluctuates among several levels or, as it might be said, is described as different phases of the spiritual discipline. Hence issue the errors of interpretation of which Husserl complained so constantly and bitterly" (HL 24). Although Ricoeur never denies the presence of the transcendental reduction in *Ideas*, he questions whether one should not look elsewhere for its full implementation, particularly the "Nachwort" and the *Cartesian Meditations*.

It is my intention, however, not to debate the origin of the implementation of the reduction, but to lay bare Husserl's contrast between the absolute character of consciousness and the relativizing of everything else that results from the reduction. Other problems involved in the interpretation of the development of Husserl's transcendental reduction fall outside the scope of this study. In spite of some disagreement between Ricoeur and De Boer, the features of that which can be characterized as Husserl's transcendental method are held in common by both.

Ricoeur asserts that "the central thesis of Husserlian idealism" can be reduced to the following claims: "The place of plenary intuition is subjectivity. All transcendence is doubtful; immanence alone is indubitable" (PH 103). All the other features of Husserl's phenomenology are founded on this distinction between the indubitability of absolute consciousness and the doubtfulness of all else. Husserl's quest for a science of a different order, characterized as a "radical beginning" grounded within itself (*Selbst-begründung*) (PH 103), is dependent on an egology that seeks to ground all meaning on an absolutely indubitable foundation. Therefore, when Husserl proclaims that "transcendental phenomenology is not a theory, devised merely as a reply to the historic problem of Idealism, it is a science founded in itself, and standing absolutely on its own basis; it is indeed the one science that stands absolutely on its own ground" (*Ideas* 13), such a proclamation can only be made if one clearly understands what transcendental phenomenology rests on. To state it otherwise: What is this ground that has its ground within itself and gives phenomenology a radical beginning?

More than of mere methodological concern, Husserl's phenomenology reorients the ego's connection to the world and is therefore of ontological significance as well. Husserl explains that

the result of the phenomenological clarification of the meaning of the manner of existence of the real world (and, eidetically, of the real world generally) is that only transcendental subjectivity has ontologically the meaning of Absolute Being, that it only is non-relative, that is relative only to itself; whereas the real world indeed exists, but in respect of essence is relative to transcendental subjectivity, and in such a way that it can have its meaning as existing (*seiende*) reality only as the intentional meaning-product of transcendental subjectivity. (*Ideas* 14)

To understand how the world is relativized in relation to transcendental subjectivity, particularly in view of Ricoeur's rejection of foundational subjectivity, careful explanation of Husserl's transcendental reduction is needed.

Husserl's phenomenological idealism can be given a preliminary characterization as an act of consciousness that reduces "natural" reality considered as "present to hand" (*vorhanden*) into a phenomenon essentially related to me. In the first part of *Ideas*, Husserl begins to show how such an act of consciousness is possible by contrasting his position with that of Brentano's phenomenological psychology. For Husserl, Brentano never moved beyond the "natural attitude." Phenomenological psychology's mistake was to examine the "I" reality as any other science might examine its object of investigation, hence, to take the "I" as something given and described in the manner in which reality is purportedly given for any other science. What Husserl wishes to describe is the "I" reality after a shift in attitude has taken place, a shift away from a natural standpoint which sees the self as a thing in a world of things, to a transcendental standpoint. Husserl calls this shift the phenomenological reduction. To move beyond reality as given, one must restrict one's gaze to the manner in which reality is given for me, to the act of consciousness in which the object has been made conscious to me. In other words, one must reduce reality from its existence apart from my own, to its meaning for me in the conscious act where that meaning occurs. Reality must be "bracketed," phenomenologically reduced, its validity canceled, in order that consciousness can have a *Wesenschau* of its essential nature, free from the distractions of the ever-changing shapes of the visible world.

It could easily be said that phenomenological psychology wishes to isolate the ego and grasp an essential glimpse of its structure, but for Husserl phenomenological psychology fails to transcendentalize the "I" reality. The "I" must no longer be construed as an actual existent among others, because it is "no longer a human Ego *in* the universal, existentially posited world, but exclusively a subject *for* which this world has being, and purely, indeed, *as* that which appears to me, is presented to me, and of which I am conscious in some way or other, so that the real being of the world thereby remains unconsidered, unquestioned, and its validity left out of account" (*Ideas* 8). The psychological ego, through a shift in attitude, is transformed into a transcendental ego. Just as reality to which I belong becomes that which exists for me, the transcendental reduction transforms the subjectivity of the ego from a "person living among others in the world" (*Ideas* 7) into the ego of intentional acts for which the world is a meaning correlate.

