The Tragedy of Scientific Culture: Husserl on Inauthentic Habits, Technisation and Mechanisation

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Abstract
Habit and habitualisation play an important role in Husserl’s phenomenology, yet one aspect of habituality has been somewhat overlooked, namely the dimension of authenticity/inauthenticity. While authenticity in Heidegger has received a lot of attention, inauthenticity in Husserl is less well researched, although, as I will show, it is of equal importance to his overall theorising. The central aim of this paper is to explore the authenticity/inauthenticity-distinction in the various domains of habitualisation and to establish its fundamental importance for Husserl. In the first, introductory part of this paper I offer a few remarks on how to understand and categorise Husserl’s transcendental take on habits; I also introduce the important distinction between authentic and inauthentic habits and authenticity and inauthenticity in general. In the second part I present the problem of mechanisation as a form of inauthentic habitualisation as it appears in Husserl’s phenomenologies of ethics and, more importantly, science. The third part concludes the paper with a reflection on how phenomenology is programmatically aimed against any form of inauthenticity, and on how it might or might not achieve this goal.

Keywords Habit · Authenticity · Inauthenticity · Mechanisation

Introduction
Habit and habitualisation play an important role in Husserl’s phenomenology, but, as has also been pointed out, habit and habitualisation are what Fink calls “operative concepts” (Fink, 1976), i.e., concepts which are of fundamental importance without ever becoming thematic. In short, Husserl does not offer a systematic theory of habit (see Moran, 2011). Nonetheless, one can find a wealth of considerations revolving around habit, habituality and habitualisation in his writings—including the newly edited Ideen II (see Caminada, 2019). I will focus on an aspect which has
been somewhat overlooked, namely Husserl’s notion of inauthentic habits. While authenticity in Heidegger has received a lot of attention, inauthenticity in Husserl is less well researched, although, as I will show, it is of equal importance to his overall theorising.¹

In the first part of this paper, I offer a few remarks on how to understand and categorise Husserl’s transcendental take on habits; I then introduce the distinction between authentic and inauthentic habits. In the second part I present the problem of mechanisation as a form of inauthentic habitualisation as it appears in Husserl’s phenomenologies of science, ethics, and philosophy itself. The aim of this paper is to explore the authenticity/inauthenticity-distinction in the various domains of habitualisation and to establish its fundamental importance for Husserl.

**The Transcendental Take on Habit and Its Depth**

One central topic in regard to which Husserl discusses authenticity and inauthenticity is habit. Husserl’s phenomenology has suffered from a number of misinterpretations over the years, so to better understand his specific perspective on habit, habituality and habitualisation, we need to clarify briefly what he takes phenomenology to be. First and foremost, phenomenology is not descriptive psychology or introspectionist poetry, it is a type of transcendental philosophy: Husserl is concerned with the conditions of possibility (as well as the structures) of appearing or what he calls “constitution”. The many detailed descriptions serve either the critical purpose of showing that our preconceptions do not properly express what is going on (which we will touch upon later) or they serve a productive purpose analogous to the preparation of anatomical specimens, laying bare the structural features of experience, which we then can describe and discuss.

For our purpose this implies that habitualisation appears either in the role of the conditioned or the role of condition. I will mostly focus on habitualisation as a condition of other phenomena, although one could also use Husserl’s phenomenology to develop a transcendental theory of habitualisation itself. This would have to include a treatment of primordial time-consciousness and especially the way retention and protention work.²

As Husserl says in § 34 of the *Cartesian Meditations*, habitualisation is an issue of genetic phenomenology, since it concerns temporality; Husserl even speaks of the “history” of passive genesis (Husserl, 1973a: 112, see Cavallaro, 2016). Methodologically speaking, habit and habituality are invisible to a merely static description of subjectivity. However, within Husserl’s genetic phenomenology habituality is almost ubiquitous. In order to systematically introduce the issue (or to introduce

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¹ I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments and further references.
² Clare Carlisle offers such a transcendental theory of the conditions of possibility for habitualisation. See Carlisle, Clare, *On Habit*. London/New York 2014.
a system to the issue), I will now distinguish several levels, dimensions, and spheres the concept of habitualisation operates on or in (see Moran, 2011: 61).

