

***PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE:
HUSSERL MEETS HOFMANNSTHAL***

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In December 1906 Hugo von Hofmannsthal made a conference tour through Germany, reading his paper “The Poet and this Time.”¹ On December 6 he was in Göttingen where he visited a distant relative, Malvine Husserl² (née Steinschneider), and her husband Edmund Husserl. A few weeks after this meeting, on January 12, 1907, Husserl wrote a letter to Hofmannsthal in which he thanks him for a present, presumably Hofmannsthal’s book *Kleine Dramen*.³ He goes on to compare Hofmannsthal’s theory of aesthetic experience to the phenomenological method. Husserl’s letter is of philosophical interest because it was written at a time when he was just beginning to develop the phenomenological reduction and, thus, to make his “transcendental turn,” that is, when he began to explore phenomenology.

I. Husserl’s Letter

Let me first sketch briefly the timeline of Husserl’s development of the phenomenological reduction. The first publication in which Husserl introduces the phenomenological reduction is his *Ideas* from 1913. Husserl had begun to develop the phenomenological method much earlier, though. In his *Logical Investigations* from 1900/01 he took a methodological approach that he calls – clearly under a strong Brentanian influence – “descriptive psychology.” In the years to follow he began to revise this methodological approach. From the notes from the *Nachlass*, some of which were published in the meantime, we know that Husserl developed the phenomenological reduction in the years 1905-1907. Already in his lectures on time-consciousness from 1905 Husserl presents “statements that foreshadow the phenomenological reduction of his later philosophy” (Sokolowski, 1964, 74), but it is not until the time of his lectures on *The Idea of Phenomenology* between April 26 and May 2, 1907, that he introduces the phenomenological reduction to a broader audience.

Thus, at the time when Husserl wrote his letter to Hofmannsthal, he was in the process of elaborating his phenomenological reduction; interestingly, Husserl begins his letter by excusing its delay with the remark that

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finally syntheses of thoughts that were long sought for offered themselves. I was very busy fixing them. Your book *Kleine Dramen*, which was always next to me, was an important stimulus, even though I could read only a little at a time. (Husserl, 1994, vol. VII, 133)⁴

I think it is fair to assume that the “syntheses of thoughts” Husserl is writing about are related in some way or other to his elaboration of the phenomenological reduction. If that assumption is correct, Husserl states explicitly that Hofmannsthal’s work was an important stimulus for his development of the phenomenological reduction.

Husserl goes on to state that Hofmannsthal’s purely aesthetic description of inner states is very interesting to him, as a phenomenologist. He explains that in recent years he has been working on the phenomenological method that

requires us to take a stance that is essentially deviating from the “natural” stance towards all objectivity, which is closely related to that stance in which your art puts us as a purely aesthetical one with respect to the represented objects and the whole environment. The intuition of the pure work of art is taking place in a strict cancellation of each existential stance of the intellect and each stance of the feeling and the will, which presupposes the existential stance. Or better: the work of art puts us in (is forcing on us, as it were) a state of pure aesthetic intuition that excludes this kind of [*existential*] stance. (Husserl, 1994, vol. VII, 133)

Husserl distinguishes the natural attitude of everyday life, in which we take an existential stance towards the things in our environment from the purely aesthetic and the phenomenological attitude.

Once we have taken the phenomenological attitude, our stance towards our physical environment, towards science and what is believed to constitute reality, changes radically. Everything becomes “questionable, incomprehensible, a riddle” (Husserl, 1994, vol. VII, 134). There is only one way to solve this riddle: by bracketing all questionable assumptions and beliefs, especially our existential beliefs, and taking objects as what they are, or better, as what they become in this attitude: *phenomena*. The task of the phenomenologist is to describe these phenomena in his reflective analysis. Husserl writes in his letter:

If all perception is questionable, then the phenomenon “perception” is the only givenness [*the only thing that is given unquestionably*], and before I accept one perception as veridical, I look and research by merely observing [*rein schauend*] (merely aesthetically, as it were): what does veridicality mean, i.e., what is perception as such and what is the perceived objectivity? (Husserl, 1994, vol. VII, 134f)

According to this description of the phenomenological reduction, we have to apply a universal doubt, a methodological scepticism à la Descartes, and observe and describe those phenomena that cannot be doubted. And here again Husserl equates the “phenomenological look” with aesthetic experience.

