

Henry Pietersma on Husserl: Transcendentalism and Internalism, Epistemic Fulfillment and History

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When I was Henry Pietersma's doctoral student I had the conviction that almost all of his interpretations of Husserl were outlandish and indefensible. After a few years of sober reflection I find that almost all my interpretations of Husserl are the ones he taught me. Having said that, reading Pietersma's *Phenomenological Epistemology* makes me realize that he is more of a transcendentalist than I had previously thought, and makes me realize that I am less of one than I had thought. My comments will explore a few points along these lines.¹

One of Pietersma's central theses is that phenomenological epistemology responds seriously to skepticism. Phenomenology offers a verifiable theory of transcendental conceptual frameworks, including the conceptual frameworks that make epistemic verification of empirical objects possible, even if in an ongoing and fallible way. Pietersma's book is in many ways a model of phenomenological research, combining close textual analysis of classical phenomenologists with his own arguments and conceptual analyses developed over many years of reflection. I shall focus my remarks on two issues. The first involves the relation between a description of empirical consciousness *in terms of* transcendental structures and a description *of* transcendental structures. A lot of my own work on Husserl has focused on the former procedure, and I wonder if Pietersma moves too quickly to the latter and loses out on some of the resources of the former for answering skepticism. The second issue involves the role of history in transcendental consciousness. The latter is a tricky issue. Pietersma moves from the empirical to the transcendental, which looks like it should exclude historical considerations from the nature of consciousness, but at the end of the chapter, he wants to reintroduce historicity, and this creates some challenges. My approach to the description of consciousness focuses somewhat more on the empirical, so it would seem that I would have an easier time accounting for the historicity of consciousness. But I lean towards dehistoricizing consciousness, and this causes problems too.

I cannot do justice to the complex arguments and purposes of Pietersma's fifty-page chapter on Husserl, but I do want to give readers a sense of the flow of ideas in the chapter. There are five sections of Pietersma's chapter. The first section (42–6) shows how Husserl's distinction between meaning-intentions and meaning-fulfillments provides the

transcendental or structural conditions for the possibility of coming to know anything. In a typical kind of experience, we express to ourselves the idea—the meaning-content—that birds are flying by outside, then we look outside and see the very birds we expected to see. The perception—the meaning-fulfilment—brings the intended birds into presence. The perception verifies the correctness of our expectations. Such experiences of confirmation of course depend on the condition that we already had some prior knowledge about what birds look like. Only if we have such conceptual frameworks and background contexts does a given perception either verify or falsify a belief. A belief has to be “accompanied by a sense of certain specific steps” to be followed in order to arrive at the relevant perceptions. Of course, our perceptions arise in a constant stream, and changes in expectations are ongoing. But what makes knowledge possible is the degree of constancy in our expectations and our ability to see in a new perception the fulfilment of some of those expectations. In reading Husserl one might come to two sorts of paradigms of knowledge acquisition: (1) one might think paradigmatically of the build-up of a complex pattern of perceptual contents and the interpretations of objects that they validate. For example, when we walk into a room and look around, we build up expectations regarding, for example, how formally people are dressed for the occasion, and as our glance falls on one person’s clothing after another, each perception fits and/or contrasts with expectations based on its predecessors. Henceforth, the next perception has an expanded context to apply to its successor, and so on. This paradigm puts the anticipatory force primarily in the flow of experiential contents, along with the meanings of our interpretations of them. (2) Alternatively, one might think that the paradigm case is when we express a proposition which states in language what one expects to observe through the senses, followed by a sense experience which either does or does not present the designated sensations. We might call these two paradigms the perceptual paradigm and the propositional paradigm. Clearly, Husserl describes both paradigms and, clearly, both sorts of experiences occur.² Both cases support Pietersma’s basic point that knowledge is attained, and is known to be attained, when a subject perceives something, and goes back and compares the perception with a prior expectation that has not changed in the meanwhile. Yet while both sorts of cases are Husserlian, and Pietersma does not rule either one out, he does, I think, emphasize the second paradigm, the one that puts emphasis on propositions and their verification rather than on the flow of perception and its expansion. Throughout the book Pietersma distinguishes between the nature of knowledge and the search for knowledge, and his distinction between propositional correctness and perceptual amplifica-

tion roughly parallels this. Pietersma’s distinction emphasizes that the verification of a belief is in principle different from adding content to that belief. My own view is that the verification of a proposition by a perception has to be carried out through the synthesis of perceptions with other perceptions. (Much of my work on Husserl when I was Pietersma’s student had to do with the two layers of synthesis involved in fulfillment. In particular, I was interested in the way in which each perception “refers back” to meaning-intentions that may not ever have been formulated explicitly as a proposition, i.e., cases where the synthesis of meaning with perception is constituted only after the fact of a synthesis of perceptions with other perceptions.³)

