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# PHENOMENOLOGY AS FIRST PHILOSOPHY: A PREHISTORY

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## Introduction: *Letztbegründung* as the Problem of Husserl's *Second* First Philosophy

When Husserl explicitly construed his phenomenology as first philosophy, he knew that he was placing himself into a long tradition in Western philosophy.[1] One can witness the emergence of this project of phenomenology as first philosophy already in the first decade of the twentieth century, in the wake of the establishing phenomenology as *mathesis universalis*.[2] Yet, Husserl was never as aware of the philosophical tradition as when he allowed this theme to resurface in the third decade of the twentieth century, in the fruitful period of the 1920s. Accordingly, one can distinguish *two* senses in which Husserl uses the term.

[1] This tradition begins, as is known, with Aristotle. See Christensen's account of Aristotle's notion of First Philosophy, cf. Carleton B. Christensen, *Self and World. From Analytic Philosophy to Phenomenology* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 265 ff., where he points out that Aristotle's notion of this founding discipline is "metaphysical" and committed to an "ontological naturalism" (p. 265), in other words, a wholly different register than the modern meaning of the term, which is *epistemological,* as I point out above. Hence, there is a fundamental difference in the topic between the ancients and the moderns, which I see here, with Husserl, as "ideal types"—in other words, it is possible that Aristotelians exist to this day, but Husserl is not one of them.

[2] The earliest mention I was able to locate where Husserl speaks of phenomenology as first philosophy is in a lecture from 1909, *Einführung in die Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis. Vorlesung 1909*, ed. by Elisabeth Schuhmann, Husserliana Materialienbände VII (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2005). Here, he characterizes phenomenology very much in the sense of the *Prolegomena* as "die im strengsten Sinne Erste Philosophie ..., diejenige, aus der alle anderen Wissenschaften die letzte Aufklärung des Sinnes ihrer Leistungen zu empfangen haben." Thereby "alle Wissenschaften [werden] zu Philosophien, zu Bestandstücken und Fundamenten einer allumfassenden absoluten Seinslehre" (p. 92).

Husserl's original ambition to declare phenomenology as the grounding discipline for all other scientific disciplines—first philosophy in the sense of Descartes' *Meditationes*—never wanes. However, when he revisits this topic in the 1920s—most notably in *Erste Philosophie* of 1923/24, but also in texts and lectures written at the same time, such as the *London Lectures* of 1922 and *Einleitung in die Philosophie* of 1922/23—the way he approaches it now, after having made the transcendental turn a decade before, changes vastly. It is not that the original purview is altered, but it, arguably, fades into the background. Instead, a new element gets added to the issue of what a first philosophy should accomplish; namely, to provide an absolute grounding of a new scientific discipline in its *own* right, namely, transcendental phenomenology, the eidetic science of transcendental subjectivity. Hence, rather than to focus on providing through phenomenology a foundation for other disciplines ("second philosophies"), *transcendental* phenomenology is a self-enclosed, autonomous discipline with its *own* task, method, subject domain and therefore, consequently, in need of its *own* grounding. This latter notion of first philosophy belongs systematically to the task of demanding of the transcendental philosopher a true conviction to one's task, to take ultimate responsibility for one's work and its consequences for society.[3] The philosopher him/herself has to ground his or her own existence in an ultimate responsibility. *Letztbegründend* (ultimately grounding) and *letztverantwortend* (ultimately responsible), which amount to "absolute justification"[4], are nearly synonymous notions. I call *this* sense of phenomenology—the self-encapsulated transcendental discipline in its own right—Husserl's *second* first philosophy.

This sense of phenomenology is not explicitly spelled out in the *Crisis,* nor is phenomenology there called "first philosophy," which could lead one to the erroneous assumption that the task of providing an ultimate foundation was a passing stage in Husserl's late development.[5] Quite to the contrary, when Husserl

[3] This task also entails, of course, the problem of providing a correct entry into philosophy, which Husserl also calls the "hodegetic method (or principle)" that he especially discusses in his *London Lectures* of 1922, cf. *Einleitung in die Philosophie. Vorlesung 1922/23,* ed. by Berndt Goossens, Husserliana XXXV (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), and esp. the highly instructive introduction by its editor, Berndt Goossens, discussing this principle. Cf. also the editor's introduction to the first publication of the *London Lectures* in Husserl Studies 16/3 (1999), pp. 183-254, which discusses the topic of the "hodegetic method" in closer detail.

[4] Husserl, *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, p. 264.

[5] Indeed, Husserl's latest stage, presented in the *Crisis* and oftentimes seen as an overcoming of the project of *Letztbegründung* in favor of a hermeneutically inspired science of the lifeworld, is in no way a renunciation of his earlier and perhaps more ambitiously presented project of First Philosophy. To counter this wrong impression, I have elsewhere shown how the project of First Philosophy and the science of the lifeworld hang together systematically, cf. "Phänomenologie als

speaks of the philosophers as "functionaries of mankind," it is this strain of thought to which he is alluding there.

Hence, the infamous topic of *Letztbegründung* is the problem of phenomenology as first philosophy in the second sense of the term. The purpose of this paper is to determine its meaning in the mature Husserl, however in an indirect manner.

It is an open question whether there is a tension between these two projects, that of (1) phenomenology as a *mathesis universalis* that provides the basic concepts for the regional ontologies and the sciences correlated to them (an ontological problem), and (2) the problem of *Letztbegründung,* which seems to require the transcendental turn to clarify the conditions of possibility of experience and cognition, making it an epistemological problem. I shall not discuss this tension and how it may be resolved—or whether there even is a tension.[6] But if it is my claim here that the second project is, to put it neutrally, an addition to the first in Husserl's mature transcendental phenomenology, it is—I argue—because Husserl was aware, in most general terms, of the problem as it had developed in the aftermath of Kant, most notably in Fichte, whom he read intensively as of the war period and on whom he lectured several times during the war and to different audiences.[7] Granted that these were public lectures, in which Husserl presented the "exoteric" Fichte of the *Vocation of Mankind* and *Vocation of the Scholar,* and not the "esoteric" author of the *Wissenschaftslehre,* where Fichte lays the ground for his system. Yet Husserl was familiar with the problem of finding an ultimate

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erste Philosophie und das Problem der Wissenschaft von der Lebenswelt," in *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 53 (2011), pp. 137-152.

