

## ECOLOGY AND THE LIFE-WORLD

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This paper is an attempt at working out the relationship between Husserl's concept of the life-world and ecology. For this purpose we shall begin with outlining the terms 'life-world' and "ecology". The term "life-world" was introduced by Husserl in his *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*,<sup>1</sup> the last work of Husserl, which he left unpublished before his death in 1938. "Life-world" means the world of immediate experience. As such, it is often described as "constantly given" rather than "given", for it is "always already there" existing in advance for us as the "ground" and "horizon" of any human activity.<sup>2</sup> It is "pre-theoretical", that is, prior to all theories. It serves as a title for the un-thematic, intuited world. As intuited, it is, in a sense obvious. It is the everyday world of commonsense before science starts to interpret and theorize it. In the life-world, we speak of water instead of H<sub>2</sub>O; we speak of fire burning instead of combustion and so on. It suggests a return to the experiences, which are originary – a region of experience, which is prior to all thought of experience. The life-world is not an altogether novel conception of Husserl's. It is rather a predictable outcome of his earlier works, such as, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*,<sup>3</sup> *Experience and Judgment*,<sup>4</sup> and even *Ideas II*<sup>5</sup>.

The concept of the life-world has attracted enormous critical attention because it is said to document the "turn" in Husserl's phenomenology. The "turn" is evidently taken to mean Husserl's turning away from his transcendental constitutive phenomenology, limiting the transcendentalism and sovereignty of the transcendental subjectivity and returning to experience in the ultimate, original sense. What is equally important is that the life-world remains in focus as the contrastive idea to the theorization and idealization of the modern science, the scrutinization and reassessing of the mathematically based natural science and the modern world as characterized by science.

Ecology, etymologically, the "science of the household", is the scientific study of the interaction between organisms, the communities they make up and their environment, both biotic and abiotic. Each sentient organism, while living within its unique world which serves as its interior boundary or interiority, is also housed or situated within a surrounding environment, its "niche" or environmental setting. The

surrounding environment, its shape, texture, surfaces, edges are all relevant for the organism in question in that they provide motivation for survival against intrusion and alien-ness and stimulate the organism to behave in diverse ways. The mollusk, for instance, by means of its ductility – its sensory-motor repertoire, which is intrinsic to it – follows the actual and uneven shapes of bodies in its environment. Ecology is not the same as environment study, although the concept of environment is the fundamental concept of ecology. As an interdisciplinary field of study, ecology includes biology and earth sciences.

In recent years, there is a surge of interest in the ecological significance of Husserl's phenomenology. At the same time, while some Husserl scholars are skeptical of a "logical space" in Husserl's phenomenology for a philosophy of environment<sup>6</sup>, non-Husserlian eco-phenomenologists,<sup>7</sup> that is, those who conduct environmental theory from a phenomenological perspective, maintain that phenomenology's contribution to environmental philosophy would necessitate a revision of phenomenology's various implicit claims. For our present purpose, we find that although for Husserl all of us belong to the life-world as our world, the life-world being the surrounding world, out of which, we may say, environmental concerns can be said to have sprung, he stops short of drawing its full implications. As the contrastive idea to modern sciences, the life-world has its critical importance, but this does not exhaust its full range of possibilities. There still remains the problem of accounting for the relation between ecology and the life-world. How one's personal life-world is related to the living ecological world is a question of significance for us because we live in the age of ecology and the fundamental concern of this age is the concern for the environment. Yet, the theme of the life-world, "by its own momentum, does not afford a resolution in this direction." It has to be routed through an understanding of nature, rather a phenomenological or life-worldly understanding of nature. Obviously, such an understanding is not understanding of nature by natural sciences. From the life-worldly perspective, nature is the realm of everyday experience. It is different from nature to which an ideal, mathematical being has been imputed. When we regard things surrounding us as *our* surrounding, and not as, as is the case with natural sciences, "objective nature", we approach nature in a personalized attitude. Natural sciences seek to describe nature, regardless of the

subject; all subjective elements are left out in their determination of nature. How a subject “feels” about an aspect of nature is not relevant to them. All that the natural scientist sees is just nature. For Husserl, however, this nature as the objective reality of the natural scientist, does not consist of real things and objects of our daily experiences, things and objects which we handle, manipulate, use, but ideal constructions made possible on the basis of mathematics. Nature, as studied by natural sciences, is not the world of everyday life, but an abstraction. Husserl argues in the *Crisis* that exact science has come to mask what is first given with its constituting shades of clearness and distinctness, proximity and remoteness. Such masking is also distorting because by extending the ideal of exactness, science bestows a form of presence upon what is present in a way that intrinsically falls short of such an ideal. The circularity of the wheel of a cart is hardly the ideal circularity of geometry whose properties can be ascertained in a totally unambiguous manner.