The transcendental reduction, or *epochè*, transforms the being of the world into a kind of nonbeing. The world is not annihilated, it is there in all its fullness, but only as meaning in relation to consciousness for which it is meaning. This change in attitude manifests the ego as transcendental consciousness, as that which cannot be thought away or doubted. The ego is the

act of consciousness grounded in itself without which the transcendental reduction cannot occur. Rather than the ego construed as a subject "among others in the natural world," the ego becomes the reality to which the phenomenological world is subject. The transcendental ego, although it lacks reality as a being among others, becomes the focal point of unity and the absolute foundation on which all meaning rests. Husserl writes:

I now also become aware that my own phenomenologically self-contained essence can be posited in an *absolute* sense, as I am the Ego who invests the being of the world which I so constantly speak about with existential validity, as an existence (*Sein*) which wins for me from my own life's pure essence meaning and substantial validity. I myself as this individual essence, posited absolutely, as the open infinite field of pure phenomenological data and their inseparable unity, am the "transcendental Ego." (*Ideas* 11)

The investment of the ego with the quality of absoluteness is a curious notion similar to Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, although the "absolutely indubitable sphere of Being" (*Ideas* 97), sought by Descartes, remains within the natural attitude. Husserl's notion of consciousness with its intentional meaning correlates is not the same as the residue left behind after an exercise in Cartesian doubt. The Cartesian denial of all but consciousness was still understood as a substance present to hand (*vorhanden*) that stands over against everything else that is changeable and doubtful. Cartesian doubt renders the foundation of science indubitable, but on the level of a being among others. Husserl writes: "he who attempts to doubt is attempting to doubt 'Being' of some form or other, or it may be Being expanded into such predicative forms as 'It is,' or 'It is this or thus,' and the like. The attempt does not affect the form of Being itself" (*Ideas* 97). The absoluteness of Cartesian consciousness is still on the level of the natural or general thesis of the being of the world; it cannot serve as the foundational goal for science; "we cannot at once doubt and hold for certain one and the same quality of Being. It is likewise clear that the *attempt* to doubt any object of awareness in respect of it *being actually there necessarily conditions a certain suspension (Aufhebung) of the thesis*; and it is precisely this that interests us" (*Ideas* 97).

Husserl cannot accept Cartesian doubt as a revelation of absolute consciousness, for one cannot hold the thesis and the antithesis of the reality of the world to be true at the same time and in the same respect.⁷ What needs to be done is to suspend, or put out of action, the entire thesis of the world altogether. This, however, does not cancel the thesis of the world. There is no way in which one can undo the passive synthesis⁸ of consciousness; rather, what takes place is a transformation of the world of being into meaning. Husserl explains that the suspension of the natural thesis

is not a transformation of the thesis into its antithesis, of positive into negative; it is also not a transformation into presumption, suggestion, indecision, doubt (in one or another sense of the word); such a shifting indeed is not at our free pleasure. *Rather it is something quite unique. We do not abandon the thesis we have adopted, we make no change in our conviction. . . .* And yet the thesis undergoes a modification—whilst remaining in itself what it is, *we set it as it were “out of action,” we “disconnect it,” “bracket it.”* It still remains there like the bracketed in the bracket, like the disconnected outside the connexional system. We can also say: The thesis is experience as lived (*Erlebnis*), *but we make “no use” of it . . .* we are dealing with indicators that point to a definite but *unique form of consciousness*, which clamps on to the original simple thesis . . . and transvalues it in a quite peculiar way. (*Ideas* 97–98)

Phenomenological reduction refrains from positing the natural world as the world of being in which I am a part, in order to isolate the essence of the act which performs the reduction by which the world is made relative as meaning. The phenomenological reduction reduces the world to an intended meaning (*noema*) correlate of the intentional act (*noesis*) of an absolute consciousness. However, this can only be assumed if the “putting out of action” of the natural world is not equated with the destruction of the world as being, but simply the free act of placing it within brackets (*Ideas* 99–100).

The act of consciousness that performs the phenomenological reduction is precisely what Husserl wishes to isolate. By “reducing” the natural thesis of the world to an intentional field of meaning, what remains is “a new region of Being, the distinctive character of which has not yet been defined, a region of individual being,” a region “which we refer to on essential grounds as ‘pure experiences (*Erlebnisse*),’ ‘pure consciousness’ with its pure ‘correlates of consciousness,’ and on the other side its ‘pure Ego’” (*Ideas* 101). Transcendental consciousness, or the absolute “pure ego,” to which the pure “correlates” of consciousness are subject, is thus both the residue of the phenomenological reduction and the act performing the reduction.⁹

Consciousness, as the “new” found “region of Being,” is qualified as *absolute* consciousness in three different ways: (1) presence in contrast to absence, (2) independence in contrast with dependence, (3) existence as necessary and indubitable, in contrast to contingency. These three different qualifications of consciousness exemplify the central features of phenomenological idealism and the modern idea of the *cogito* as the foundation of meaning, which Ricoeur wishes to set aside. Therefore, these three features of Husserl’s conception of the ego will be explored in greater detail.