[6] In Mohanty's explanation, reconciling both seems to involve a two-tiered or two-step task, cf. J.N. Mohanty, *The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl. A Historical Development* (New Haven/London: Yale, 2008), 398. A less charitable reading might hold that these are really two different projects that differ, roughly, by the fact that the first does not, while the second does, require the transcendental turn. They would, in other words, have their systematic locus in different "registers." This important question for Husserl's project as a whole cannot be decided here; all I wish to do here is to *indicate* the problem.

[7] Husserl's relation to Fichte has already been recognized and dealt with in scholarship. On Husserl's relation to Fichte, cf. esp. the works by Tietjen, Seebohm and Hart, Mohanty, Rockmore, Fisette, Farber, Mohanty and others (see bibliography). From what I can tell, except for a brief mention in Fisette's "Husserl et Fichte: Remarques sur l'apport de l'idéalisme dans le développement de la phenomenology," in: *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy (Revue canadienne de philosophie continentale)* 3.2 (1999), pp. 185-207, a relation to *Reinhold* has not been explored in scholarship. It is fairly obvious that Husserl did not read Reinhold in original, but my point is that he follows a certain trajectory similar to the historical development from Kant to Reinhold to Fichte. In other words, Reinhold is not seen as what I believe he is, i.e., a necessary stepping stone from Kant to Fichte.

foundation through his general knowledge of Fichte and the way the problem was still alive in his contemporaries, the Neo-Kantians, especially of the Marburg School (esp. Cohen and Natorp), who were also at times referred to—even by Husserl himself!—as "Neo-Fichteans" before the schools had taken on fixed labels.[8]

Hence, the problem of a first philosophy in the *second* sense of the term is, I argue, *precisely* the Idealists' problem of finding an absolute foundation for all knowledge, based on a first principle. This is the manner in which transcendental philosophy becomes furthered in Kant's aftermath, despite or perhaps because Kant himself saw no problem here. But to his most famous followers, the issue comes down to *finding and defining* precisely this first principle, which is not something logical, as, e.g., in Aristotle (the law of non-contradiction), but which, after the transcendental turn, must hang together intimately with the problem of *subjectivity* and concerns the very task of what transcendental philosophy is to accomplish. As the historian of post-Kantian philosophy immediately recognizes, this was the project of the early reception of Kant's critical philosophy, especially in Reinhold and Fichte.[9] Indeed, the problem of such a first philosophy as finding an absolute foundation of knowledge was broached, in Reinhold, under the title of *Elementarphilosophie* and, in Fichte, in the project of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. These texts are the origin of the *modern,* i.e., *epistemological* problem of first philosophy as that of finding an ultimate foundation or grounding of knowledge. To understand Husserl's project—in fact, to understand him better, perhaps, than he understood himself—it is worth studying these texts anew. It is widely known that Husserl did not closely study the movement of German Idealism; but viewing him through the lens of the Idealists will help us understand him in a new light.

Hence, instead of discussing straightforwardly the problem of *Letztbegründung* in Husserl, this paper will approach this problem from the historical perspective. I will show how and, more importantly, why the problem of finding an ultimate

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[8] Cf. his letter to Hocking, quoted in James Hart, "Husserl and Fichte: With Special Regard to Husserl's Lectures on 'Fichte's Ideal of Humanity'," in *Husserl Studies* 12 (1995), pp. 135-163, here p. 136.

[9] And, by extension, Schelling, at least until 1800. Hegel will famously label these attempts as "subjective idealism" and will attempt to overcome them with his "absolute idealism" using the dialectical method. The connection between this problem in German Idealism and Husserl has already been pointed out by the editors of the 1923/24 lecture course, *Erste Philosophie* (Hua. VII & VIII), Rudolf Boehm, cf. *Erste Philosophie (1923/24). Erster Teil: Kritische Ideengeschichte,* ed. by Rudolf Boehm, Husserliana VII (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1956), p. xxx, and the editor of the 1922/23 lecture *Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Hua. XXXV), Berndt Goossens, cf. Hua. XXXV, pp. xx f., but I cannot see that more has been made of it in scholarship except for a gesture to a historical similarity.

foundation first arises in Reinhold's path from explaining Kant to attempting to radicalize him with his *Elementarphilosophie* and from there to Fichte, who in turn wants to trump Reinhold. It is the much-neglected Reinhold who plays a crucial role in the path from Kant to Fichte. After following this historical path, I will conclude with some remarks on how this path can be retraced in Husserl's late thought.

To counter those who might be initially put off by this historical narrative, I should say that my argument here is implicit: while I do not want to *deny* Husserl's originality, I would like to show how Husserl's development towards the final stage of his philosophy follows a similar trajectory as the tradition he first thought he could disregard, and later knew he couldn't. He himself realized at his mature stage that, by applying the principle of charity to the "terminological Romanticism" of the German Idealists (not something of which he himself is completely innocent), "the most radical problem dimensions of philosophy yearn to see the light of day," problems which open up the "ultimate and highest problems of philosophy."[10] This perspective presented in this paper in no way diminishes Husserl's achievements, but instead places them into a greater context, in which these very achievements can be better appreciated by philosophers who are perhaps not familiar with Husserlian phenomenology. My purpose is also to free Husserl from a self-imposed isolation and to re-connect him to the tradition to which he truly belongs.