The perceptual paradigm normally makes it easier to deal with typical phenomenological topics, for example, to see how perceptions build up into wholes and parts, into singularities in context, into temporal events with forward and backward references, and so on. Epistemologically, it is hard to see how we could know when a perceptual verification of a propositional meaning was complete if that completeness were not experienced as the end-point of the momentum of a prior stream of perceptions. It is, to be fair, not inconceivable that a propositional meaning alone could entail a complete list of relevant perceptions (a position that sounds like phenomenism); but a theory of perceptual momentum explains more easily why certain perceptions are experienced as completing our experience of a given object. Again, Pietersma certainly does not deny the role of perceptual buildup, but he does mark strongly the distinction between that and the verification of meanings already defined. I think the emphasis he puts on this distinction leads to his transcendentalism.

The second section of Pietersma’s Husserl chapter raises the skeptic’s problem of why we should think that perception really verifies anything (49–60). My own attempts to deal with this problem appeal to the way that objects, once intended, imply additional ways in which they could be perceived, so that perception would automatically count as the verification of the presence of those objects. For Pietersma, this appeal to perception is possible only because of the transcendental structures of intentional consciousness (I would not deny that), and he thinks that this implies that the level at which epistemic justification is grounded is the transcendental level (of which I am less certain). While Pietersma makes the usual denial that phenomenology reduces to Berkeleyan idealism (59), he does make some quite strong claims to the effect that Husserl is an “anti-realist” (57), and that the subject “constitutes entities” (51, 58). If transcendental consciousness constitutes empirical entities then, as it were, transcendental consciousness gets to decide what will verify the

existence of those entities, and it confers that power of verification upon empirical perception. Knowledge of objects may be acquired in the course of perception, but on Pietersma's account, the ground of knowledge that would refute a skeptic would lie only in the transcendental constitution of objects. (This will be instructive to our non-phenomenologist colleagues who think that phenomenological method consists of sticking fishhooks into one's fingers to see what it feels like.) For Pietersma, one major implication of phenomenology is that the optimal epistemic condition for perceiving an object would be one in which a transcendental subject constitutes a certain object in such a way that she could not even conceive of the possibility that she could have the perceptions she has without the object existing. The act of constituting the object would determine criteria for justifying claims about its existence. Yet it is difficult to see what sorts of objects, other than perhaps mathematical, logical, and *a priori* categories, could be defined transcendently in such a way as to predetermine all possible ways of perceiving them.

Indeed, Pietersma's third point in the chapter (60–8) is that perception almost never does actually put us into an optimal epistemic situation. In some important pages, he deals with the fallibility of perception, the need for criteria for the defeasability of empirical beliefs, and procedures for evaluating how successful we are being in searching for truth even when we are not attaining it. This kind of analysis, for me, would entail that continuous experience of a world of objects could not fail to produce justifications (as well as some falsifications) of our empirical beliefs. Yet Pietersma takes the fact that justification depends on "points of view," "frameworks," and intentional consciousness generally to entail that it is the transcendental subject, not the lived world, that grounds justification. He maintains that no matter what experience we have, the belief in the non-existence of the actual world remains consistent with our experience. Of course, this logical possibility leads towards the skepticism that Pietersma set out to refute. Pietersma's conclusion is thus not that transcendental phenomenology disproves the contingent proposition that there is no world, but that phenomenology shows that it is inherent in a transcendental standpoint that one take one's experience to confirm the existence of those empirical objects that one's transcendental standpoint itself constituted. To simplify, the premise on which I agree with Pietersma is that ongoing fallible perceptions carry with them the experience of continuous epistemic successes. Pietersma thinks this entails that we have full justification for transcendental judgements but not for empirical judgements. The issue for readers of Pietersma is whether this conclusion follows.