1.1.1 *Presence in Contrast to Absence*

Husserl begins to describe the absolute character of consciousness by making a distinction between inner and outer perception, that is, between perceiving a thing and the act of perception as such. The very possibility of a “reflexive” act of consciousness that can make the distinction between turning inward away from the thing intended to the act of intending transforms the act itself into an “inner” object of consciousness. This act of turning inward is the gaze of consciousness directed on its own conscious acts. Therefore, the act of consciousness is the reflexive act itself. This is referred to by Husserl as immanent perception.

Under *acts immanently directed*, or, to put it more generally, under *intentional experiences immanently related*, we include those acts which are *essentially* so constituted *that their intentional objects, when these exist at all, belong to the same stream of experience as themselves*. . . . Consciousness and its object build up an individual unity purely set up through experiences. Intentional experiences for which this does not hold good are *transcendently directed*, as, for instance, all acts directed towards essences, or towards the intentional experiences of other Egos with other experience-streams; likewise all acts directed upon things, upon realities generally, as we have still to show. (*Ideas* 112)

Here immanent perception does not mean that in addition to transcendent objects there are immanent objects that now become the focus of description. Immanent perception does indeed view acts as objects, but it too is an intentional act and therefore composed of the correlates intention and intended. What interests Husserl is the immanent act that intends an act as its object. These are two acts within the same stream of consciousness but they are not identical, they are different. Whereas an act of perception has its object “outside” the stream of consciousness or has a transcendent intentional object, the object of immanent perception is found within the very same stream of the psychic reality that I am now living through. This, however, raises a peculiar problem. An act of reflection upon an act is always a *new* act of consciousness, because no act can be its own object. It is not possible to describe an act of immanent perception without making it the object of that description, and this reduction of the act to an object requires another act by which this object is perceived. Such an act of description cannot be perceived without another, and another, ad infinitum. Hence, Husserlian phenomenology must find rest or be grounded on something that prevents the human subject from succumbing to this peculiar form of dissipation usually called infinite regress.

Husserl attempts to resolve this problem by claiming that transcendental subjectivity is absolute, or self-contained. By distinguishing between inner and outer, or immanent and transcendent perception, Husserl is in fact making what he calls “a basic and essential difference . . . between *Being as Experience* and *Being as Thing*” (*Ideas* 120).¹⁰ Outer or transcendent being is characterized as phenomenon, given as a temporal-spatial thing, and thereby only given to consciousness through the incomplete perspectives of the thing perceived. But: “*An experience has no perspectives—Ein Erlebnis schattet sich nicht ab.*” Husserl goes on to say that

it follows from the essential nature of spatial thinghood . . . that Being of this species can, in principle, be given in perceptions only by way of perspective manifestation; and it follows likewise from the essential nature of *cogitationes*, of experiences in general, that they exclude these perspective shadings; or otherwise stated, when referring to that which has being in this region, anything of the nature of “appearing” or self-revealing through perspective variations, has simply no meaning. (*Ideas* 121–122)

The object of the act of immanent perception is, in contrast to the object of transcendent perception, completely present with regard to space and time. Rather than given through perspectives and thereby never fully complete, the object of immanent perception is fully present without the spatial limitation of the adumbrations of the object, nor the temporal limitation of the compilation of perspectives. The *object* of the act of immanent perception and the *act* of immanent perception coincide completely, and therefore, this act is absolute, self-contained in its mode of givenness. This is what distinguishes the two types of being: immanent being is given *as* fully present to itself, transcendent being is given *as* absence (*Ideas* 121). In section 44 of *Ideas* Husserl explains that “whereas it is an essential mark of what is given through appearances that no one of these gives the matter in question in an ‘absolute’ form instead of presenting just one side of it, it is an essential mark of what is immanently given precisely to give an absolute that simply cannot exhibit aspects and vary them perspectively” (*Ideas* 126–127).

Even though the experience of immanent perception is fully present, it cannot be described as temporally complete. Although at the moment of the experience, it is fully present in a temporal and spatial sense, consciousness itself is always linear. Consciousness is a stream, a flow of anticipation and retention, of future, present, and past. Therefore, immanent perceptions change, but this type of change differs from that characteristic of transcendent perception and does not diminish the absoluteness of immanent consciousness.