And, finally, by showing how Husserl's project of *Letztbegründung* arises from the problems tackled by Reinhold and Fichte, the point to be made, more immanent to Husserl, is the following: There is to this day a grave misunderstanding of what Husserl meant and wanted to achieve with his

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[10] *Aufsätze und Vorträge (1911-1921),* ed. by Thomas Nenon and Hans Rainer Sepp, Husserliana XXV (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1987), p. 309. It is worth nothing the context of this quotation. It stems from Husserl's "Memories of Franz Brentano" ("Erinnerungen an Franz Brentano") of 1919, a laudatory and philosophically somewhat superficial account, indicating the distance Husserl wants to place between himself and his erstwhile teacher. In the passage quoted (ibid., 308 f.), Husserl first speaks of Brentano's strong dislike of German Idealism, which he thought to be only "degenerate" (p. 309), and how Husserl himself in his early years, influenced by his teacher, thought the same. Instead, he "only late" came to the conclusion that he, and phenomenology altogether, could and would have to learn from the Idealists. It is possible that Husserl himself, based on his philosophical training, was not very well suited to this task. As his marginalia to most texts of the Idealists indicate, he had little patience with their "terminological Romanticism" and ceased reading most texts after a few pages. Yet it is enough to note, for our purposes, that Husserl saw the genius of German Idealism and felt a kinship darkly. I reckon the late Husserl would have been delighted to see these parallels spelled out—though he would certainly also be convinced that the final and ultimately scientific stage had been reached with his transcendental phenomenology.

phenomenology as first philosophy, and this misunderstanding has led to fatal consequences in the way Husserl is read, and dismissed, by many contemporary philosophers unfavorably disposed to him. The latter can be grouped into two camps, (1) either those who place Husserl into the tradition of an ill-begotten problem, which had better be left behind altogether (Rorty); (2) or those who, for the same reason, reject the later, transcendental, Husserl and stick to his earlier "realism" in the hopes of making him more palatable to contemporary analytic philosophy of mind and remaining, thereby, metaphysically neutral. But this neutrality is an aloofness which at bottom mocks Husserl's seriousness and ambition. Both disregard the "transcendental tradition"[11] of philosophy as of Kant, within which Husserl must be viewed, if one is not to fundamentally misunderstand Husserl's deepest philosophical intuitions.

## I. From Kant to Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*

First I shall retrace the move from Kant to Reinhold to show how the problem and perceived necessity of finding a first principle arises for the first time. It is no other than the arch-Kantian Reinhold who, by working through the Kantian system, concludes that such a first principle is (a) missing in Kant, and (b) necessary to ground the new critical system. Reinhold is mostly, and unfairly, known as the first popularizer of Kant's philosophy, who as early as 1785 wrote easily accessible letters on the Kantian philosophy, which greatly helped disseminate Kant's famously obscure writings and which caused Reinhold to receive a professorship in Jena for the newly established chair for "critical philosophy" in 1787. However, his attempts at popularizing Kant soon led him to discover a lacuna in Kant's philosophy—namely the lack of an ultimate grounding—that motivated him to supply, as he says (the first to use this trope), the "premises" for the "conclusions" that Kant had presented. These premises are formulated in his *Attempt at a Novel Theory of the Human Capacity for Representing* (*Neue Theorie des menschlichen Vorstellungsvermögens*, of 1789), which he also labels *Elementarphilosophie* and also at times calls "First philosophy." It is curious to note that Reinhold, a protean thinker, soon abandoned his *Elementarphilosophie* after reading Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* in 1794. The—considerable—fame of the new *Elementarphilosophie* was, partly for the reason that its own author abandoned it, short-lived. Yet in it, Reinhold proposes a highly interesting concept that is of

[11] This is a term coined, for precisely this purpose, by David Carr.

great importance for phenomenologists, and it shall be the first topic of this paper.[12]

The starting point for Reinhold's critique is the centerpiece of the First Critique, the Transcendental Deduction. In it, in briefest terms, Kant famously broaches the question as to how it is possible to have cognition of objects. This was the *factum* that Kant presupposes—that we indeed have a priori cognition—and Kant's question was how it was possible. The condition of the possibility to have objects in the first place was that they are given in space and time as forms of intuition. Yet cognition comes about only when this manifold of intuition is brought under concepts through the understanding. Only when the manifold is thusly synthesized can we speak of an *object* of cognition. Hence, the object that Kant speaks of is this robust something to which categories have been applied, making it truly an *object,* a *Gegenstand*, which is distinguished from a mere sensual impression (a "swarm," *Gewühl*), on the one hand, and, on the other, from the object as thing-in-itself. Hence, the object synthesized in this manner is a *unity*. The question, then, is, *how is this possible,* i.e., how is it possible that the unity of the object can be achieved? How is this synthesis possible? The famous and ingenious Kantian answer is: through the I-think that must be able to accompany all my representations. Thus, the synthetic unity of apperception, the unity of the subject, accounts for the unity of the object. Yet the I-think is, as Kant also says, a *principle,* i.e., it is not the empirical but the transcendental ego, which cannot be an object of intuition. It is a principle that must be *assumed, if* we are justified in speaking about the object as a unity as well. Yet the principle is *noumenal,* it cannot be further elucidated, and hence Kant must avoid saying anything more about it, based on his self-imposed restrictions that reason mustn't overstep the bounds of that about which it can make statements, namely, objects of experience. This silence on the issue of the I-think is both understandable from Kant's standpoint, yet dissatisfying for Reinhold.

Accordingly, this is where Reinhold sets in. He completely agrees with in Kant, but as he famously says, Kant had provided the conclusions, what was lacking were the premises. This is to say, Reinhold *in turn* treats Kant's system as the *factum* that needs to be justified. How was the Kantian system itself possible?

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[12] The trajectory from Kant to Reinhold and Fichte is narrated in greater detail in Frederick C. Beiser's *The Fate of Reason* Beiser: *German Philosophy From Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987). Though neglected for a long time, lately there have appeared some studies on Reinhold's philosophy that highlight his importance for German Idealism, cf. the articles esp. by Daniel Breazeale, Martin Bondeli, Paul Franks and Marion Heinz/Violetta Stolz, in: Kersting, Wolfgang/Westerkamp, Dirk, eds., *Am Rande des Idealismus. Studien zur Philosophie Karl Leonhard Reinholds* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2008).

Hence, Reinhold wants to clarify the *conditions of possibility* of the *critique itself.* Reinhold's project, which in effect carries him beyond Kant, was to perform a meta-critique of the Critique, a transcendental deduction of the Critique of Reason itself. Reinhold was hence the first to formulate the task of a *critique of critique*[13]*,* which is the reason he calls his attempt an *Elementarphilosophie* reminiscent of the *Elementarlehre,* the major part of the first Critique. Hence, the *Elementarphilosophie* had to clarify the conditions of the possibility of the critique itself, the transcendental *ground* of the Critique, *its* foundation. But this foundation is in itself, as a principle, not something that can be empirically described, but something that must necessarily be presupposed, in analogy to Kant's I-think that must be presupposed if we are to assume the unity of the object. Thus, Reinhold wants to find the principle on which the Critique itself stands, what *it* presupposes. What kind of principle can this be?