Let “levels” concern the degree of activity of the ego(s) involved either in the formation of the habit or the acts determined by the habit: some habitualisations are almost completely passive, for example the one leading to the expectation of a next moment in time. Also, the early formation of concepts or types, which is also an act of habitualisation in that we learn to habitually unify certain data, does not imply much spontaneity; these are matters of passive synthesis and the topic of what Husserl calls transcendental aesthetics. Association and typefication are the modes of habitualisation at the passive-receptive level.

In contrast, actively forming concepts by logical work or consciously replacing a bad habit with a good habit for example would be cases of (re-)habitualisation which requires a high level of ego-involvement, i.e., spontaneity and conscious effort—hence Husserl speaks of “secondary passivity” (Husserl, 2004a: 111) in the case of such habits belonging to and acquired actively by us as fully-blown responsible persons.

Low-level habits also influence high-level processes: pre-predicative associations and their correlated types shape the formation of concepts proper; our bodily habits might influence our world-view—and vice versa. For example, deciding to care for the environment and habitualising this conviction should imply a change in behaviour.

Habitualisation also plays an important role in different dimensions, under which I want to understand types of activity. We can acquire practical-bodily habits (style of movements), emotional habits (typical reactions), perceptual habits (ways of looking), volitional habits (the effect of decisions), lingual habits (an idiom), ethical habits (virtues (Husserl, 2014: 338)), character habits (see Husserl, 1991: 253–281), and even logical habits (ways of thinking, where habit “expresses the manner in which stance-taking is informed by a certain discipline or practice of viewing and considering” Moran, 2014: 40). Interests in general are habitual and shape the world of recurring situations (Husserl, 1973d: 55; see Ferencz-Flatz, 2014: 73). Husserl uses the term “dispositional habit (dispositioneller Habitus)” (Husserl, 2004b: 102) to denote an aptitude (Befähigung), in this specific case attentiveness as well as love and hate qua abilities. Tentatively speaking, almost all kinds of activity seem to allow for habitualisation or imply processes of habitualisation.

Habitualisation can also be viewed as belonging to different spheres, which concern the degree of intersubjectivity involved. The habitualities involved in time-consciousness are purely egoic, they belong to the primordial, purely subjective, pre-objective sphere. Personal habits within relationships for example belong to a sphere of intersubjectivity, although to a fairly personal one, relying on bodily encounters

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3 Husserl himself sometimes distinguishes habits and dispositions (Husserl, 2002: 106), on account of the fact that habits or habitual attitudes subsist, retain their validity and stay identically alive between their actualisations; they are not ‘dead’ or ‘blind,’ but alive. In some sense, inauthentic habits almost devolve into dispositions, as we shall see later. Husserl also suggests distinguishing between habit and hexis (Husserl, 1973c: 195), because a hexis supposedly concerns a conviction which I have, but which I am not (the conviction is not an attribute of mine).
and personal acquaintance. A prime example of such a personal intersubjective habit would be love, a “continuing practical habit, its realising affirmation” (Husserl, 1973c: 172) a unity of striving, wherein the striving of one becomes of interest to the striving of the other and in which the will of the other is implicit in each (Husserl, 1973c: 173); love implies the habitualised understanding (Bewusstseinshabitus) that the life of the loved one is of personal, even existential relevance to the loving person (Husserl, 2014: 354). Whereas e.g. the constitution of tradition through habitualisation is clearly an intersubjectively mediated, social process, which is however less personal than the habit-forming processes happening within close relationships, even in some sense involving subjects unknown and long dead.

In short, habitualisation is a core condition of possibility for the formation of both the ego and—correlatively—the lifeworld, in that habit “is responsible for the organization of experience into horizons of familiarity and unfamiliarity” (Moran, 2011: 68).