Even an experience (*Erlebnis*) is not, and never is, perceived in its completeness, it cannot be grasped adequately in its full unity. It is essentially something that flows, and starting from the present moment we can swim after it, our gaze reflectively turned towards it, whilst the stretches we leave in our wake are lost to our perception. Only in the form of retention or in the form of retrospective remembrance have we any consciousness of what has immediately flowed past us. . . . But *this* incompleteness or “imperfection” which belongs to the essence of our perception of experience is fundamentally other than that which is of the essence of “transcendent” perception, perception through a presentation that varies perspectively through such a thing as appearance. (*Ideas* 127)

Contrasting immanent incompleteness and the perspectival incompleteness of temporal transcendence,¹¹ Husserl opens a gap that Ricoeur uses to advance the notion of narrative identity which looks for the unity of temporal experience not within consciousness but rather within the object toward which consciousness is intentionally linked.

1.1.2 *Independence in Contrast to Dependence*

The priority of immanent consciousness over transcendent consciousness gives way to the second characteristic of the absolute being of consciousness, namely, its independence in relation to transcendent being. Husserl explains that

it is a mark of the type of Being peculiar to experience that perceptual insight can direct its immediate, unobstructed gaze upon every real experience, and so enter into the life of a primordial presence. This insight operates as a “reflection,” and it has this remarkable peculiarity that that which is thus apprehended through perception is, in principle, characterized as something which not only is and endures within the gaze of perception, but *already was before* this gaze was directed to it. (*Ideas* 128)

“Presence” is primordial; it nonspatially, or transcendentally, grounds consciousness within itself by virtue of the fact that the objects of immanent perception are “already” there “before” we engage in the act of immanent perception. Since the act of immanent perception has the acts of consciousness as its objects, the objects of immanent perception are completely *independent* from the perception of them, for such act-objects constitute the very flow of consciousness and therefore cannot be separated from consciousness itself. Immanent perception as fully

present cannot be *dependent* on the perspectival perception of transcendent objects of consciousness. The object of inner perception is an act that constitutes the very stream of consciousness and is therefore independent from the perception of it, whereas the object of transcendent perception is dependent on the act of the perception of it for its completeness because it is only given in varying perceptual slices.

1.1.3 *Necessity and Indubitability in Contrast to Contingency*

The characterization of consciousness as necessary and indubitable is the ultimate expression of Husserl's transcendental idealism. Reflecting on the advances achieved by the transcendental reduction, Husserl states at the beginning of section 46 of *Ideas* that

[f]rom all this important consequences follow. Every immanent perception necessarily guarantees the existence (*Existenz*) of its object. If reflective apprehension is directed to my experience, I apprehend an absolute Self whose existence (*Dasein*) is, in principle, undeniable, that is, the insight that it does not exist is, in principle, impossible; it would be non-sense to maintain the possibility of an experience *given in such a way not truly existing*. . . . I say forthwith and because I must: *I am*, this life is, I live: *cogito*. (*Ideas* 130)

Here we see the foundational role of absolute consciousness. Because "all experiences are conscious experiences" (*Ideas* 128), and since the objects of immanent perception are constitutive of the very stream of consciousness, to turn one's gaze back onto the stream of conscious experience necessitates the existence of the stream of consciousness prior to any immanent act of reflection. This is the ultimate meaning of the term *absolute*. Transcendental reflection reveals the objects of immanent consciousness to exist out of necessity. What Husserl in fact describes is an absolute self whose essence and existence necessarily coincide: "the possibility of a perceiving reflection which lays hold on absolute existence belongs to its essence as it does to every experience" (*Ideas* 128). Therefore, the ego of immanent perception is fully present to itself in the temporal moment of experience, and within the primordially of the nonspatial space of conscious reflection. It is completely independent, free from the perspectival change of transcendent being, and it is that which necessarily exists. Thus, the existence of the ego, or self, is completely indubitable.¹²

In contrast with absolute consciousness existing out of necessity, the transcendent world, which has already been defined as "absent" and "dependent," is now also described as "contingent." With an authoritarian note, Husserl

claims that “it is an essentially valid law that *existence in the form of a thing is never demanded as necessary by virtue of its givenness*, but in a certain way is always *contingent*” (*Ideas* 131). He goes further, declaring that transcendent being is “presumptive reality.” In other words, without the absolute being of the conscious experiences we are now living through, all transcendent reality loses its meaning. Transcendent being *presumes* that which gives it meaning.