To answer this, let us ask, what was it that Kant had presupposed? What he had clarified was that and how we are justified in having a priori cognition of empirical objects. What was *lacking* was a critique or analysis of this very *faculty* of cognition in the way that it achieves, when carried out concretely, cognition. What Reinhold wants to supply as the missing piece in Kant is an analysis of the faculty of cognition itself *in or through which* we have cognition. Kant clarified how we have *cognition,* not the mental processes that *achieve* it, a sphere that Kant wouldn't have wanted to explore, as this would have led to a psychology, which he deemed impossible within the purview of transcendental philosophy. But this is not what Reinhold wants—he knows Kant all too well to not fall into this mistake. What he, instead, points to as what Kant had tacitly presupposed is a dimension of *givenness* to a subject that has cognition, givenness prior to making judgments or performing any higher activity ("synthesis"). This *givenness* is what Kant had assumed, and Reinhold wanted to account for the "space" in the subject where this givenness can manifest itself, the "faculty" which is able to receive this givenness. What Reinhold means is not sensibility as forms of intuition who "take in" the given, but the mental power which is the condition of possibility for receiving what the senses merely deliver.

Hence, Reinhold triumphantly claims to have opened up a whole new dimension of inquiry, and the magic, yet awkward and insufficient word he uses for it is *representation.* This new science "would be the science of the empirical faculty of cognition." Hence, Kant's "science of the *faculty of cognition* would have to be *preceded* by another that establishes its foundation. This other science too would be a science of sensibility, understanding and reason—not, however,

[13] Herder's *Metakritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft* appeared in 1799.

inasmuch as these are identical with the faculty of cognition [= Kant's project], but inasmuch as they stand in common at its foundation … It would be the science of the a priori form of representing through sensibility, understanding and reason … In a word, it would be the science of the *entire faculty of representation as such*."[14]

"Representing" is thus the title for the sphere that Kant presupposes, as he merely clarifies cognition itself, or as we might say, the *a priori content* of the act of cognizing. The act structure in which these contents are had and achieved, this "immanence," is something that Kant assumes. Reinhold further breaks down this structure into the subject of representation, the object of representation and the power or faculty of representation as such which combines the two—all of this, to be sure, within the sphere of immanence after the transcendental turn. This complex structure is captured in Reinhold's famous *principle of consciousness* (*Satz des Bewusstseins*), which reads:

"*In consciousness representation is distinguished by the subject from both object and subject and is referred to both.*"[15]

Thus, what Reinhold wants to point to is that (a) Kant's mistake was to focus only on the *content of cognition,* not the process (the "mental capacity") in which it comes about, and that what Kant effectively presupposes in so doing is (b) a whole new and unseen sphere in which this cognizing becomes manifest. This sphere breaks down into the three-fold structure of the (1) subjective experiencing, (2) that which is experienced in this experiencing and (3) the referring that establishes the connection between both. To switch to a more familiar terminology, what Reinhold discovers in this rather crude wording is the *sphere of intentionality* as the immanence of experience in which cognition comes about as the content of an act (a "representing"). What Kant had provided—to use a terminology that Natorp was to use a century later—was an *objective grounding* of cognition. What was missing was a *subjective grounding,* which Reinhold sought to provide. Kant had provided the *noematic* part of cognition, what Reinhold wanted to supplement was the *noetic* counterpart, and furthermore, that which establishes the connection is the faculty of representing itself, which has the capacity of

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[14] Reinhold, *The Foundations of Philosophical Knowledge,* in: George di Giovanni & H. S. Harris (eds.), *Between Kant and Hegel. Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2000), pp. 51-103, here p. 67 (di Giovanni, trans.).

[15] *The Foundations of Philosophical Knowledge*, p. 70, though I have altered di Giovanni's translation, who translates "*durch*" as "through [the subject from both object and subject]," which I think is misleading, because it is the subject as the bearer of the faculty of representing who actually *does* the referring (*beziehen*).

*referring* (*beziehen*), again in Husserlian language, the *intentional* capacity of consciousness as always being referred-to (conscious-of). Hence, the deepest and most fundamental principle of consciousness is the faculty of representing, which is nothing but the intentional constitution of consciousness in establishing a relation between that which represents and which is represented.

With his theory of representation Reinhold has opened the door to the immanence of consciousness, the sphere of intentionality that has to be presupposed necessarily if we are justified in believing that what Kant is doing is correct. Like Kant's I-think, it is something that we simply need to assume as a first *principle,* not as an object of experience, and as such infer its character. It is, rather, an *actual fact of consciousness,* as such it is *simple, pre-conceptual, completely self-determined,* and as concrete and real it is also a *material* principle, not just formal as Kant's I-think. Hence, what Reinhold means to describe is nothing abstract or mentalistic, but the actual, concrete constitution of consciousness in its basic function, much more primitive than actual "thinking," in which cognition occurs. Hence, critical philosophy is supplanted by a new first philosophy, the *science of the foundation* of philosophy, the *Elementarphilosophie,* which Reinhold also calls "philosophy without surnames/nicknames" ("*Philosophie ohne Beynamen*"). The *Elementarphilosophie* is, hence, the "rigorous science"—Reinhold's coinage!—of universally binding principles for all possible disciplines; principles, which all go back to the first principle, the principle of consciousness, which is the faculty of representing with its basic function of referring, or as we might say, the principle of intentionality.

To summarize, and to use a terminology more familiar to us, Reinhold's point in his critique of the Kantian critique is that what Kant had presupposed was the fact that something is given to us in the first place and the structure of this givenness. Reinhold calls it representing (notice the active participle, *Vorstellen*) and as such it is a first principle. This structure is broken down into a noetic and a noematic part and the most basic underlying structure, which is the representing itself as the "referring" activity, the basic *factum* of consciousness, the *having of something.* If Reinhold calls this fundamental structure "principle," we need to be clear what kind of principle this is: it is not some normative principle to which one must adhere if one is not to exclude oneself from scientific discourse (making that person a "vegetable," according to Aristotle). Instead, it is a *merely descriptive* account of something that underlies, in fact *must be assumed as* underlying every act in which cognition in the Kantian sense is brought about. It is a principle in a curious sense, namely as a foundational structure, if that which Kant presupposes as a *factum* is supposed to be possible in the first place.