Toward the end of the letter, however, Husserl stresses that there are some differences between the purely aesthetic stance and the stance of the phenomenologist.

The phenomenological look is, thus, closely related to the aesthetic look in “pure” art; but, of course, it is not a look in order to enjoy aesthetically, but to research, to discover, to constitute scientific affirmations of a new (philosophical) dimension.
(Husserl, 1994, vol. VII, 135)

Thus, while the phenomenologist and the artist take the same kind of attitude, they do so for very different reasons. In the purely aesthetic experience one looks for pleasure, while the phenomenological reduction serves philosophical and scientific goals.

This last point of Husserl’s letter stands in direct contrast to one of the main theses of the paper, “The Poet and this Time,” that Hofmannsthal read on that evening, after his meeting with Husserl. Hofmannsthal discusses the role poets play in a time when life has become increasingly chaotic and people seem to have lost their interest in poetry and read instead many scientific and journalistic texts. Hofmannsthal claims that these people are looking for something other than the information conveyed by the scientists and the journalists: it is their thirst for poetry that makes them read all these technical texts. Even if they are reading the newspapers or scientific texts, they are, according to Hofmannsthal, looking for poetry, often without even knowing it. His point is that all these writers are poets to some degree because they all use the same instrument: the living language. Of course, only the real poets know how to create the magic of poetry. Only they can give the people what they are actually looking for and so satisfy their thirst for poetry.

Thus, according to Hofmannsthal, the philosopher and the poet have the same goal, but only the poet can achieve this goal, while all other writers are doomed to fail. Husserl, on the other hand, seems to hold that the artist and the phenomenologist have two different goals, two completely different agendas, and that both can achieve their goals in their own ways.

II. Husserl’s Three Ways to the Phenomenological Reduction

Husserl’s letter to Hofmannsthal is, as far as I know, the only place where he compares the phenomenological reduction to aesthetic experience of pure art. He does not even use this comparison in the lecture *The Idea of Phenomenology* that he gives only three and a half months later.

Throughout his lifetime, Husserl continued to refine and revise his phenomenological reduction. At different stages of his development he explains the need for this methodological approach in different ways and even distinguishes between different kinds of reduction. Iso Kern has shown in his article “Three Ways to the Transcendental Phenomenological Reduction” that Husserl introduced the phenomenological reduction in three major ways: the Cartesian way, the way via intentional psychology, and the way via ontology. The first way has the most

relevance for the present discussion, but it is worthwhile reviewing the other two briefly.

In the *way via intentional psychology* phenomenologists concentrate on mental phenomena and exclude physical phenomena from their research just as physicists concentrate on physical phenomena and exclude mental phenomena. Husserl develops this strategy from the 1920s on.⁵

The *way via ontology* points, roughly speaking, to the fact that every perception of objects must remain “unintelligible” in principle as long as it is analysed in the natural attitude rather than understood in the context of a subjectivity that brings about the intentional relation. “The objects of experience and eventually the whole world come to be grasped in their basic structure [...] as an ‘index’ or ‘guide’ to the subjective a priori of constitution” (Bernet/Kern/Marbach, 1993, 70).

The *Cartesian way* is characterized by the attempt to provide an Archimedean point, a secure foundation for all sciences. Outer perception cannot fulfill these high standards, since error is always possible. In consequence, we have to bracket our beliefs in the existence of the physical objects perceived. What cannot be doubted, however, are our occurring mental acts of perception. Thus, the phenomenologist studies these acts of perception as mere mental acts, without paying much attention to the objects towards which they are directed. In his letter to Hofmannsthal, Husserl motivates the phenomenological reduction in this Cartesian way, as we have seen above.

In his later works, mainly in *Crisis*, Husserl criticizes the Cartesian way. He points out that it is characterized by a loss of the external world: when we bracket all our beliefs concerning the existence of objects in our physical environment we seem to lose the physical world and can study only the left-overs, as it were, or, as Husserl calls it, the *phenomenological residuum*.