In every way, then, it is clear that everything which is there for me in the world of things is on grounds of principle *only a presumptive reality*; that *I myself*, on the contrary, for whom it is there . . . I myself or my experience in its actuality am *absolute Reality* (*Wirklichkeit*), given through a positing that is unconditioned and simply indissoluble. *The thesis of my pure Ego and its personal life, which is “necessary” and plainly indubitable, thus stands opposed to the thesis of the world which is “contingent.” All corporeally given thing-like entities can also not be, no corporeally given experiencing can also not be:* that is the essential law, which defines this necessity and that contingency. (*Ideas* 131)

Hence, there is an order of being with regard to the priority of immanent being in relation to “mere” transcendent being. De Boer explains it this way: “[c]onsciousness is the ‘ontic presupposition’ (*Seinsvoraussetzung*) of the world. Transcendental phenomenology is ‘presuppositionless’ for exactly this reason, for it is aware that the world cannot be accepted as ground since consciousness is the true ground and basis” (De Boer 357). That is not to say that the world’s being is created by immanent consciousness.

Husserl does not make the classic mistake of rationalism . . . namely, deriving being from thought. . . . The phenomenological point of departure, the principle of all principles, is that every intuition given in an ordinary way is a proper source of knowledge. . . . the existence of the world presupposes the existence of consciousness, but . . . the reverse is not the case. Thus consciousness is described as a necessary condition for the existence of the world. This does not yet imply that it is also a sufficient condition. (De Boer 353–354)

Even though we do not create the world of being among beings, the phenomenological reduction places the world as meaning for me in absolute dependence on the intending act of consciousness. In other words, the transcendental subject is the transparent master of his or her own soul. The self has become the indubitable self-contained creator and ground of all meaning. “With this conclusion,” Husserl states, “. . . our study has reached its climax. We have won the knowledge we needed” (*Ideas* 132). With this “sure” foundation, meaning

is secure. However, if transcendental reduction transforms reality into meaning and becomes inconceivable apart from the being of absolute consciousness, is not the inverse also true, that phenomenal reality and meaning exist because it is intended by consciousness? Absolute consciousness is therefore an act of constitution or founding. The reduction has shown that the transformation of things, present to hand in the natural attitude, into phenomena in relation to the intentional acts of consciousness, is really an act of constitution for and by consciousness. *Absolute consciousness is really a meaning-giving, meaning-accomplishing being, which has the world as its accomplishment. Consciousness is the ground of the world, the foundation on which being and meaning rest.*

1.2 Ricoeur's Critique of Phenomenological Idealism

Ricoeur rejects this idealistic interpretation of phenomenology. He combines a change in emphasis in the later works of Husserl with the hermeneutical thinking of Heidegger and Gadamer, to orient phenomenology toward the intersubjective world of linguistic meaning that precedes all transcendental attempts to ground meaning in absolute consciousness. This shift Husserl makes toward the *Lebenswelt* is, according to Ricoeur, an inevitable result of the failure of the transcendental reduction to found meaning within itself. It is indicative of a fundamental dualism at the very core of Husserl's phenomenological project, one which Ricoeur seems to repeat in his early phenomenological studies on voluntary and involuntary consciousness, as well as those on the antinominal structure of human fallibility.¹³ Therefore, if Ricoeur appropriates significant portions of Husserlian phenomenology in the development of his own hermeneutic of selfhood, does he overcome this dualism or replace it with a hermeneutical variation that has moved the problem from a transcendental identification of selfhood to an identification of selfhood within the language of self-sameness (*idem* identity) and self-constancy (*ipse* identity)? This is a significant problem that is taken up again in the final chapter, which deals explicitly with Ricoeur's most recent formulation of selfhood in *Oneself as Another*.

In spite of this dualism within Husserl's philosophy, Ricoeur is confident that he can use this shift toward the life-world to his own advantage. He explains that

in becoming more and more existential the phenomenology of the late Husserl became more and more empirical, for the whole order of the understanding . . . henceforth proceeds from "passive synthesis" initiated on the very level of perception. Thereafter it is clear that this progression toward an ever more originary original destroys every claim of constituting the world "in" consciousness or "begin-

ning from" consciousness. The idealistic tendency of transcendental phenomenology is thus compensated for by the progressive discovery that one does not constitute the originary but only all that one can derive from it. The originary is just what could neither be constituted nor reduced. (HL 205)