In short, what Reinhold had discovered was the sphere of intentionality, subjective immanence that achieves higher-order acts, such as synthetic judgments a priori. It is a "subjective grounding" as correlated to the "objective grounding" that Kant had provided. It is a "grounding" not in the sense of constructing a new line of argument based on an axiomatic first principle (a *Begründung*), but rather a ground-laying (a *Grundlegung*) of higher order acts as founded in the very fact that something is experienced in the first place, a structure which breaks down into the act of experiencing, that which is given in this experiencing and the basic underlying fact that must be assumed for *any* experiencing, that the experiencing is *of something*. And the Philosophy of Elements devoted to it was a philosophy "without surnames," i.e., not a meta-discipline for, or in the service of, this or that other discipline, but philosophy proper, i.e., a self-encapsulated discipline with its *own* foundation, and of benefit to other philosophical and scientific tasks, such as Kant's (more restricted) justification of cognition, only through *application*.

## II. From Reinhold to Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*

Fichte's well-known move from the I as matter of fact (*Tatsache*) to an active agent (*Tathandlung*) is a direct consequence of his meditating on and critique of Reinhold's First Principle.[16] But before I reconstruct Fichte's move, let me briefly turn back to Husserl. While Husserl never read Reinhold, he did read Fichte rather extensively, as witnessed in the public lectures on "Fichte's Ideal of Humanity" from 1917/18. However, as he himself mentions there, the texts he read, and which are the basis for his edifying speeches to soldiers and, later, war veterans, are Fichte's popular texts, such as the *Vocation of Man* and the *Vocation of the Scholar*. At the same time, he points to the "difficult thought acrobatics [*Denkkünsteleien*] of his *Wissenschaftslehre,*" which one "will soon find intolerable."[17] Two things are remarkable here: Firstly, Husserl is clearly aware of the "exoteric" Fichte of the popular lectures (which were especially popular during World War I) vis-à-vis the "esoteric" Fichte of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Secondly, it is *not* true that

[16] As is known, Fichte's move beyond Reinhold is largely motivated by his attempt to address and refute *Aenesidemus*-Schulze's (a neo-Humean) critique of Reinhold. Hence, *Aenesidemus* would be important for a full account of the move from Reinhold to Fichte. But for the sake of brevity, I must skip over *Aenesidemus'* critique of Reinhold (and Kant), though I will quote from Fichte's famous review of *Aenesidemus*, as this is the breakthrough of Fichte's own thoughts on the I as *Tathandlung,* but only to the extent that it helps clarify Fichte (not, in other words, in its refutation of the Skeptic).

[17] Husserl, "Memories of Franz Brentano," p. 269.

Husserl, despite the critical remark just quoted, thereby shuns the "scientific" Fichte.[18] Quite to the contrary, though Husserl does not delve deeply into the arguments of the *Wissenschaftslehre,* he immediately goes on to say in the same passage that it is impossible to disregard the scientific Fichte, as demanding as he may be:

> For, Fichte is no mere preacher of morality or a philosophical minister. All of his ethical-religious intuitions are for him theoretically anchored. … One becomes aware that even behind the logical violence [*Gewaltsamkeiten*] that he asks of us, there lies a deeper meaning, a plethora of great intuition, albeit not yet having fully come to fruition, in which lies a true power.[19]

Hence, in rereading Fichte for the purpose of understanding Husserl's trajectory, these two aspects will be important: that he is clear to distinguish between the two Fichtes and, moreover, that he is also aware that there is a deeper unity to the popular and scientific personae of Fichte. Although he does not follow Fichte's reasoning in the *Wissenschaftslehre,* he respects it as coming from the core of Fichte's existential commitment to society. It is this *performative* act on the part of Fichte, the philosopher and citizen, which Husserl deeply appreciates.

Back to Fichte and his critique of Reinhold. The critique, which leads to Fichte's original conception of the subject, is a two-step argument. To understand Fichte's intentions, however, one needs to keep in mind that Fichte is still within the paradigm of finding a first principle. *Step one* is an immanent critique of Reinhold, accusing him on not cashing in fully on his own discovery. According to Fichte, although Reinhold has rightly pointed to this novel sphere that Kant presupposes, the sphere of representing, in his correlating it with Kant's objective grounding of knowledge, Reinhold failed to understand that the relation between both types of grounding cannot be one of mere correlation, but their relation must, instead, be *foundational.* The subjective grounding is in fact the condition of the possibility of the objective grounding. In Fichte's words, Reinhold has made the mistake of conceiving the faculty of representing as merely an *empirical* principle, which is a misunderstanding of what a principle really is. As grounding, it must be a priori. As merely empirically determined, it cannot accomplish what Reinhold wants it to. Already using his own, more familiar terminology in criticizing Reinhold, Fichte writes:

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[18] This is oftentimes insinuated, also by James Hart in his otherwise insightful piece on "Husserl and Fichte" (pp. 136 f.).

[19] Husserl, "Memories of Franz Brentano," p. 270.

> Subject and object must be thought before representation, but not in consciousness as an empirical determination of the mind, *which is all that Reinhold discusses* [my italics]. The absolute subject, the *ego,* is not given in an empirical intuition, but is posited through an intellectual one; and the absolute object, the *non-ego,* is what is posted in opposition to it. In empirical consciousness, both occur in no other way than by a representation being referred to them. They are in it only mediately, *qua* representing, and *qua* represented. But the absolute subject, that which represents but is not represented; and the absolute object, a thing-in-itself independent of all representation—of these one will never become conscious as something empirically given.[20]

Hence, Fichte seems to be saying, the distinction that Reinhold makes in the sphere of representation, must *be made on the part of* a subject that is not empirical but "absolute." Again, it is a meta-stance on Reinhold's meta-stance on Kant. This absolute subject as underlying this distinction must be construed in absolute distinction to that which it distinguishes. It cannot be a Kantian I-think, which is certainly far too abstract (or formal, as Reinhold had already noted). But Reinhold's intuition to ground the theoretical activity of the subject in something more fundamental such as representing failed, not because the intention to ground the former in something more concrete was wrong, but because this very insight would have had to lead him to a new, and truly groundbreaking, concept of *subjectivity itself.* And this is what Fichte wants to achieve with his concept of "absolute I." This leads us to the *second step* of the argument.