The transcendental Ego is not a “dead pole of identity. It is the I of affection and action” (Husserl, 2012: 208) and as the subject of actions, it is also the subject of habits as they arise “historically” from the fact that an ego has acted in some way. “With the original decision the I becomes the originally so decided I” (Husserl, 2012: 211). “The decision inhabits or informs me” (Moran, 2014: 38). I have acquired a habit. “The key characteristic of habit in Husserl’s analysis is its “last-ing” or “continuous” (dauernd) character, the fact it attaches to the ego and modifies it permanently” (Moran, 2014: 32f.). Through and thanks to all these processes of habitualisation, the transcendental subject can become a person rather than just a formal (Kantian) I to accompany all our thoughts. Habitualisation allows acquiring subsistent traits and the result of the various habitualisations is an individual “style,” which includes habits on all levels, in all dimensions and spheres mentioned above, as well as decisions regarding our way of life: a lifestyle. This style determines how the transcendental subject constitutes the world as a “habitual formation of meaning” (Husserl, 2002: 48). Habitualisation is the condition of possibility for us to exist as stylish, personal, and personally identical beings, and thus to encounter the world (see Jacobs et al., 2010).

So far, authenticity and inauthenticity have not appeared, as we were concerned with levels, dimensions, and spheres of habituality, in order to understand the fundamental role(s) habits play in Husserl’s phenomenology. However, some habits also exist on a qualitative spectrum; some habits are better than others in that they are more or less authentic.4 Tradition for example can be seen as a “practical ‘habit’ of the community,” which, while lacking its “original sense of function,” still has the “secondary form of an ought,” which can either be justified as an authentic ought

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4 The term “authentic” serves as a translation for the German “eigentlich”. While in some contexts a more natural translation might be “actually,” in the sense that something is really, actually given, for example, I have chosen the Greek-derived “authentic” as the most literal rendering (following the Heidegger-translators), since “authentikos” means “originary” or “genuine” and “eigen” means “own” or “proper,” which is close enough. Also, while “autos” and “eigen” do not share the exact same meaning, they both have a reflexive element to themselves. Husserl himself uses the term “eigentlich” in different contexts, but arguably with the same meaning, hence the need to provide a consistent translation.
by going back to the meaningfulness of its originary foundation—or not: “In opposition to this authentic justification we find the inauthentic one—the appeal to the ‘they’ or ‘one’ (Man), i.e., the referral to the fact that everyone is doing it like that and that it has always been done like this” (Husserl, 2008: 527, see Arnold, 2022). The difference between authentic and inauthentic habituality lies in the presence/absence of meaning or the ability/inability to re-activate the original meaning; inauthentic habits are meaningless, and they are cut off from the possibility of actualising their original meaning.

As such the distinction between authentic and inauthentic habits refers back to earlier distinctions revolving around notions of authenticity. Starting from the Philosophy of Arithmetic and building on a distinction introduced by Brentano in his lectures (Husserl, 1970: 193 FN 1), Husserl distinguishes between authentic and inauthentic phenomenological states. A representation for example is authentic if it presents its object originally, i.e., intuitively; so, a judgement is authentic if it is based on such a representation (Husserl, 2009: 37–8), otherwise it is a merely signitive, “symbolic—or empty intention,” (Husserl, 2009: 172, FN 1). Even the fulfilments of signitive acts themselves can be authentic or inauthentic, depending on whether they present the fullness of the object (Husserl, 1984: 605): evidence is the epistemic mode of authenticity. As early as 1905 Husserl concludes that all experiences are either authentic or inauthentic (Husserl, 1969: 9), depending on whether they intuitively present their content or fail to do so.

This also circumscribes the range of possible cases of (in)authenticity, as not everything within the range of phenomenology is an experience or presents (or fails to present) something. In fact, not every habit can be (in)authentic, low-level habits like the expectation of further moments in time are either in place or not. In such cases, mechanisation or automatization are also no issues.