By following Husserl's lead, Ricoeur adopts a methodology that focuses on the constituting power of *originary meaning outside consciousness* which constitutes self-consciousness, rather than being constituted by consciousness. For Ricoeur, transcendental subjectivity ultimately fails to place subjectivity on the firm foundation that motivates the project of transcendental phenomenology in the first place. Ricoeur puts into question the clarity of the apprehension of consciousness. Although transcendental phenomenology places all transcendence in doubt, it is remarkable that transcendental phenomenology seems unable to grasp the possibility that "transparent subjectivity" is a ruse constructed to satisfy the dreams of metaphysicians for a being whose existence coincides with its essence. If all objects of appearance and the philosophical systems used to construct them are susceptible to doubt, could not the consciousness of lived experience be the product of forces outside of, or more primordial than, consciousness itself? Citing Heidegger's question, "Who is *Dasein*?" Ricoeur states: "Insofar as self-knowledge is a dialogue of the soul with itself, and insofar as the dialogue can be systematically distorted by violence and by the intrusion of structures of domination into those of communication, self-knowledge as internalized communication can be as doubtful as knowledge of the object, although for different and quite specific reasons" (PH 109–110). The chiaroscuro play of ideological, structural, social, psychological, religious, and economic forces within the self gives testimony to the vanity of transparent self-consciousness.

Although transcendental phenomenology fails in mastering one's own destiny, Ricoeur remains committed to the employment of phenomenology for describing what is closest to human existence. Rather than an exercise in foundationalism, phenomenology must become an invitation to live in and receive from the world meaning and one's identity as a task. Referring to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, Ricoeur argues that in spite of its idealism, the phenomenological project remains a valid enterprise if taken up on the level of existence. "I think that each of us is invited to rediscover for himself this act of transcendence. Thus I will risk an outline of the 'existential' sense of the thesis of the world;" a life-world in which I discover myself through an interpretation of the originary original of "actual life."¹⁴

Ricoeur catches sight of this existential and hermeneutical reorientation of phenomenological meaning in Husserl's most explicit formulation of transcendental idealism. "The *Cartesian Meditations* are the most radical expression of the new idealism for which the world is not only 'for me' but draws all

of its being-status 'from me.' The world becomes the 'world-perceived-in-the-reflective life.' . . . Phenomenology is the unfolding of the ego, thereafter termed 'monad' in the Leibnizian manner. It is the 'explication of self' (*Selbstausslegung*)" (HL 10). Note the term *explication*, or *Auslegung*. Combined with an increasing emphasis on that which constitutes the ego rather than a constituting ego, Ricoeur sees within Husserl the possibility for the development of a phenomenology that focuses on the interpretation of the originating world of meaning instead of some originating act that founds all meaning. Ricoeur explains that in the *Cartesian Meditations*

the reduction less and less signifies a "return to the ego" and more and more a "return from logic to the antepredicative," to the primordial evidence of the world. The accent is placed no longer on the monadic ego; instead the accent is placed on the totality formed by the ego and the surrounding world in which it is vitally engaged. Thus, phenomenology tends toward the recognition of what is prior to all reduction and what cannot be reduced. . . . The being of the world is manifest in such a manner that all truth refers back to it.¹⁵

If Ricoeur heralds Husserl's "progressive abandonment" of phenomenological idealism, why then does he continue to refer to his method as phenomenology, albeit hermeneutically qualified? Rather than dismissing phenomenology outright, Ricoeur wishes to embrace its original insight.

The first act of consciousness is designating or meaning (*Meinen*). To distinguish signification from signs, to separate it from the word, from the image, and to elucidate the diverse ways in which an empty signification comes to be fulfilled by an intuitive presence, whatever it may be, is to describe signification phenomenologically. The empty act of signifying is nothing other than intentionality. If intentionality is that remarkable property of consciousness to be a consciousness of . . . of moving out from itself toward something else, then the act of signifying contains the essence of intentionality. (HL 5–6)

This "remarkable property" sets Ricoeur's critique of Husserlian idealism in perspective. Rather than looking for the ground or foundation of meaning, phenomenology must follow the aim of its original discovery: the intentionality of consciousness. Transcendental subjectivity, or consciousness thinking itself, betrays the intentional aim by turning away from the intended to that which intends. Ricoeur concludes that this attempt to establish self-knowledge on such an interior foundation is removed from the fundamental structure of intentionality.

The phenomenology which arose with the discovery of the universal character of intentionality has not remained faithful to its own discovery, namely that the meaning of consciousness lies outside itself. The idealist theory of the constitution of meaning in consciousness has thus culminated in the hypostasis of subjectivity. . . . Such difficulties attest that phenomenology is always in danger of reducing itself to a transcendental subjectivism. The radical way of putting an end to this constantly recurring confusion is to shift the axis of interpretation from the problem of subjectivity to that of the world. That is what the theory of the text attempts to do, by subordinating the question of the author's intention to that of the matter of the text. (PH 112)

Hermeneutical phenomenology is interpretive description of what *lies outside* the intending ego. That which is outside the phenomenological ego is the focus of Ricoeur's entire philosophical project. However, never significant for its own sake, meaning is the place from and in which self-understanding occurs. By focusing on language, discourse, and texts, Ricoeur wants to "exchange the *me*, master of itself, for the *self*, disciple of the text" (PH 113). The self that is retrieved is a work of the world of meaning projected by the text.