How would one have to construe such an absolute subject that would underlie any subjective and objective grounding? As Reinhold saw, but could not adequately express, such a first principle cannot be another *thing* that would have to be construed as "exist[ing] as thing-in-itself, *independent* of his *representing* it, and indeed as a thing *that represents*," of which one may be permitted to ask polemically: "is it round or square?"[21] Reinhold, because he construed the faculty of representing as merely an empirical principle, was therefore not able to see the true nature of the fundamental principle, this mysterious I. Instead, as Fichte's mocking rhetorical question indicates (as to what "shape" the I has), Reinhold has *substantialized* or *reified* the I. Had he understood that its true nature cannot be empirical, and hence of a substantial essence, he would have been forced into

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[20] Fichte, "Review of *Aenesidemus,*" in: George di Giovanni & H. S. Harris (eds.), *Between Kant and Hegel. Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2000), pp. 136-157, here p. 142, italics added.

[21] Fichte, "Review of *Aenesidemus*," p. 143.

Fichte's grand insight that the ego is not a *thing* but something radically different—an *activity*. Again commenting on Reinhold, Fichte writes that he

> has convinced himself that [Reinhold's] proposition is a theorem based upon another principle, but that it can be rigorously demonstrated *a priori* from that principle, and independently of all experience. The first wrong proposition which led to its being posited as the principle of all philosophy is that one must start from an actual fact. To be sure, we must have a real principle and not a merely formal one; but … such a principle does not have to express a *Tatsache*; it can also express a *Tathandlung*.[22]

Hence, the deepest principle of philosophy must be the I itself, but conceived in a radically novel manner. The I is not a thing but an activity, it exists only as active, as "positing," in Fichte's words, which posits in this activity its absolute other, thereby establishing a self-relation. This is Fichte's radical attempt to depart from a substance ontology with respect to the subject. Or to put the same matter differently, with the notion of the *Tathandlung,* Fichte wants to overcome the fateful distinction between theoretical and practical reason, more generally theory and practice altogether, by undercutting this distinction at the heart of the agent itself. When Kant had to "annul reason to make room for faith" in moral action—arguably the main purpose of the first Critique—Fichte wants to radicalize Kant as well as Reinhold by (a) undercutting the theory-practice distinction altogether; and (b) by going along with Reinhold in criticizing Kant for not having provided a first principle but by suggesting that this first principle had to be construed radically differently than Reinhold did. If the absolute principle has to be conceived as *a priori,* not empirical, then the only solution was to radically alter the *character* of a first principle. The first principle is a self-positing activity, which in this very essence inaugurates a whole new style of philosophical inquiry alien to Kant and by extension Reinhold. In the words of Jürgen Stolzenberg:

> What is of interest to Fichte is not the form of judgment [as in Kant/SL], but the basic constitution of subjectivity, or the concept of an *original activity*, with which the principle of self-consciousness and the relation of a self-conscious subject to the world are described concurrently. Fichte's philosophy unfolds no longer as an epistemology grounded on the theory of judgment and as critique of the inherited metaphysics, but instead as the ground-laying of a theory of subjectivity out of the concept of an activity, through which the subject of

[22] Fichte, "Review of *Aenesidemus*," p. 141.

> thinking and acting constitutes itself. On its basis then ensues the reconstruction of the relation to self and world within the boundaries of pure reason.[23]

Hence, the I as *Tathandlung* is this absolutely first principle for which Reinhold had searched in vain. It is the first in the sense that the I as performative act, as positing a non-I, can be or do what it is by being self-conscious. It is an original restatement of Kant's apperception thesis (the "I-think must be able to accompany all my representations"), with the difference that the I is not a thinking agent, but self-creating in the act of existing. It is creative and hence active through and through. Revisiting the question as to the type of *Letztbegründung* that Fichte enacts here, it is again not a grounding in a static principle, but the principle is precisely a dynamic, active, self-positing and self-creating agent. The I becomes real in its *activity,* be it scientifically or otherwise active.

It is from here that we can connect, finally, the esoteric with the exoteric Fichte. Because, once the nature of the first principle changes, so does the system itself and its larger implications. Fichte's move is from armchair epistemology to thorough activity, engagement with the world, in which the I retroactively realizes its meaning and purpose. For Fichte, the entire *Wissenschaftslehre* rests on this foundation of the active ego as a general and primary characterization of subjectivity. This means that the activity of the scientist is but one activity amongst others, or differently, the scientist is only active insofar as his/her activities serve a role for society as a whole. Indeed, it is the scholar's vocation

> that the highest aim of my reflections and my teaching will be to contribute toward advancing culture and elevating humanity in you and in all those with whom you come into contact, and that I consider all philosophy and science which do not aim at this goal to be worthless.[24]

It becomes clear from here that the scholar is just one of active member of society who has to place his activity in the power and benefit of society to elevate culture as a whole. Hence, Fichte's performative I as the principle of scientific activity is but the tip of the iceberg of his socio-political philosophy, in which each individual must place himself into a "society," i.e., a group of people devoted to some form of creating and furthering culture. Ideally—all of this is spoken in the Kantian realm of Ought—all members of society will form a higher subject,

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[23] Stolzenberg, "'Ich lebe in einer neuen Welt!' Zum Verhältnis Fichte – Kant," forthcoming in: Hans Feger et al. (eds.), *Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2010), p. 17 (typescript, trans. by SL).

[24] Fichte, "Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar's Vocation," in: Ernst Behler, ed., *Philosophy of German Idealism* (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 1-38, here p. 10.

in which all differences have been mediated or harmonized. Harmony, however, can only come about when the individual has managed to live in harmony with oneself. The scientist, in Fichte's lights, who mustn't just be devoted to one's own research, has the function for society to help individuals see their vocation to further culture, but only after they have been able to see their own nature, and hence take responsibility for themselves. Ideally, we must help each other to see what we are and to help implement it in ourselves: this is the demand of freedom, to help the other become free by imputing freedom into him/her (since freedom is a *noumenon*), i.e., to treat them as if they *were* free, although I can never *know* this.