In the relevant cases however, Husserl uses notions of fullness (presence) and emptiness (absence) to describe authenticity and inauthenticity, be they epistemological or ethical. Just as a merely symbolic representation signifies emptily, a mere habit is devoid of meaning; the absence of meaning in inauthentic habits is analogous to the absence of the object in the case of inauthentic representations. Inauthenticity is absence of something that ought to be there; a habit, an act, a presupposition, an action, a volition can all fail to be genuine or proper in this way if they are, in some sense, empty.

This difference between authenticity and inauthenticity also cuts across several key distinctions: both activity and passivity can be (in)authentic, as we have seen in the cases of judgements or representations (active) and habits (passive). Speaking of judgements, both the thematic as well as the un-thematic parts of a judgement can also be (in)authentic, depending on whether they present their objects or meanings intuitively or not—although (philosophical) thematization should arguably present its objects authentically, on pain of defeating its initial purpose (we will get back to

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5 A slightly different approach can be found in Husserl (1980), where Husserl calls any position-taking authentic if it is “explicitly performed” (Husserl, 1980: 357); the relation between the authentic/inauthentic and the explicit/implicit distinctions is worth looking into, but beyond the scope of this paper.
this in the conclusion). The same holds for the implicit/explicit distinction: implicit assumptions can be as (in)authentic as explicit ones, depending on the quality of the judgements in question—and similar as with thematization, the (philosophical) act of explication should function as a form of authentification, as re-activating or giving meaning. An explication which does not present meaning certainly seems to defeat its purpose.

As we will see later, in some cases the relation between inauthentic representations and inauthentic habits is not just one of analogy but one of foundation. What the formal analysis of inauthenticity as emptiness amounts to in concrete cases and how the difference between authentic and inauthentic habituality is spelled out, obviously depends on the type of phenomena under consideration. Husserl himself discusses inauthentic habits in at least three areas, ethics (including axiology), the philosophy of science and the philosophy of philosophy.

**Mechanisation in Ethics and Science**

One example discussed by Husserl himself is love. While love is itself a “practical habitus” or at least has an habitual aspect according to Husserl (Husserl, 1973c: 172), there is a major difference between a relationship that has become a mere habit and a relationship that is habitual, but in which love is also recurrently actualised or realised in acts of love. The former is inauthentic or stale, while the latter is stable but alive and retains its meaning; the former is merely and totally habitual, while the latter only includes habits. Loving someone is the “realising pursuit” (Husserl, 1973c: 172) of my habit, as opposed to the mere passive persistence of that habit. As such, love is authentic or it is not, as Husserl states in a remarkable passage from the summer-semester of 1930, which is worth quoting in some detail:

Can “ethical” life turn into life of an ethical business-as-usual? There is indeed danger here. For the absolute ought, absolute value is only in absolute position-taking, as an absolute love; and a mechanised love would be no love. While love becomes habitual, it is still true and real only in active pursuit. Being habitually firmly directed must become actual in action in actual loving evaluation. Regarding this we have to add: A devolving technique is a rule-governed activity directed towards goals, but in the end its reasons, which give it a rational meaning, are not awakened, they are “forgotten”; they are not only not really reproduced, but they are not awakened and in the background – like

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6 McGuirk discusses this difference between good and bad habits (“degeneration of habit”/“automatism” and “habit simpliciter,” McGuirk, 2014: 151, 153) as one pertaining to the presence or absence of thinking, where good habits “entail a unique form of knowing or exercise of reason” (McGuirk, 2014: 148). His discussion centres around Ricoeur’s account, who holds that “ossification is a threat inscribed in habit, not its normal destiny” (Ricoeur, 1966: 304, quoted after McGuirk, 2014, 158). Incidentally Hegel also discusses mechanisation in terms of the loss of meaning, namely as the very function of memory. He takes the lack of proper accentuation as an indicator for a mechanised form of recital, because the “correct accent aims for meaning; the referent, representation which is called upon disturbs the mechanical connection and thus easily confuses the recital” (Hegel, 1992: 461).
for instance insights which I have at my disposal, ready to be reactivated in a “secondary evidence”. Only when I follow them am I still rational and rational in autonomous self-responsibility. Such a technisation we also find in the ethical realm. I can decide absolutely in the current situation through apperception and its specific evidence of transferral. I can do so too through and at the same time through appeal to an essential principle, which might be pertinent here, although I might not be able to reactivate it as a principle completely. Should it have become merely formal, in which case its meaning is not available to me at all times, my actions in accord with it are without value. (Husserl, 2014: 436, author’s translation)