Moreover, the Cartesian way raises expectations it cannot fulfill. Since we give up our belief in the existence of the outer world for methodological reasons, we might expect that at a later point in the phenomenological enterprise we may return again to this belief after an appropriate justification. In other words, we expect Husserl to make a move that has the same result as Descartes’s move in the *Meditations*. Husserl, however, never fulfills these expectations, but rather calls them a *misunderstanding*;⁶ in the phenomenological reduction, the world becomes a mere “phenomenon” – and that is what it stays. In addition, the *Cartesian Way* leads to a solipsistic point of view that cannot provide a foundation to explain intersubjectivity. For these reasons, Husserl gradually became dissatisfied with the *Cartesian Way* to the phenomenological reduction and developed other ways to introduce his method. It was not until the nineteen-twenties, however, that Husserl abandoned completely the *Cartesian Way*.

III. The Strength of Husserl’s Comparison

We have seen, in the letter to Hofmannsthal, that Husserl characterizes the phenomenological method as a bracketing of all beliefs in the existence of the objects in our environment, which are beliefs that become “questionable,

incomprehensible, a riddle” to the phenomenologist (Husserl, 1994, vol. VII, 134). Thus, he is clearly introducing the reduction through the *Cartesian way* – and he will do so again a few weeks later when he introduces the phenomenological reduction in his lectures on *The Idea of Phenomenology*.⁷ His later critique of this *Cartesian way* as a method attaining the phenomenological reduction explains why he does not exploit the comparison between phenomenological reduction and aesthetic experience elsewhere: the *Cartesian way* fails because it gives an incomplete and misleading idea of the phenomenological reduction.

Between 1905 and 1907 Husserl struggles considerably to find a way to introduce the phenomenological reduction. Since it is a special kind of experience, it is difficult to explain it to anyone who has not personally experienced the phenomenological reduction. In his lecture *The Idea of Phenomenology*, Husserl says at one point, after describing the phenomenological reduction:

This discussion is, of course, only a roundabout way [*Umwege und Behelfe*] of helping us to see what is to be seen here. (Husserl, 1999, 35)

In this context we can state that Husserl’s letter to Hofmannsthal is at least one more roundabout way of explaining what it is like to perform the phenomenological reduction, even though it is not a very successful one.

IV. What Husserl Should Have Said

Does that mean that the comparison between the phenomenological reduction and Hofmannsthal’s aesthetical theory is a dead end, an unimportant subsection in the history of philosophy? It is, in the way Husserl explores it. Yet, there is another, more fascinating analogy between Husserl and Hofmannsthal that the former could have exploited.

Hofmannsthal, as is well known, gained his first literary merits very early in life. At the age of seventeen he started under the pseudonym “Loris” to publish poems that caught the attention of the literary circles of the time. Hofmannsthal’s work in general, but especially his early work, is strongly characterized by the ideas of aestheticism. In this early period he wrote the dramas that were published in the collection *Kleine Dramen* and that he gave to Husserl as a present.

A few years later, however, at the age of twenty-five, Hofmannsthal undergoes an important development. He experiences a crisis – or at least he pretends to do so – that is triggered by his emerging scepticism with respect to language. Hofmannsthal expresses this crisis in *The Lord Chandos Letter*, which becomes probably the best known of all his texts. He writes this letter in 1902, nearly four years before he meets Husserl. A fictional text with autobiographical elements, situated in the early seventeenth century, it is a letter from Lord Chandos to the philosopher Francis Bacon.

In the first part of the letter Lord Chandos describes his early literary successes, and emphasizes that the act of writing had come easily to him in his early life. He enumerates all the plans he had had for literary works and states that in his earlier literary endeavors he had been strongly influenced by aestheticism. But this

description of his earlier writings and projects is only an introduction to the main point of his letter, which is to explain why he can no longer write as he used to. He states that he is now unable to identify with his early works and cannot continue to work on his earlier projects. Lord Chandos sums up his problems by saying:

My situation, in short, is this: I have utterly lost my ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all. (Hofmannsthal, 1986, 19)

This inability to speak and think progresses in stages. First, he finds it impossible to use abstract words, and then this disability quickly spreads to all levels of language or, to put it in Wittgensteinian terms, to all other language-games. The words and phrases of everyday conversation seem more and more “undemonstrable to me, so false, so hopelessly full of holes” with the result that he must make a supreme effort to sustain even the most banal and everyday conversation and to hide the fact that he cannot use language in the way he used to (Hofmannsthal, 1986, 21).