> We could, therefore, just as well say that our social vocation consists in the process of communal perfection, i.e., perfecting our self by freely making use of the effect which others have on us and perfecting others by acting in turn upon them as upon free beings.[25]

What follows for "the scholarly class" is "the supreme supervision of the actual progress of the human race in general and the unceasing promotion of this progress."[26] The scholar should, accordingly, "be the ethically best man of his time. He ought to represent the highest level of ethical cultivation which is possible up to the present."[27] Thereby, the scholar is "a priest of truth."[28]

Regardless of how one wants to judge these heroic statements, it is clear that they stem from the first principle of philosophy, the I as *Tathandlung*; and *vice versa*, the need to locate activity in the heart of the subject is owed to the societal role of every individual in his group, including, first and foremost, the scholar who, in one way or another, is *existentially* devoted to the project of *Wissenschaft,* the pursuit of truth, as the highest form of culture. Finding an ultimate principle is, hence, fueled by the necessity to advance a society's pursuit of culture, morality, and truth.

## III. Some Concluding Remarks on Husserl

It would, of course, be too easy to simply map Husserl's development towards phenomenology as first philosophy onto the development from Reinhold to Fichte in a one to one correspondence. Yet there are, I believe, some striking parallels that show Husserl to be an intrinsic part of this idealistic tradition. By

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[25] Fichte, "Some Lectures," p. 18.

[26] Fichte, "Some Lectures," p. 33.

[27] Fichte, "Some Lectures," p. 37.

[28] Ibid.

emphasizing continuity, not ruptures, my intention here is to connect Husserl to the best elements of this grand tradition. This, I believe, takes nothing away from Husserl, but, to the contrary, gives us a richer image of the allegedly "austere" founder of phenomenology.

Let us begin with the notion of idealism itself. Referring mostly to the project of *transcendental* idealism begun with Kant, there is, however, also a more *existential* sense of idealism that is present in Fichte and Husserl. "Idealistic" in this vein refers to a fundamental, enlightened *optimism* that breathes through the philosophy of German Idealism.[29] Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is imbued not only with the philosophical confidence of having solved age-old problems once and for all—something that is of course, in retrospect naïve—but, for that reason more importantly, with the optimism of an existential commitment of the scholar to his or her society. The will towards a system of science itself stems from the *personal* existential sentiment of Fichte the scholar-citizen. He synthesized precisely what had become separate and undone in Husserl's time, namely in the form of the will to pursue truth through science as a communal affair, on the one hand, and the personal and radically individualized pursuit of personal fulfillment, on the other. It is precisely this diagnosis that lets Husserl lash out again and again against "fashionable philosophy of existence," which has given up on the ideal of science as that which leads humanity to salvation; or, put differently, which sees a contradiction between both options and the choice between them as a "lifestyle decision." As Husserl once says to his pupil Dorion Cairns, "existentialism" is a term that he deems "unnecessary and confusing."[30] In the same context, he speaks of how existential worries had been on his mind front and center since the Great War—but that the remedy to the crisis of reason and civilization could only come through science, which, in turn, must not forget its roots in the lifeworld. Separating both, life and science, existence and essence, is a symptom of "crisis."

Next, let us take a look at the project of finding an ultimate grounding as it had first arisen in Reinhold. As has become clear, hopefully, in this reconstruction of the *Satz vom Bewusstsein,* it is nothing like an ultimate ground in the sense of an axiomatic principle, as an absolute ground, which Kant had rightfully rejected, because it would overstep the boundaries of reason by placing the subject in the

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[29] This is a sense of idealism that is also alive in Husserl's contemporary Neo-Kantians, e.g., Cassirer, for whom the project of the Enlightenment, as "man's progressive self-liberation," and idealism are inextricably linked. This is another indication for my thesis that Husserl is part of a larger tradition. While the Neo-Kantians, as their name indicates, of course embraced Kantian idealism, Husserl was at first reluctant to admit this kinship, but mostly, as I argue, because of his realist "miseducation" through the Brentano school.

[30] Cairns, Dorion, *Conversations with Husserl and Fink* (The Hague: Nijhoff), p. 60.

place of a God or declare this principle as some form of divine principle. Instead, Reinhold simply wants to highlight a sphere that Kant had presupposed when he spoke of objects being *given* to us through our forms of intuition. The latter are in fact more than the formal "vessels" of space and time, but they are a material sphere of experience in which we can distinguish an experiencing, something experienced, and where we must assume some underlying principle that is the condition of the possibility of both being "joined." This is prior to and much more primitive than any claims to cognition. It is simply the *próteron pròs hemâs,* which opens up after the Copernican turn. "The first" for us is simply the fact that something is given to our experience in the first place. The domain of this *próteron* calls for its *own* discipline, *prior* to any other, an *Elementarphilosophie.*

In the same vein, and here more narrowly directed at the Marburg Neo-Kantians, Husserl asserts that the clarification of cognition and its legitimacy, which is the objective direction of the B-Deduction of the 1787 Critique, and *mutatis mutandis* the task of the "Transcendental Method" developed by Hermann Cohen, is a rightful task. However, in the order of things, from a genetic standpoint, this is not first, but *"last philosophy."*[31] The project of grounding knowledge in the experience from the first person perspective is simply the emphasis on the fact that the *próteron* is the first person perspective and what is given in it. This is first philosophy in the epistemological, not ontological order of things. All *legitimate* objective knowledge claims are grounded in a subjective experiencing of them, which of course does not render them subjective, but their *Ausweisung,* their authentication, can only take place in experience, which is the experience of an individual subject. *This* is the true condition of possibility of cognition from the genetic point of view. In this sense, Husserl encounters a similar problem as Kant: how despite our subjective standpoint we are justified in having a priori cognition, which is objective. That type of cognition that Husserl is looking for is, to be sure, eidetics of consciousness, the starting point for which is one's individual first person perspective that firstly has to be *recognized* as a sphere of genuine research. This is *Reinhold's* legacy in Husserlian phenomenology. But analogously to Fichte's critique of Reinhold, Husserl, too, is pushed beyond this conception of an elementary science into the bathos of the social world; or, he, too, is swayed by Fichte's worries that such a first science could be construed as living in completely autonomous "splendid isolation," which is unacceptable and irresponsible with respect to the demands of society.