The technical term he uses to describe both the epistemological as well as ethical decline is “technisation”. It might sound slightly odd to speak of “technisation in ethical matters”, but what Husserl means is “going through the motions”: In technisation, reasons for doing something are forgotten, the meaning of the activity is lost and cannot be reactivated, which equals a loss of autonomous self-responsibility: I’m unable to answer myself as to rhyme or reason of my actions. My habits have become ossified.

Technisation—or, to introduce another technical term, mechanisation—signals the decline of science as Husserl discusses it in his later works, like the foreword to Formal and Transcendental Logic or of course the Crisis. As he elaborates in FTL:

Science in the form of the special sciences has become a kind of theoretical technique, which relies much more on practical experience than actual insight into the reason of its performance. Thereby modern science has relinquished the ideal of true science which was alive and operative within the sciences since Plato, along with radicalism of scientific self-responsibility. (Husserl, 1974: 7).

In his most famous take on the issue, in § 9 of the Crisis, Husserl speaks of an outright “depletion of meaning of mathematical science through technisation” (Husserl, 1976: 45), the result of which is not just a lack of philosophical foundation of the sciences (which could be dealt with as an issue external to the sciences themselves), but a lack of understanding of the meaning of their own
results, a lack of insight proper to real science. Husserl diagnoses the sciences with an inherent self-destructive tendency and foresees a “collapse of science through science in its methodisation as technisation. Loss of reason through the effects of reason itself” (Husserl, 2014: 430). Irrationalism and the loss of meaning would thus be a result of scientific progress, which has taken the form of technicalised special sciences (Husserl, 2001: 178). In this, Husserl’s thinking comes quite close to the idea of a self-destruction of enlightenment through a blindly pragmatised thinking as Horkheimer and Adorno propounded it (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2004), although Husserl frames the process as a “tragedy” rather than a “dialectic”:

The modern progress of scientific culture evinces a deep tragedy of the Platonic ideal of mankind, namely that it [...] determined our development, but that on the other hand it also took – in its effect – the form of mechanised and mechanising scientific culture, which robbed from its very ideal the power to awaken and further free intellectuality. (Husserl, 1989: 209)

So how does technisation/mechanisation play out? The “tragedy” of science rests partially on a dialectic of signs, I believe, specifically that of mathematical symbols. Learning to use signs (letters, numbers, and their concatenations) is itself a form of habitualisation: we get used to the signs meaning something and the ways we can employ them to refer to something. In using signs habitually, the referral or reference-relation becomes un-thematic, I’m simply directed at whatever the sign signifies. At this stage, the sign itself might be called habitual. A habitual sign in Husserl’s sense is a sign which functions without recourse to the original will or act of referral. It is supposed to refer without carrying any sign of the will which originally founded the ’ought’ of referral. The “habitual success” of the sign implies no conscious realisation or thematisation of the signifier, but only a tendency towards the signified. The sign draws me in, so to speak, not in order that my attention terminates in it, but rather in the conscious presence of whatever it signifies (Husserl, 2005: 84–7). Habitualisation therefore also allows for stable representations. Take the praxis of justification as an example; I can only present arguments as evidence for a judgement if (a) everyone involved understands the language I use and (b) is able to follow my patterns of reasoning. Both requirements rest on successful habitualisation, namely, learning.