It is important to see that Lord Chandos is expressing doubts about language only; he does not question the existence of his physical environment, the “outer world,” or parts of it, but only his ability to refer to his environment by means of language:

Everything fell into fragments for me, the fragments into further fragments, until it seemed impossible to contain anything at all within a single concept. (Hofmannsthal, 1986, 21)

This new state in which the poet finds himself is not only a state of loss – loss of the ability to apply language. There are “blissful and quickening moments” in which he has experiences he before never thought possible (Hofmannsthal, 1986, 22):

There is something ineffable, you see, something one could probably never define, that makes itself known to me at such times, filling like a vessel some arbitrary feature of my everyday surrounding with a prodigal surge of more exalted life. [...] Each of them [i.e., *everyday objects*], or, for that matter any of a thousand others like them that the eye glides over with understandable indifference can all at once, at some altogether unpredictable instant, assume for me an aspect so sublime and so giving that it beggars all words. Or it may happen that only the idea of some object remote from me is suddenly accorded to the brim with that gentle but irresistible flood of divine feeling. (Hofmannsthal, 1986, 23)⁸

This crisis with respect to language progresses to another state in which the poet has a new state in which he has a whole new range of experiences. He does not experience new kinds of objects, though; it is not that his physical environment has changed – rather, he experiences his familiar environment in a new way.

The *Lord Chandos Letter* was an important step in the development of Hofmannsthal’s work. It has often been interpreted as a critique of the pure aestheticism he had held earlier in his earlier years and the beginning of a stronger emphasis on the moral dimension of life. Still a matter for discussion is whether the crisis expressed in the letter was a radical turning point in Hofmannsthal’s life, “a crisis that compelled him to reject all that had gone before” (Janik/Toulmin, 1973, 114), or whether, as a result of the disproportionate emphasis on the Chandos crisis, “the overall unity of Hofmannsthal’s work has been distorted and overlooked”

(Daviau, 1971, 29).⁹ For our discussion, however, this question is not relevant. What is important is that, with this letter, there is a whole new dimension to Hofmannsthal's theory, and Husserl could have made a strong comparison between phenomenological reduction and aesthetic experience if he had exploited this new dimension of Hofmannsthal's theory. There are several aspects of this comparison that could have worked for Husserl.

First, in the phenomenological reduction as well as in Hofmannsthal's state of crisis, we lose the ability to comprehend the world around us "with the simplifying glance of habit." We do, however, gain a new way of experiencing our environment in which we "examine at curiously close range all of the things that surface in such [everyday] conversation" (Hofmannsthal, 1986, 21). Once they are in these new states of mind, Husserl and Hofmannsthal can experience their physical environment as they could not have done earlier, when they were still, to use Husserl's expression, in the "natural attitude."

Second, as I have pointed out above, Husserl's actual comparison fails because it emphasizes the *Cartesian way* as a step into the phenomenological reduction. A comparison with the *Lord Chandos Letter* would allow Husserl to discard this way. He could stress that the phenomenological reduction is a change of attitudes in which we open ourselves up to a whole new range of experiences, just as Lord Chandos's changed attitude made it possible for him to have a range of new experiences. Lord Chandos is not sceptical with respect to the existence of the external world, but only with respect to our ability to speak about the external world. Hence, Husserl could have used this comparison to stress the point that in the phenomenological reduction we do not "lose the external world." He could thus have anticipated his own critique of the *Cartesian way*, i.e., of the way he used to introduce the phenomenological reduction in its early stages. In addition, he could have emphasized that we gain a new way of describing these objects and mental experiences that are directed toward them. Thus, a comparison to Hofmannsthal's later aesthetic theory could have helped Husserl express his intentions more clearly than the comparison, which he presents in the letter, to Hofmannsthal's early theory.