Hence, the *Fichtean* influence, in conjunction with the stress on the existential commitment of the scholar, can be seen in Husserl's emphasis on the practical

[31] *Erste Philosophie, Kritische Ideengeschichte,* p. 385.

aspect of the subject. This emphasis becomes palpable in Husserl's ethical texts of the 1920s, most notably the text surrounding the topic of "*Renewal*." The most acute influence for this move was certainly the Great War and the perceived crisis of reason and civilization in its aftermath. But, as influential as this external catastrophic event may have been on Husserl, this tendency was already present all the way back in his pre-transcendental phase. In his project of an encompassing Critique of Reason, i.e., subjectivity's achievements according to eidetic laws, it had been his project all along to investigate theoretical, willing, valuing and, of course, also *practical* intentionality in his grand systematic scope. In a manuscript from the 1930s, responding to a contemporary critic, Husserl registers the almost exasperated complaint: "Is not *practical* intentionality also a form of constitution, was it ever the intention of my phenomenology to clarify only the constitution of the nature of the natural scientist?"[32] But as of the 1920s, the focus of Husserl's investigations changes insofar as practical intentionality is not just one feature of subjectivity among others, but it becomes the defining and must fundamental characteristic of subjectivity. Subjectivity is at bottom active and practical, all higher achievements are forms of praxis and stem genetically from it, even those that seem to involve an "non-participating observer."

There is perhaps no term that has been more detrimental for the reception of Husserl's thought than this characterization of the philosopher, emphasized by none other than his closest pupil Fichte. For nothing could be further from Husserl's intentions of the role of the philosopher or scientist in society. The scientist is in the highest and most dignified degree a "functionary of mankind" in the Fichtean sense of the scholar hearing his/her vocation. Every scientist, including (especially) the philosopher, has a vocation to help further society in its pursuit of "bliss" towards the all-idea of a society in which all differences have come to rest—as a regulative ideas, to be sure.[33] In this sense, the scientist is a moral citizen in the highest degree, to the extent that science is the highest function of human culture. This does not mean that every person should become a scientist or a philosopher, of course; instead, science is but the highest form of culture as such, and science in the most authentic sense of the term stems from

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[32] *Zur phänomenologischen Reduktion. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1926-1935),* ed. by Sebastian Luft, Husserliana XXXIV (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), p. 260. This entire text, which is framed as a critique of Heidegger, is an extremely important and interesting text evidencing an almost emotional statement of Husserl's view of "theory." It also shows how Husserl understood Heidegger (perhaps unfairly), as simply repeating a critique of his phenomenology that he thought he had long addressed (phenomenology as armchair philosophy).

[33] To emphasize this idea as being a regulative ideal is merely an aside against who criticize Kant and Fichte, and by extension Husserl, for the supposed naiveté of their philosophical vision.

and exists for the lifeworld, not something that may distance and separate itself from it. Hence, the same ethical sentiment that drives Fichte as a citizen and a scholar is present in Husserl's notion of the moral responsibility of the philosopher in the service of humankind. It stems from the Fichtean Ur-intuition that at bottom theory and practice, science and life are false alternatives but point to a deeper unity. The idealistic tendency ultimately driving Fichte and Husserl is to see the practical aspect of theory, that theory in an Ivory Tower is irresponsible; instead, both emphasize the theoretical aspect of practice, to lead to the highest conceivable society possible—all as an idea lying in infinity. The philosopher is merely the citizen *par excellence,* who is able to ultimately justify one's own actions and take responsibility for them. This is the ultimate grounding that any human can achieve, be he or she a scientist, a politician or a baker. The scientist is thereby not "better" than the others, he or she just grounds what is must precious in our culture: the institutionalized and communal pursuit of truth.

To conclude with a critic who has been mentioned at the outset, Richard Rorty, it should have become clear that the latter's choice of placing Husserl in the tradition of philosophers committed to the ideal of wiping clear the "mirror of nature"—and one knows his critique of this project—could not have been worse. In fact, Husserl is, together with Kant and Fichte, the philosopher who *least* fits this description. For all idealists, there is no epistemology detached from the "rich bathos" of practical existence. To place Husserl in this tradition (if it ever existed in this pure form, as Rorty suggests it did) is the result of being misguided by a skewed sense of first philosophy, the meaning of which has just been spelled out. What Husserl wants to accomplish, at bottom, is to create an awareness of the subjective character of and the first person access to the lifeworld as the origin of every activity, also that of the scientist, and that precisely for this reason science must never be conceived as a theoretical exercise, taking place in laboratory removed from society. All higher cultural activities must be understood as grounded in our subjective-relative life, and moral responsibility can only be claimed by those who are active, in *their own way,* in achieving this goal of creating a just and harmonious society with citizens committed to the truth. Hence, while the origin, not to be forgotten, of any experience and activity is one's subjective-relative standpoint, the *terminus ad quem* is human culture and society, where these respective subjective standpoints have to become reconciled with communal goals of humanity as a whole. But this insight comes not from the philosopher in the armchair, but from the engaged and active citizen. In this sense, it is not too far-fetched or too much of an over-simplification to say that

Husserl's lofty and highly sophisticated phenomenology comes down to the popular saying: *Es gibt nichts Gutes, außer man tut es.*[34,35]

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[34] This popular quotation, which has become a *bonmot,* stems from the poet and novelist Erich Kästner (taken from his novel *Fabian*). In an excerpt from Fichte's *Vocation of Mankind,* Husserl also jots down (in 1915) Fichte's statement: "Nicht bloßes Wissen, sondern nach deinem Wissen Tun ist deine Bestimmung" ("Not mere knowledge, but action according to your knowledge is your vocation."), quoted in Karl Schuhmann*, Husserl-Chronik. Denk- und Lebensweg Edmund Husserls* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1981), p. 194.

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