Habitualisation is the way signs acquire a permanent meaning, which in turn allows the transmission of information through documents and the subsequent establishment of intersubjectively accessible norms—and tradition in general, part of which is science. This of course is the topic of the famous Appendix III of the Crisis, The Origin of Geometry as well as Derrida’s commentary on it. Writing down geometrical results transforms and “sediments” the meaning given in the original geometric evidence, allowing readers to “reactivate” it (Husserl, 1976: 371–2).

Yet just as traditions can lose their meaning, signs, signifiers, and complete scientific practices itself can become empty. By using signs emptily, we do not even terminate in the consciousness of whatever it signifies any more, because we use the habitual sign itself habitually, we do not invest mental activity into bringing the
signified into focus, since we ‘know’ what it means. And, as Derrida points out, this holds for reading as well as writing: “In the moment of writing, the sign can always ‘empty’ itself, take flight from awakening, from ‘reactivation,’ and may remain forever closed and mute” (Derrida, 2001: 208).

Exactly that happens in the case of technisation or mechanisation in science: we use the signs and formulae without considering or activating their meaning. We use theories without properly understanding them—not necessarily because we cannot, but because they have become mere tools, “closed and mute,” as Derrida puts it. This might include the usage of technical terms, if we just throw around the terms everyone else also uses, without really meaning much by it—take “narrative” as an example. In this case, the inauthentic habit of empty shop talk consists in inauthentic representations and the inauthenticity of the signifiers founds the inauthenticity of the habit as a whole. The question remains whether such “tragedy” of science and the underlying dialectic of signs is really tragic in the emphatic sense, namely truly and absolutely inevitable as well as destructive.

Before attempting to answer this question, I would like to limit the scope of Husserl’s claim by invoking the phenomena described for example in Kuhn’s theory of the paradigm-shift. According to Kuhn, successive “transition from one paradigm to another via revolution is the usual developmental pattern of mature science” (Kuhn, 1970: 12). From a phenomenological point of view, a scientific revolution—or revision if we want to include less dramatic developments—constitutes a breaking of certain old habits, followed by the introduction and institutionalisation of new ones. Presumably such an event could and maybe would also get rid of ossified habits. And since any newly instated habit is presumably authentic qua being founded with its meaning still present (and because of that presence, which has negated the old, empty habits), a scientific revolution or revision could be considered to be nothing short of a re-authentification. Thus, the historical structure of mature science ought not to be considered simply tragic in the phenomenological sense throughout. The question remains whether mechanisation is a necessary moment in the ebb and flow of scientific history, a moment complementary to the revolutionary or revisionary tendencies—and how far towards total emptiness the sciences can or even must deteriorate.

Husserl certainly insists that mechanistic habituality is indeed as necessary for science as it is a factor in its devolution towards mere technique: “technisation and specialisation are necessary and at the same time […] a form of decay” (Husserl, 1989: 209). Scientific progress rests on technical rationality (Husserl, 1959: 249), science “itself needs ‘mechanisation,’ and no life is possible without mechanising habit or an effective tradition” (Husserl, 2014: 179). Constantly ensuring that all our habits are authentic by reactivating their meaning would interrupt any normal activity; if we want to get anything done within science, we have to accept the possibility of inauthentic habits, we even have to take things for granted.

Interestingly, the truth of this description rests on an anthropological fact, since our ability to keep all habits filled with meaning is not limited on logical or eidetic grounds; we are simply cognitively limited in that way. Habituality in general is only necessary because retention is finite. Husserl himself claims that our human ability to authentically represent numbers ends “with twelve at best” (Husserl, 1970: 222); only symbolic representations open up the infinite realms of modern mathematics. A
major part of all representations involved in doing mathematics and a fortiori mathematical natural sciences is therefore inauthentic out of anthropological necessity. But habitually wielding inauthentic representations leads to inauthentic habits. The mathematisation of science is thus a major factor in its mechanisation. Which is not to say that it does not yield results. It might even lead to fulfilled, that is authentic representations: it remains an open question whether a result can be authentic while parts of the process of gaining it are inauthentic.