The final subsection of the chapter involves Husserl's concept of history, and I think it is one of the virtues of the book to show how a theory of history is entailed by epistemology. Pietersma has two ways of articulating his—and phenomenology's—motive for taking up this topic at this point. The first is to consider the question of whether transcendental structures themselves might change during the course of empirical human history. The second is that the transition from transcendental to empirical consciousness is also a kind of history. We might call the latter a history "internal to consciousness" which would explain how events can be experienced as external to consciousness. We might call the former a history of cultural ideas external to consciousnesses that would explain how we construct frameworks within consciousness. Husserl's text on the "Origins of Geometry" takes up both aspects of history. To put the idea of that text very simply: at some point in history human beings used their transcendental capacities to develop geometrical principles; then those human beings passed on those geometrical doctrines and practices through generations which preserved scientific progress in the form of an empirical tradition; in this way the empirical history of geometry, essential as it is for the progress of the science, never substitutes for the need for each geometer to think the principles by means of their own transcendental capacities. Hence, the empirical history of geometry is ultimately a spin-off of transcendental history, and in need of transcendental consciousness in order that it been seen as a history of geometry, i.e., a history of an *a priori* science, at all. While on the one hand Pietersma's discussion of history has the effect of bringing the transcendental subject into the world of empirical processes, it also has the effect of more or less reducing empirical history to an expression of transcendental history.

In one sense history consists in reenacting the transcendental judgements of first philosophy; in another sense we rely on cultural progress in order to advance a science, precisely without having to reenact consciously all those earlier principles every time we sit down to work.⁴ Pietersma's terminology on this point is difficult, but I interpret him to be saying that history is transcendently reenacted so that empirically it need not be reenacted. Pietersma ends the chapter with the remark that philosophical history must explain how history itself became possible in history. This self-referentiality of historical explanation would require a distinction like the above—namely, between a first-order history of empirical progress and a second-order history that explains how transcendental consciousness distributes its judgements bit by bit throughout history. To put the dilemma bluntly: geometry is a transcendental framework of consciousness for interpreting the world; but there is a history of

geometry *in* the world. Is that history of the framework of consciousness inside consciousness or outside consciousness? Pietersma's solution is that "the history is, in the final analysis, internal to consciousness" (83). What appears to be an external history of frameworks is actually all grounded by the same transcendental standpoint, and hence is all internal history (80). But Pietersma's conception of internality is rather complicated.

To regard a series of judgements historically (we are speaking here not of histories of facts but of histories of conceptual frameworks) is to regard them as a progression of increasingly justified points of view that the subject herself has on the empirical world. That is, to regard a series of judgements as a history is to internalize them in one's own consciousness. Though this is admittedly not the "usual sense of the term 'history'" (80), the series of contingent judgements (the usual sense of history) is not truly history at all, in Pietersma's terms, until a subject regards them as fulfilments of the search for a good transcendental framework, i.e., fulfilments of the search for self-knowledge. When a tradition is externally given, the transcendental framework that makes the tradition historical is not given; for the empirical tradition to be given *qua* history, it must be internal to consciousness (82). To put it polemically, to be historical, a tradition must belong in its entirety to ahistorical consciousness. Pietersma's views here, as throughout his book, develop his own independent analysis that move well beyond the classical phenomenologists he discusses. Yet I think the issues he tackles are very much at the heart of contemporary debates in Continental philosophy. Contrary perhaps to some common views, in my view most Continental philosophy does not affirm the historical character of being; from Hegel to Husserl, Bergson to Deleuze, most Continental philosophy turns succession into simultaneity.

But now, there is yet one more complication. In the last pages of the chapter, Pietersma wants to go beyond purely internalist history, albeit without returning to externalist history. To do this he appeals to what he calls Hegelian "absolute consciousness." Pietersma wants to incorporate into his internalist history the fact that phenomenology itself "is the teleological fulfillment of a history that begins with Greek philosophy" (82–3). Pietersma is not abandoning his conclusions regarding the internality of history to consciousness, but he is trying to get transcendental consciousness to develop out of an external history starting with the Greeks. To accomplish this external history within internal history, Pietersma appeals to "absolute consciousness." It is as if the history of cultures is first internal to this absolute, universal, productive, purely transcendental consciousness, then subsequently external to our individ-

ual, finite consciousnesses, then finally conceivable by us as internal to absolute consciousness when we employ phenomenology to see that the empirical is grounded in the transcendental.

