HUSSERL'S CONCEPTION OF REASON AS AUTHENTICITY

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Both of Husserl's last two major publications from the 30's refer to a crisis—a crisis in Europe, a crisis in and regarding science, and a crisis concerning the nature and possibilities of philosophy. They are of course for him symptoms of the same crisis, and at both the beginning and the end of each of these works, Husserl also characterizes this crisis as a crisis of "reason," as a crisis about the nature, limits, and possibilities of reason itself (VI, 7, 10, 13, 273, 319, 347). In fact, one way to characterize his basic message in both of these writings is that modern Western ("European," he calls it here) thinking has taken a fatal turn by orienting itself on a technically fruitful, but philosophically much too narrow conception of reason that precludes the possibility of a reasonable philosophical discussion of the normative, social, ethical, and practical questions that cannot be solved by modern natural sciences. The discussion is occasionally somewhat confusing because of the ambiguity of the very notion of reason and of Husserl's use of the term Rationalität in some places to describe the inappropriate and fateful restriction of what reason is and can be, and in other places as the name for the project of philosophy itself and as the goal of Western humanity that goes well beyond the narrower project of modern natural science. In the German text of the longer work, it helps that the former, narrower notion is often referred to by means of the Latin term ratio or its Germanic derivatives Rationalität and Rationalismus (cf., e.g., VI, 18 ff. in his account of the origin of modern mathematically oriented science), whereas the broader and in his view more appropriate conception is usually terminologically fixed through the German word Vernunft (e.g., in §§2–6 in his description of the traditional role of philosophy [VI, 3–14, 275, 329, and 337]). It would not be completely inappropriate to characterize the overall tenor of the two writings as a call back from rationality as mere Rationalismus in favor of a return to a broader conception of rationality as Vernunft. Another problem connected with Husserl's use of the term "rationality" in these writings is that he is very specific and relatively clear about what rationality in the broader, more appropriate sense is not, i.e., he gives a very detailed account of the origin of the inadequate modern conception of rationality, but that he does not specify in nearly as clear terms what he means by "reason" in the sense of Vernunft.

In what follows, I will be arguing that his use of the term in these final two writings is consistent with the positive sense of the term "reason" that he adopted from Franz Brentano and then developed and explicated in earlier writings, most especially in final section of the Ideas I and in the Kaizo articles from the 1920s. I will also try to show how reading his positive use of the term "reason" against this background can not only help us better understand what he means by reason in the positive sense in those writings, but also help us understand his general project in a somewhat different way than it has often been seen by commentators who want to see Husserl simply as a twentieth century version of Descartes. The picture that emerges will have Husserl end up in closer company to hermeneutical philosophy along the lines of Heidegger or Gadamer, or critical theory along the lines of Habermas than has commonly been recognized.

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There is a rule of thumb for German philosophical terminology that says that in order to figure out how a term is used, you can normally go back to Kant (or otherwise Hegel) to find out where the usage comes from. There are some notable exceptions, of course. Heidegger's attempt to invent a whole new philosophical terminology in German—an attempt inspired by his understanding of the way the classic Greek philosophers had coined their technical terms—is

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the most prominent exception, but for nineteenth and early twentieth century philosophers, the rule is pretty reliable. All the more surprising, then, that Part Four of Husserl’s major systematic work, his Ideas I, begins with the heading “Reason and Actuality,” and uses the term in a way that has nothing to do with Kant’s (or at first glance, with Hegel’s) use of the term. In what follows, I will begin by recalling how Husserl uses the term there, and then with reference to other writings, in particular the Kaizo articles, I will try to show how his use of the term, which is derived from Brentano’s employment of it in his Vom Ursprung der sittlichen Erkenntnis, is closer to the classic Greek uses of the term, even though there are a couple of very significant differences that I will try to summarize below. I will try to describe how his conception of reason took him in a direction that is also significantly different from most modern uses of the term that focus on reason primarily as an intellectual capacity, and very clearly avoids the modern tendency to reduce ratio or reason to a kind of ratiocinatio or calculation, which is the precisely what his final two writings are meant to combat.