However, Husserl believes that while a certain, even a large degree of mechanisation is unavoidable, it is not necessary for science to become utterly empty of meaning—but authenticity needs work:

Its mechanising way of proceeding, its mechanising method is, if science is true science and the scientist a true scientist, totally understandable, able to be transformed into authentic intuitive experience and thought. Its fight against inauthentic science is a fight against the inauthentic or false traditionalisation of reason, against operating with symbolic sediments of results not originating from true insight. It fights a businesslike academic life (Wissenschaftsbetrieb) in which theory-workers deal with mechanisms and results which they cannot justify […] at any given time. (Husserl, 2014: 179)

In principle all the signs, theories and results we treat mechanically can be re-activated, their original meaning and evidence recovered. While it is impractical, maybe factually impossible for any scientist to actively re-understand every single theorem of her field in its current state, it is at least logically possible to do so. We can presumably re-activate most of the empty habits we have acquired ourselves; we can think about the meaning of formulae and phrases instead of simply using them mechanically. But it is an ability that is limited in its realisation. Firstly, our cognitive limitations in the face of ever-growing research disallow a complete authenticity of habits; we can re-activate the meaning of some of our habits, but in most cases the knowledge that we could do so must be enough. Being conscious of the issue and proceeding not completely mechanically is a win in this situation.

The second way our abilities of re-activating meaning are limited, is tied to the historicity of the sciences themselves: we cannot re-activate evidence we have never had originally, and which was not documented, which means that certain fundamental decisions or events which have shaped and motivated our theories cannot be recovered simply by reactivating the meaning of the theorems we are currently dealing with. The “ur-evidences” of most sciences, together with their defining, most basic ontological and epistemological concepts can only be reconstructed or analysed by phenomenology, according to Husserl (Husserl, 1976: 381). To keep the habits of science from ossifying completely, we need a cooperative reflexive effort, consisting of the occasional reflection on the side of the scientists as well as historical and ontological reflection on the side of phenomenology (or philosophy more broadly construed). The way to keep our habits relatively healthy and (thus) our scientific tradition rational is (occasional) reflection or self-examination (“Besinnung” as Husserl puts it) through which we can re-activate the original meaning of the actions we perform and the signs we use. In short, the tragedy of (normal) science only plays out fully “if a [philosophical] countermovement […] is missing” (Husserl,
Yet the ambiguity of inauthentic habits remains—they are problematic, even destructive for science in the emphatic sense in that they are empty, meaningless; then again, they also appear to be a necessary element of scientific progress and, in fact, life in general. They can and should be contained, but never eradicated.

Phenomenology and the Danger of Hollow Substructions

Yet what about phenomenology itself? Is there a tragedy of mechanisation within philosophy? Certainly, philosophy is, like any other human endeavour, impossible without habitualisation. As a phenomenologist I “split” myself into two realms of habituality (see Husserl, 2002: 88), one worldly person, one unworldly, “disinterested spectator” (Husserl, 2002: 90). The disinterested spectator is the result of the epoché, the break from the natural attitude. The natural attitude can be described as the implicit habit of positing the world and remaining focussed on worldly objects. Negatively, the natural attitude amounts to the habit of ignoring the transcendental dimension of constitution, i.e., our own contribution to the appearance (or “positing”) of the world. The epoché could almost be described as the habit to break or bracket natural habits (Husserl, 1973b: 208, see Moran, 2014: 29 and Moran, 2011: 59). Yet philosophers have to rely on language, which is itself a product of the natural attitude and a result of habitualisation (see Fink, 1988: 93; see Kerckhoven, 2003: 387–410). So clearly habitualisation is a condition of possibility for doing phenomenology.