This does not mean, however, that the comparison is perfect or that Hofmannsthal's crisis and Husserl's phenomenological reduction are exactly the same kind of experience; in fact, they are quite different in several respects. Husserl thought that the two kinds of experiences serve two completely different purposes, whereas Hofmannsthal expresses his contention in the paper he read at Göttingen, i.e., four years *after* the *Lord Chandos Letter*, that all written language serves to quench the thirst for poetry – a goal that, according to him, only poets can achieve. Another crucial difference lies in the ways in which they introduce their new methods of looking at things: while Hofmannsthal describes his crisis as something that he slid into, something that came upon him without any effort on his part, Husserl presents his phenomenological reduction systematically, as the result of hard work and an active and deliberate attempt to establish a new method of philosophy.¹⁰ In addition, Hofmannsthal states that the experiences that he has in this new state of mind – and that he describes so eloquently in his letter – are

ineffable, while Husserl thinks that it is the task of the phenomenologist to describe what he experiences in the state of phenomenological reduction.

V. Conclusion

The comparison between phenomenological method and aesthetic experience that Husserl makes in his letter to Hofmannsthal fails because Husserl refers to the aesthetic theory Hofmannsthal had held before he wrote the *Lord Chandos Letter*, i.e., he compares it to the theory that Hofmannsthal had modified four years before they met. However, Husserl could have made a strong point if he had compared his views to the ones Hofmannsthal actually held when they met. There is an important analogy between Husserl's phenomenological method and Hofmannsthal's aesthetic theory, but Husserl could not see that analogy at the time he wrote the letter.

The question remains why Husserl refers to Hofmannsthal's early aesthetic theory, i.e. to a theory Hofmannsthal gave up four years before Husserl wrote his letter. Why did he not consider the *Lord Chandos Letter* and Hofmannsthal's language-crisis? I think there are several reasons. First, we know from the letter that Husserl had read Hofmannsthal's book *Kleine Dramen*, a collection of plays Hofmannsthal wrote before his *Lord Chandos Letter*. Second, Husserl never was a great reader, so it is quite possible that he did not know about Hofmannsthal's turn. And third, even if Husserl had known about Hofmannsthal's turn, he probably could not have appreciated the advantages of this other comparison at the time since he had not yet recognized the problems of the *Cartesian way* for the phenomenological reduction in early 1907, when he wrote the letter to Hofmannsthal.

¹ "Der Dichter und diese Zeit," printed as Hofmannsthal (1907).

² See Hirsch (1968, 109).

³ For these biographical details, see Schuhmann (1977, 100ff) and Hirsch (1968, 108ff).

⁴ Since Husserl's letter has not yet been translated, I have translated all passages that are quoted.

⁵ He argues for it for the first time in his lecture "Erste Philosophie" (1923/24).

⁶ See *Erste Philosophie* (1923/24), *Husserliana* VIII, 174.

⁷ In this lecture, the *Cartesian way* is already combined with the *way via ontology*.

⁸ Translation slightly altered.

⁹ For an interesting discussion on that topic see also Le Rider (1997, 101ff).

¹⁰ This is mainly a difference of how the two have presented their ideas. Hofmannsthal expresses in a very eloquent way that he has "utterly lost my ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all" (Hofmannsthal, 1986, 19), which raises numerous doubts about whether the letter describes autobiographically an actual crisis Hofmannsthal went through. Husserl, on the other side, writes in a letter that he was driven by demons in his development of the phenomenological reduction. He writes about the decade between the *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas*: "A development has never been more straight, more goal oriented, more predestined, more 'demonic'" (Husserl, 1994, vol IV, 412; my translation), which suggests that the development of the phenomenological reduction was not only the

result of a systematic effort, but also something that Husserl slid into, very much like Hofmannsthal's description of being overcome by the crisis; see also Smith (1995, 102) and Schuhmann (1994, 6f). I want to take this occasion to thank Barry Smith for drawing my attention to this letter and Husserl's "darker side."

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