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One way to describe the topic of the fourth section of the Ideas I is that here Husserl addresses the question of what had traditionally been thought of as the “objectivity” of knowledge, of the relationship between purported knowledge and the object it is supposed to be about, or—to use Husserl’s terminology from the Logical Investigations (terminology I find most helpful here) of intentions and their fulfillment. In fact, we recall from the Logical Investigations Husserl took what had traditionally the problem of how knowledge can be said to correspond to its object and transformed it into a different question. We recall that in the Fifth Logical Investigation, Husserl approached the question of the objects toward which meanings are directed in terms of the meaning-intention so that from the phenomenological perspective, “objects” are approached in terms of the intentions through which they present themselves to consciousness. From a philosophical perspective, it is appropriate to claim that all objects are “intentional objects.” This is not to say that there is an actual object that necessarily corresponds to this intention, nor that the object—even if it exists—is exactly the way it is intended, but simply that whenever we talk or think about things that do or do not actually exist and about they way they are, there is some intention in terms of which our consciousness is directed towards them. The question of their actuality, the question whether they actually exist and exist as we intend them, is addressed in the Sixth Logical Investigation in terms of the fulfillment of that intention. As we all recall, one of Husserl’s primary contributions to twentieth century continental philosophy is that the fulfillment takes place through intuition (Anschauung) in a broad sense that not only encompasses the kind of evidence provided to us through our senses, but all kinds of other experiences that count as appropriate “seeing” or “insights” into the intended object or state of affairs so that the intention counts as fulfilled or confirmed, i.e., whenever it becomes apparent to us that the object or state of affairs is indeed as it had been intended.

Taken in the very broad terms, the account of truth provided in the Fourth Division of Idea I builds on and parallels this account. Here, however, he has not only introduced a distinction between noesis and noema to account for one aspect of what had traditionally been thought of as “objectivity,” namely, the object-directedness of intentions that does not necessarily entail the accuracy of the intention, but also a new term for the experience of the identity between the object as intended and the objects as experienced in a fulfilled intention. He now casts this discussion in terms of the traditional philosophical concept of “reason.” He introduces the problems of “rational consciousness” as a problem that is correlative to the problems connected with the notion of “actuality,” since it is in Vernunftbewußtsein that the actuality of an object or state of affairs is confirmed or identified (sich aussweist) (III, 281). Hence for Husserl actuality, truth, and reason are closely connected phenomena: “As a matter
of principle in the logical sphere, the sphere of statements, 'being-truly,' or 'being-actually' and 'reasonably being able to be confirmed' [verunftig ausweisbar-sein] stand in correlation to one another" (III, 282). If we ask wherein rational confirmation or rational consciousness of a posited sense or state of affairs (from the objective perspective) or a posited proposition (from the correlative subjective perspective) consist, the answer lies in the fact that it is the achievement of insight, or "originarily giving consciousness" (originär gebendes Bewusstsein)—first-hand experience, we might say—and this in turn is connected with the notion of fulfillment: "The distinction has to do with the way the sense, or rather a proposition...is a fulfilled or an unfulfilled sense or proposition" (III, 283).

Of course, not all fulfillments are equal, the aim is complete and original or first-hand givenness, an adequate fulfillment that "excludes being otherwise" (III, 285). Reason, then is a name for the inherent tendency to seek adequate fulfillment for what is posited, and, as the ideal of complete and uncontroversible fulfillment, is associated not only with truth, but also with certainty or what Husserl calls the "Urdoxa": "Rational consciousness in general refers to a highest genus of thetic modalities in which that "seeing" (in an extremely extended sense) that is "related to originary giving consciousness is a strictly delineated species" (III, 285–86), and a few pages later, he adds, "Truth is obviously the correlate of the complete rational character [des vollkommenen Vernunftcharakters] of the Urdoxa, of the certainty of belief" (III, 290). Another way Husserl describes this inherent directedness towards final justification is in terms of the concept of Rechtheit, correctness or rightness, that actually in its historical (Latin) origins still bears within itself an implicit reference to direction or directedness as well. Rightness means that the positing of a state of affairs has been done appropriately, that the object or state of affairs is the way it is posited to be, which is why the discussion of objectivity in the Ideas I centers around the discussion of evidence (as it did in the Sixth Logical Investigation), and the idea of reason is presented in terms of the search for evidence that would ground the truth of subjective forms of consciousness like beliefs expressed in the form of judgments. It expresses the teleological character of reason, both as a fulfillment of an inherent tendency of beliefs towards verification (or more generally of what he here calls thetic intentions—corresponding roughly to what he called "objectifying" intentions in the Logical Investigations—towards fulfillment) and an inherent claim of such intentions to present the object as it truly is, a claim that provides the norm for evaluating them as successful or not.