The transformation of the transcendental ego into a "self" disciplined by the world of intersubjective meaning becomes the central task of hermeneutical phenomenology. Through the use of a nonidealistic concept of intentionality, Ricoeur wishes to take into account "the various aspects of man's insertion in the world" (HL 203). Thus, the self received from the world of meaning is multidimensional, a collection of activities linked to their respective fields of meaning whose principle of unity remains to be established, if at all. Therefore, Ricoeur's hermeneutical variation of phenomenology is employed to understand the fundamental features of lived experience, features that find the self first and foremost in an originating source of meaning that precedes consciousness of it. "Consciousness defined by its intentionality is outside, beyond. It ties its own wandering to the 'things' to which it can apply its consideration, its desire, its action. Correlatively, the world is 'world-for-my-life,' environment of the 'living ego'" (HL 205). Ricoeur goes on to explain that because the "world" precedes consciousness, it must become the basis for all reflection on human experience. "The 'world' is prior to every 'object.' It is not only presupposed in the intellectualistic sense of a condition for possibilities, it is pre-given in the sense that every present activity surges into a world already there. Moreover, this world is the totality which, not being composed from parts and by means of addition, is inaccessible to doubt. It is the 'passive pre-given universal of all judgmental activity,' the 'one basis of belief upon which every experience of

particular objects is erected.’”¹⁶ The concept of the “world” is thus indicative of the repositioning of a methodological foundation no longer located in an indubitable absolute ego, but in a world of diverse meaning full of competing stories that precede self-consciousness.

By shifting from a “ground grounded within itself “ behind the intentional acts of consciousness, to the world of meaning in front of consciousness, is Ricoeur not discarding one form of foundationalism for another? Is Ricoeur’s insistence on the closure of the idealistic ground of phenomenology, in view of the opening offered by the world of meaning, not a grounding of a different sort? This might be the case if our attention simply focused on Husserlian phenomenological resources without elaborating the second term of the couplet *phenomenological hermeneutics*.

1.3 A Hermeneutical Variation of Phenomenology

As early as 1957, in an article entitled “Existential Phenomenology,” Ricoeur displays a propaedeutic interest in phenomenology as a means for uncovering or describing the structures of existence: “existential phenomenology makes the transition between transcendental phenomenology, born of the reduction of everything to its appearing to me, and ontology, which restores the question of the sense of being for all that is said to ‘exist’ ” (HL 212). This early formulation of Ricoeur’s methodology lacks the programmatic decentering of the ego that characterizes his later works. Although Ricoeur’s early phenomenological studies include a nascent hermeneutic,¹⁷ their preoccupation with eidetic structure forgoes the degree to which Ricoeur’s later works are attuned to the deceptive strategies of consciousness that hide, distort, and cloud the dialogue of the soul. Even though Ricoeur does look to “the examples of Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche,” as philosophers of existence who offer “sufficient indication that description is effective only in the service of a great plan: to denounce an alienation, to rediscover the place of man in the world, or on the other hand, to recover his metaphysical dimension, and so on” (HL 208), it is only in his middle and later works that Ricoeur develops the notion of the critical space of reflexivity that counters the idealism of the self-transparent ego.

Ricoeur, however, employs key elements of phenomenology only by way of a “hermeneutical” critique. In “The Task of Hermeneutics” (1973), Ricoeur traces the essential historical features and figures of the hermeneutical tradition. Beginning with the philological origins in the work of Schleiermacher and ending with Gadamer’s magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, Ricoeur concludes that hermeneutics should be defined as “the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts.” The central problem of such a theory is “the opposition, disastrous in my view, between explanation

and understanding" (TH 43). Hermeneutics thus becomes an attempt to resolve the seemingly divergent concerns of methodological explanation and participatory understanding, in order to ultimately clarify existence by means of concepts that are methodologically responsible and existentially true.