However, due to the very strict standards of (absolute) self-responsibility Husserl places on the philosopher, there is no allowance for inauthenticity in phenomenology—or in fact in the philosopher’s life in general. Philosophy is supposed to leave no ossified self-evidence intact, every self-evident opinion is to be turned into an evident, well-justified truth or to be discarded; no merely habitual belief or conviction and no merely habitual use of terminology are allowed to remain in place; phenomenology qua philosophy cannot allow itself to ever devolve into technisations and mechanisations, even less so than science. Philosophy can never acquiesce in the face of the “conservatism of habits” (Lohmar, 2014: 51). While habits are a necessity, for philosophy there is no ambiguity regarding inauthentic habits, they are simply to be avoided, beginning with the empty use of signs and terminology, ending with appeals to authority or vague “community standards” which might serve as a fig-leaf for empty and meaningless habits which we have simply adopted without ever justifying or even questioning them; if we are doing what we are doing simply because “one” is supposed to be doing it, we are acting inauthentically—in this at least, Husserl’s and Heidegger’s takes on inauthenticity align.

For as within science, philosophical terms can become empty and any philosophy dealing in these “hollow substructions” (Husserl, 1968: 526) is decried as metaphysics in the bad sense by Husserl (see Arnold & D’Angelo, 2020). His emphasis on intuition and description aims precisely at re-activating the original experiences that can fulfil the empty intentionality of merely habitualised terms, opinions, or judgements; going back to the things themselves allows to restore the significance of terminology which has lost its meaning to technisation. The close attention paid to actual experience within phenomenology therefore serves as a
guard against the emptying or petrification of our philosophical terminology. One result of these efforts is the attack on those empty habits underlying naturalism as well as historicism, as Husserl argues in the Logos-article (Moran, 2011: 69).

The very high epistemological standard Husserl develops for philosophy forces the philosopher to engage in constant reflection and examination of all possible areas of inauthenticity, which leads to a phenomenology of phenomenology, which would include a phenomenology of philosophical habits, starting with a deconstructive and metaphorological analysis of language as present in the works of Derrida and Blumenberg for example. Only by reflecting on its own processes of habitualisation can phenomenology stop its philosophical habits from turning into inauthentic habits like unconscious presuppositions, empty phrases, and mechanical procedures.

One effect of this almost obsessive reflexive effort to stave off ossification and inauthenticity is that philosophy cannot progress in the same way as science can. Philosophy cannot just “get on with it” and then occasionally re-awaken the meanings of its terms and theorems, it is necessarily caught up in reflection—habitually so, which includes the habitual reflection of habituality as well as reflection itself. The ideal of total self-responsibility and the idea that no unfounded presupposition can stay in place precludes any form of Kuhnian “normal science” in the case of philosophy. In the case of the sciences, questions pertaining to the conditions of possibility of themselves remain “outside the thematic frame of these sciences” (Husserl, 2012: 2), those questions being “directed against their working questions, against the predetermined path of the development of truth” (Husserl, 1989: 186)—“to think would mean not to further this work but to disrupt it” (Husserl, 1989: 185). In contrast, philosophy cannot allow itself to keep in the dark about these issues, it cannot leave those questions unasked—and it cannot allow itself to ever stop asking them. There are no normalised discourses within proper philosophy. And while we are able to make headway in the logical landscape, charting courses leading from definitions or descriptions to arguments to new positions and onwards, we can never simply accept directions as given; there is a map, but ultimately we need to “follow the tracks” (Plato, 1901: 276 D, for Husserl’s relation to Plato, see Arnold, 2017) ourselves: read the texts, think the thoughts, engage in debate—reflect on the things themselves.

The drama of philosophy lies in this fight against inauthenticity. It is a Sisyphean task, both necessary as well as incompletable. For, as Fink has pointed out, the practice of philosophy always generates an “operative adumbration” (Fink, 1976: 189), i.e., a set of conditions of possibility of this practice which we cannot bring into view while performing that very practice. We can never rule out the possibility that inauthenticity lurks in this shadow over which we can never jump (Fink, 1976: 186). However, if we want to take Husserl seriously—something we might or might not choose to do—and accept his ideal of philosophy, we should never acquiesce in the knowledge of this necessary blind spot; even if inauthentic habits might be inevitable, we can still strive to be as authentic as possible—and if we want to do that, we probably ought to start thinking about how inauthentic, empty, and mechanical current academic philosophy has become and what we could do about it.
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