Moreover, in §138 of the Ideas, he extends the insights into the multiple forms of evidence can take beyond what he had said about categorical intuition and its distinction from sense intuition in the Sixth Logical Investigations and asserts that "to every region and category of alleged objects there corresponds phenomenologically not only a fundamental sort of sense, or of positing, but also a fundamental type of originary presentative consciousness of such senses and, belonging to it, a fundamental type of originary evidence which is essentially motivated by originary givenness of such a character" (288). Through the introduction of the notion of regions, each with its own appropriate kind of intention, its own kind of objectivities, and its own kind of evidence—all of which are essentially correlated to each other—he has opened up the possibility of a whole range of distinctions that go far beyond the difference between sense objects (things) and categorical objects. Of course, already in the Logical Investigations, Husserl had made many more distinctions than just these between objects, but here he is very explicit about just how many and different these may be (consider, for example, the differences between the region of nature from the region of spiritual objects, and within this latter realm, the difference between use-objects and persons, and the difference between these kinds of objects, all of which are physically instantiated, from the regions of numbers or of logical principles).

In §139, Husserl then continues by expanding this notion of evidence and, corre-
spondingly of reason as the rightness of posit-
ing an object, beyond the theoretical sphere
into what he terms the "axiological" or aes-
thetic sphere and the practical sphere as well.
In each of them, the character of reason is
said to be the "character of rightness" whereby
the intention of something is di-
rected towards the fulfillment of that inten-
tion (even if only as an ideal) in the appropri-
ate kind of experience that confirms that this
object is indeed beautiful, pleasant, or admi-
rable instead of the opposite, or that this ac-
tion is indeed a good rather than a bad action:
"Evidence is by no means merely a title for
these kinds of rational processes in the
sphere of beliefs (and certainly not just in
predicative judgments), but rather for all
thetic spheres and in particular for the signif-
ican relationships of reason that obtain be-
tween them" (III, 290). Each of these
ospheres is unique and will have its own
unique forms of justification that share some
general structural similarities with those of
other spheres but will also manifest signifi-
cant differences as well. In this position and
in the terminology Husserl recognizes in an
illuminative footnote (III, 290) that he is fol-
lowing Brentano’s "work of genius," Der
Ursprung der sittlichen Erkenntnis where
Brentano had approached the question about
the origins and validity of ethical norms in
terms of the truth of judgments about them
and the evidence that is the origin of and
should provide the justification for these
norms and their "rightness" as expressed in
the rightness of the judgments about them.7
Even in his division of the faculties into the
theoretical, axiological, and practical,
Husserl is following Brentano’s tripartite di-
vision in that essay which Brentano himself
traces back to Descartes (UsE 17), but which
Brentano knows is of course even older than
that.

In summary, then, we see that in the Ideas
I Husserl thinks of reason in terms of the
rightness of a thetic intention that is assured
through insight, or intuitive evidence of the
actuality of the object or state of affairs as it
is intended, and hence of the truth of the be-
lief or judgment about it. This is consistent
with the positions originally developed in
the Fifth and Sixth Logical Investigations,
but goes beyond them in expanding not only
the range of objects that he discusses as the
objects of intentions, but also of the kinds
of intentions that are subject to this general
norm of reason as the rightness or appropri-
ateness of all kinds of mental, i.e.,
intentional states including valuing and
willing.

In the Kaizo articles, Husserl builds upon
these positions, but the primary focus shifts
from the sphere of theoretical propositions
to the question of practical reason. Husserl’s
personal experiences and the general Euro-
pean cultural experience of what was widely
recognized as the bankruptcy of modern Eu-
ropean societies and the powerlessness of
enlightened thought to prevent the calam-
ities of the second and third decades of the
sixtieth century led him not to abandon the
search for reason, but rather to see his own
philosophical work as part of a broader mis-
ion of individual and social renewal based
on rational reflection and reasoned action.
Human beings as persons, Husserl asserts,
are free, they make choices and act based not
just on predetermined causal patterns, but
based on motives that set their priorities,
govern their choices, and guide their actions.
When he says that humans should do so ra-
tionally, he follows the terminology adopted
in the Ideas I and casts the question of reason
in terms of rightness, not just of beliefs, but
of values, and actions as well: "And one
more supremely important point: There be-
long to actions and their motivations differ-
ences of rationality and irrationality, of
‘right’ and ‘wrong’ thinking, valuing, and
willing" (XXVII, 8). To act and value rati-
onally is to act and value rightly. The pursuit
of reason is the search for the right values,
for things that really are valuable; the search
for a guide to right action, for a proper
understanding of the genuinely good that
should serve as the end of human actions.
The search for Rechtigkeit is also described
as the search for Echtheit or authenticity (cf.
XXVII, 11 and 30). The issue is how to sort
out the genuinely from the purportedly true,
the genuinely from the purportedly valuable.
the genuinely from the purportedly good—the search for authenticity not in the existentialist sense of being merely self-consistent and consciously committed to one’s choices, but in a sense much more in line with Brentano’s assertion that there are norms that are valid and norms that are invalid and that the search for the right is the search for those norms that indeed do have the validity they seem and claim to have, the ones that are right instead of wrong. For Husserl, just as for Brentano, knowledge about these matters is not inborn, but is acquired through the experience of evidence in which the purported good shows itself as an authentic good and the mere seemingly good reveals itself as inauthentic or untrue. However, it is also not a matter of individual decision or social agreement. It is rather something that I as an individual or we as a culture can be right or wrong about. Husserl’s trust in the ability of reason to distinguish between them means that he believes that through experience reasonable people can find out if they are wrong or not.