Employing the notion of ontologized understanding, Ricoeur echoes the Heideggerian quest for the recovery of a sense of belonging that is prior to any fragmentation of a subject over against an object. "The first declaration of hermeneutics is to say that the problematic of objectivity presupposes a prior relation of inclusion which encompasses the allegedly autonomous subject and the allegedly adverse object. This inclusive or encompassing relation is what I call belonging" (PH 105). Ricoeur sharpens this declaration by referring to belonging as the "*hermeneutical experience itself*," which can be understood in Heideggerian terms as "being-in-the-world" with its emphasis on care, or the priority of belonging "which precedes reflection." I belong to the world as *Dasein* before I can objectify it as an epistemological subject (PH 106).

Here a deeper understanding of the meaning of interpretation is revealed. Since belonging is the hermeneutical experience par excellence, interpretation is *co-primordial* with the world to which I and everybody else belongs, it is the "universal concept of interpretation which has the same extension as that of understanding and, in the end, as that of belonging" (PH 107). Referring to Heidegger, Ricoeur points out that interpretation is the "development of understanding." It reveals the "as"-structure of reality, that is, "being" as something. Therefore, "explication does not transform understanding into something else, but makes it become itself" (PH 107). Because belonging is the act of interpretive understanding that "precedes reflection," I am predisposed to an orientation in and by means of the world to which I belong. Hence, being-in-the-world "anticipates" or expects the world to be configured in a certain fashion. Interpretive understanding is characterized "by the 'structure of anticipation,' which prevents explication from ever being a presuppositionless grasp of a pregiven being [*étant*]; explication precedes its object in the mode of the *Vor-habe*, the *Vor-sicht*, the *Vor-griff*, the *Vor-meinung*" (PH 107). By utilizing these Heideggerian concepts, Ricoeur wishes to make clear that the "vast" universality of interpretation is co-extensive with hermeneutical understanding. Ricoeur states: "What is important to emphasize is that it is not possible to implement the structure of the 'as' without also implementing the structure of anticipation. The notion of 'meaning' obeys this double condition of the *Als* and the *Vor*."¹⁸ Therefore, interpretation as the explication of belonging is predicated on participation in a world that precedes any objectification of the intended objects of consciousness, but also reveals the power of belonging to configure being *as* something.¹⁹

For Ricoeur, worldly participation provides the means by which I "shatter the pretension of the knowing subject to set itself up as the measure of objectivity. What must be reaffirmed in place of this pretension is the condition of

inhabiting the world, a condition which renders situation, understanding and interpretation possible" (TH 56). Conditioned possibility becomes one of the central themes in Ricoeur's appropriation of the hermeneutic tradition. The "hermeneutical experience itself" can be described as the "power to be . . . [which] orientates us in a situation. So understanding is not concerned with grasping a fact but with apprehending a possibility of being" (TH 56). Existence is structured so that the act of living calls for an act of interpretation and understanding that envisions possibilities to be more than and other than what has already been received.

Coupling the Heideggerian concept of ontologized understanding with the Gadamerian "*Sprachlichkeit* of all experience" (PH 115), Ricoeur looks to language to give testimony of the possibilities for being. All experience or existence "has an expressibility in principle. Experience can be said, it demands to be said. To bring it to language is not to change it into something else, but, in articulating and developing it, to make it become itself" (PH 115). Understanding and interpretation, the fundamental structures of belonging to a world, take place in and by means of language. " 'Discourse is the articulation of what understanding is.' It is therefore necessary to situate discourse in the structures of being, rather than situating the latter in discourse: 'Discourse is the 'meaningful' articulation of the understandable structure of being-in-the-world' " (TH 58). Language, however, is not supposed to be objectified discourse about being, about what is; it is in language, by means of the referential function of language codified in textual form, that the *possibilities* of being take shape. "We must not lose sight of this point when we draw the methodological consequences of this analysis: to understand a text, we shall say, is not to find a lifeless sense which is contained therein, but to unfold the possibility of being indicated by the text. Thus we shall remain faithful to the Heideggerian notion of understanding which is essentially a projection or, to speak more dialectically and paradoxically, a projection within a prior being-thrown" (TH 56). Language, particularly symbolic, metaphorical, and fictional language, becomes for Ricoeur the place where being is manifest, but also where self-consciousness and identity are formed.

The revelatory power of language is indicative of the universality of hermeneutical understanding. This is most evident in the "polysemic value of words" that characterizes language use. Before any methodological and hermeneutical reflection can take place, the prescientific use of language already involves hermeneutic understanding; hence, there is a "spontaneous process of interpretation which is part of the most primitive exercise of understanding in any situation" (PH 108). To live, as Ricoeur has said, is to live by means of interpretation. Life is a mediation between oneself and the world in which language "is the medium through which we understand ourselves" (HFD 142). For Ricoeur conversation is paradigmatic of this interpretive process "by which, in the inter-