This is an ingenious way of using a Hegelian concept to resolve some problems in Husserl. But leaving aside whether there are other interpretations of Hegel, I wonder if something could have happened earlier that would have prevented us from arriving at this rather extreme pass of having to posit an absolute consciousness in order to contain the transcendental identity of a single geometrical standpoint in the face of what appears to our consciousness as transcendently different geometrical points of view. What if, much earlier on, it had been possible to account for the ongoing justification of judgements about the empirical world without making the world of objects internal to transcendental consciousness? This would have meant that some structures of our experience of the world would come not from *a priori* categories but from ways we synthesize perceptions and interpretations into increasingly complex patterns of mutually fulfilling contents. After all, we do want to say that some aspects of a conceptual framework are transcendental and ahistorical (as, for example, the distinctions between meaning intention and meaning fulfilment, or between whole and part). We want to say that other aspects of a conceptual framework are empirically historical (such as the distinction between soul and mind, i.e., the sorts of aspects that distinguish Greek and modern conceptual frameworks). On the perceptual paradigm I suggested earlier, we would confirm the unity and value of certain framework concepts by theoretically working with them and practically experiencing the world in terms of them. One would learn from these empirically historical conceptual frameworks without risking a change at the transcendental level. The key point is that under a perceptual paradigm we would not require an absolute consciousness to preserve transcendental history from the allegedly relativizing effects of the empirical history of conceptual frameworks.

But now, if I am suggesting that framework history is more empirical than transcendental, it might seem that I am suggesting that the history of frameworks is external rather than internal to consciousness. But I suggested at the beginning that perceptual consciousness according to structures can carry out epistemic verification of empirical objects by bringing those objects increasingly into presence. If there is a similar sort of stream of experience that brings historical objects increasingly into presence, to be confirmed, compared, varied, synthesized, and so on, then the effect of tying history to perception is to make it more available to an individual consciousness than it would be if an absolute "Hegelian" consciousness had to be posited in order to contain it. That is, the mean-

ings and potentialities of the stages of history might be more internal to an individual consciousness if history is perceived empirically than if it had to be contained transcendently. In brief, I prefer Pietersma's internalist history before he introduces the variation involving absolute consciousness—indeed I think his account is more Hegelian without absolute consciousness—even though Pietersma reads that internalist conclusion more through transcendentalism than I would. I am afraid there might be something Bergsonian in my last suggestion, and I do not want to go too far astray, particularly in commenting on a philosopher like Pietersma who taught me so much about keeping a thought on topic. But I would say by way of excuse that it is the complexity and subtlety of Henry Pietersma's working categories, as well as his own stylistically modest yet creatively immodest approach, that makes one want to try out a few theses of one's own.

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Notes

1. This paper, slightly modified, was first presented at a symposium on Henry Pietersma's *Phenomenological Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) held at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Guelph. This book is one of the most important works of phenomenology to be published by a Canadian philosopher, and Pietersma's lifetime of work has influenced a great number of phenomenologists and other philosophers working both in Canada and around the world today. Pietersma's book includes chapters on Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty as well as Husserl; in this paper I focus exclusively on Pietersma's discussion of Husserl.

2. The following is a typical passage: "What an intention means, but makes present in a more or less inadequate way, the fulfilment ... sets *directly* before us; or at least more directly, relative to the intention. In the fulfilment we live, as it were, an experience of 'This is the thing itself'.... It is possible that in the step-by-step progress of knowledge, in the ascent by levels from acts of poorer to acts of richer epistemic fullness, one should always finally reach fulfilling perceptions.... The relative talk of 'more or less direct' and of [the thing] itself points us generally towards the principal issue: that the synthesis of fulfilments draws an inequality of value among the combined members, that is, that the fulfilling act brings with it a pre-eminence which the mere intention lacks.... Each such ranking of levels points forward to an *ideal limit*, or realizes it in its final end-point, which posits for every advance through levels a goal that cannot be overstepped:

the goal of absolute knowledge, of the adequate self-presentation of the object of knowledge." *Logische Untersuchungen* II/2 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1980), 65–6; Investigation VI, s. 16 (my translation).

3. See my *Synthesis and Backward Reference in Husserl's Logical Investigations* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995), which originated as a dissertation under Pietersma's direction.

4. Pietersma writes that we do not have to "reenact" or "re-create" earlier thoughts—though he adds that we do "form them again" (81). This is already terminologically difficult because Pietersma puts the same German word, *nachvollziehen*, in parentheses after both the term "reenactment" and "form again." He then writes that we "reenact or re-create" them (83).