This holds for all kinds of theoretical, axiological, and practical position-takings in Husserl’s view:

By contrast we can distinguish the intuited clarity, ‘evidentness,’ ‘insight,’ as the awareness of the direct grasping of what is intended itself, (in the action aimed at realizing something in the achievement of the aspired value itself) from the mere anticipatory intention of it. This becomes source of confirmatory normativity that is particularly valued and sought after. This helps us understand what is unique about striving for reason as a striving to give one’s personal life the form of insight, or rather the appropriate relationship to it, the form of rightness or rationality, in each of one’s position-takings—be it in a judgment, a value, or a practical decision. Correlatively expressed, it is the striving to exhibit by means of appropriate grasping of the things themselves what is described as ‘the true’—true being, true contents of a judgment, true or “authentic” values and goods—in light of which mere opinions have a normative standard for their rightness or wrongness.” (XXVII, 26)

Indeed, from this perspective, believing is just one form of possible action, just one kind of position-taking, so that the attempt to move from mere opinion to theoretical knowledge can be seen as just one form of a broader tendency toward practical reason in general. Reason is the norm for action in general, including the acts of knowing and believing (XXVII, 41).

This striving for rightness in all of one’s position-takings arises out of a desire, inherent within conscious life itself, a desire to orient one’s beliefs, values, and actions on something that will be able to be maintained and supported by the further course of experience. Taken as the desire for achieving the inherent goal of practical efforts, this goal can also be called “happiness” (XXVII, 25). This striving, which at the most basic level takes place at the level of feelings and associations, is from the outset aimed at evidence, but it attains the status of reason in a fuller sense when two additional elements come to be present, namely the process of reflection and the directedness towards universality.

Reflection is the process of stepping back from one’s position-takings, considering whether they are founded on evidence sufficient to justify them and being willing to revise them if one discovers they are not. This is the process of self-criticism that in the end can lead to a life of self-responsibility—which is one of the predominant themes not only of the Kaizo articles, but of all of Husserl’s later works up through the Crisis volume and the essays that led up to it. Ultimately, it leads to the search for reliable principles, especially essential truths that can serve as reliable guides for knowing and acting—science in the broadest sense, which in Husserl’s view emerged historically with the advent of philosophical reflection that he calls the “Socratic-Platonic turn” in ancient Greece.

The second additional element that Husserl stresses in the Kaizo articles is an-
other element that Husserl sees featured prominently in that adventitious turn, but which also is strongly reminiscent of Kantian practical philosophy, is the ability of humans to think in universal terms. The striving for unity becomes truly rational for Husserl only when the search for knowledge about what is true, valuable, and good becomes cast in explicitly universal terms. This is where the good as happiness becomes not just an individual enterprise, but something interpersonal and universal (cf. esp. 30 and 40). Husserl’s agrees that an orientation on the universal plays an essential role in making one’s strivings genuinely rational and hence genuinely free. Kant himself could have been the author of the following lines from that article: “It is part of the essence of human mental life a priori that the normative formations of ‘reason’ can shape its consciousness and its motivation and also apriori the possibility to think universally in freedom and according to self-acknowledged a priori normative laws and thereby determine itself practically and universally” (XXVII, 9). For a norm to be an authentic practical norm for Husserl, a rational norm, it must be universal. Or, as he says in another place that could just as easily be Kant, freedom must take the form of an überhaupt, an “in general” that raises human willing to the level of reason (ibid., 24).

Even in this earlier essay, however, he departs from Kant not only in the scope of the project he subsumes under the general heading of ethics, which for him encompasses a doctrine of practical reason in general, and not just “pure practical reason” or morality in a narrower sense, but also in the specific role that the philosopher—or more specifically, the phenomenologist—is assigned in recognizing and propagating the fundamental principles that would underlie such an ethics.

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By the thirties in fact, “universalism” has become one of the hallmarks of rationality in the genuine sense. However, Husserl’s account of universalism does not attribute this insight to Kant. Rather, one of the primary achievements of Greek philosophy as the foundation of Western thinking was the establishment of a habitual way of thinking that went beyond traditional everyday truths and aimed at what he in the shorter essay calls an orientation on ideals, truth in itself. Husserl both recognizes the roots of the Greek turn to philosophy in everyday curiosity and the search for a more reliable ways to gain control of the world and of one’s own life (cf. VI, 330–33), but stresses the fundamental change brought about through through an idealistic attitude that aims at unconditional universality. He sees this universalism as what has been distorted or lost in modern rationality as an objectivism permeated by prejudices about the nature of that evidence itself, which itself, which is precisely what modern natural science in its search for universality as objectivity, has systematically overlooked or even suppressed. That is why the move back to the genuinely universal, the ideal for Husserl is a move back from self-forgetfulness to self-recognition and self-responsibility (cf. VI, 334–36). Although it is perhaps understandable that this call should be taken as a call back to Descartes, Leibniz and the ideal of a rationalistic system of eternal truths derived from a few axiomatic first principles, more geometrico, so to speak, in spite of everything Husserl said about where Descartes and his rationalistic successors went wrong (esp. VI, 559ff.) Especially in that light, it can perhaps be helpful to recall what we learn in the Ideas I, namely that this overall project still stands under the general heading of reason because it is a call back to the original source and goals that are associated with it with the concept of reason as evidence—namely, the first-hand and direct experiences of the things themselves on the basis of which one reasonably can form beliefs, acquire values, and formulate plans...
that are “authentic” in the sense of producing what they are supposed to: true knowledge, true values, and right actions—and thus even make oneself “true” as he says, in the sense of living an authentically human life (VI, 11).

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In closing, let me note that this ends up not only moving Husserl’s conception of reason further from Descartes’ than is often recognized, but also much closer to hermeneutical theories that stress the ongoing nature of reason not as a cognitive faculty or as something strictly individual, but rather as a process, a dialogue based on a shared search for common grounds and common interests—ein Einfühlungshorizont (VI, 258)—and perhaps even closer to Hegel and critical theory in their stress upon the structure of reason as authenticity, also of reason as a process of critical analysis into whether a thing actually is what it purports to be. Moreover, Husserl’s recognition of the many different regions of being and their differences makes reason a much richer phenomenon than traditionally conceived; and his emphasis on the role of “intuition” for reason makes clear that the pursuit of reason does not mean that one completely leaves behind the things and the concrete experiences that make up our everyday life world, but rather that one must engage them, accept them as they show themselves (and not only and always through the narrow interpretive lens of a modern naturalistic bias) if one is to achieve rationality in one’s knowing, valuing, and acting. Rationality in this sense is the opposite of reductionism and loss of self—it is a way to rediscover the richness of human experience in the face of a world that threatens to lose real sense and meaning in the face of the false dilemma between rationalism as mere objectivism and irrationality. He differs from Hegel precisely in the open-endedness of the outcome and in the lack of a prescribed method for deriving specific outcomes. Hence, in spite of Husserl’s strong rhetoric of reform and absolute ideals, Husserl’s humble claim at the end of the introductory paragraphs to his last major work: “I am not trying to lead, not to indoctrinate, but simply to exhibit, to describe what I see” (IV, 17).

ENDNOTES

1. “Die Krisis des europäischen Menschentums und die Philosophie” (first presented in 1935) and “Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie” (partially published in 1936), both published in Volume VI of the Husserliana (314–48 for the former, 1–276 for the latter), ed. Walter Biemel (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969). Citations of these and other writings by Husserl will list the Husserliana volumes in roman, followed by the page number in arabic numerals, with the exception of quotations for the Ideas I, which will use the convention described below in the note 4.

2. This parallels in an interesting way Heidegger’s calls in his earlier and middle works to return back to more originary (Greek) senses of important philosophical terms that were distorted and displaced by their translation into Latin

3. Here I am thinking of Richard Rorty, Hubert Dreyfus, and others who construct a narrative that has Husserl and Descartes on the one side, and the less rationalistic, more practically oriented Heidegger, on the other.

4. Husserl explains why he departs from Kant’s use of the term—which Husserl traces back to the Wolff-Leibniz, and ultimately Cartesian project (VI, 96ff.).

5. In quotations from the Ideas I, the Arabic numeral will refer to the original pagination of that work, which is listed in the margins of the Husserliana edition. Fred Kersten’s translation, which I have also consulted and learned from, also uses those page numbers.


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8. Ibid., esp. 11–12 and 19.


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