R. Sundararajan has sketched a threefold understanding of nature from the life-worldly perspective. First, natural objects are perceived as transcendent realities, as realities set over human subjects, lying beyond the sphere of consciousness but always referred to consciousness. The various powers and attributes of things exhibit certain regularities and order which Husserl calls “habitualities”, habitualities of things in the life-world. This means that through the life-world a horizon develops in which human consciousness lives without constantly having to re-actualize the emergence of the original experience. Second, in the life-world, nature is perceived as that which supports all our communicative practices as the context of human sense and meaning. It is also the matrix of all human praxis. In fact, all common actions, social and cultural, are man’s symbolic responses to the transcendence of nature. The transcendence of nature and the possibilities to bridge over this transcendence mark human participation in nature. This sense of participation is lost when nature is looked upon exclusively in causal terms. Lastly, there is an experience of nature, in a more intimate sense, in the lived immediacy of our own bodies. The body is not an extended substance, but an “enviored body”, a locus of distinct types of bodily sensations in an enviroing world.<sup>8</sup> Husserl’s account of embodied consciousness requires consciousness to embody, in the sense of making sensually present, its surrounding world. What is crucial here are the instincts and drives as bodily

processes.<sup>9</sup> The body with its kinesthetic systems shapes the ways in which one can come in perceptual contact with objects or the horizon in terms of which objects are given to one. This mode of presence of nature in the form of the lived body can be called the aspect of intimacy, an intimacy, not only with artifacts like tools and implements but also with plants, trees and animals. We may also go to invest things and organisms in nature with human significance. In the end, all of us are part of nature by virtue of our bodily instinctive nature, which is also the ground for the life-world and the scientist must just as much be made aware of his or her embodiment in nature. Nature is a matrix.

The life-worldly understanding of nature can be utilized for an integration of man and his actions into the subject matter of ecology. There is a growing realization that a causal-naturalistic understanding of man and his environment would not be adequate for dealing with the ecological crisis we are facing today. It is also necessary to understand subjective perceptions and life-styles. What meaning we appropriate to nature affords certain style of orientation which different cultures develop into different life-worlds. The contemporary issues in ecology are concerned with delineating the meaning of nature and quality of life congruent with that meaning of nature. In India, it was in the forests that our civilization had its birth and it assumed a distinct character from the environment of its origin. Many tribal communities regard nature with reverential awe and will not utilize natural resources without prayer and supplication. When we talk of command and control of nature underlying the view of nature in natural sciences, classical and modern, it may spell disaster for the natural and human species when the control and intervention becomes massive and global. If we perceive nature as something to be valued in itself there would be an integration of nature in human valuing, maintaining the stability and balance in nature, being a part of it. On the other hand, an instrumental conception of nature would imply social norms aimed at unlimited exploitation of nature. In this way, the life-worldly image of nature brings ecology closest to an integrative discipline. That is to say, nature and social practices in the life-world are conceived as inter-woven and ongoing forms of life. They are both given but are constantly interpreted.

As a part of our present project to work out the relationship between the life-world and ecology, we can utilize the concept of the life-world more positively for indicating the possibility of an alternative shape of science. The image of an alternative shape of science refers to the idea of a non-alienating science. Modern science, if we follow Husserl, is not only alienated from the life-world but is also alienating man from his surrounding world, “colonizing” it with formal and technical concepts. The fundamental concept of an alternative science means, therefore, man’s integration into and communion with nature. Ecology fits this pattern as an alternative discipline. It is capable of taking into account the complexity of nature as continuous with the complexity of the human species. A full comprehension of this complexity is beyond the capacity of any mathematics-based modern science. Living organisms are distinguished from physical things by their complexity, the ability to maintain their unity and self-organization in the midst of change, a condition described as “unaltered dynamism”. On account of this we can never have a completed understanding of living organisms including human beings as we could have of the planet Mars. Perhaps it is for the sake of survival that living organisms are designed with the architecture of complexity rather than the architecture of simplicity. Biology, as the science of life, is baffled by the fact that any expression of life presents an astonishing intricacy unmatched by any thing else in nature or by human constructions such that “Despite the remarkable success of molecular biology, we are still far off from a complete understanding of a single species of bacterium.”<sup>10</sup> And in integrating the human species with the rest of the living world biology deserves special attention. It builds a bridge between ecology and the life-world.

Husserl’s remarks on the biological sciences are scattered through his writings prior to the crisis. In both *Ideas II*<sup>11</sup> and *Ideas III*<sup>12</sup>, he writes about how living things maintain their identity not by “hardening” as in the case of a piece of granite which endures through time unaltered, but by “altering” itself. He argues that animal existence cannot be reduced to sheer materiality.<sup>13</sup> Husserl’s logic of parts and wholes in the *Logical Investigations II*<sup>14</sup> has been developed by some scholars towards a new biology. Some scholars have explored Husserl’s thoughts on animal life in several of his texts. They have made the radical claim that in some of his writings Husserl speaks of grades or levels of transcendental life to each of which the

denomination “transcendental subjectivity” will correspond, although, in a different sense. The non-humans are on the same level of experience as humans. The non-humans are also transcendental. Transcendental here means constituting. The world is constituted around animals as it is constituted in case of other human transcendental subjects. According to them, “Husserl even says that non-human are subjects who have a ‘surrounding world’ given to them as their world in ontic certainty.”<sup>15</sup> We would say that the non-human ego is an ego by virtue of being the center of orientation of an experienced surrounding world, functioning exactly in the same way as the subegoic layer of my own personal life. Such thinking on the part of Husserl is not unusual because he was not unaware of the vitalistic biology of his time. It is not unlikely that he was familiar with the works of contemporary biologists like Hans Driesch. This, we think, will help counter the truth of the claim that “There is a general omission in Husserl’s theory of science of a general phenomenological grounding of the biological disciplines ...”

Some hints of what Husserl thought about the relation between biology and phenomenology can be had from the important Addendum XXIII to the *Krisis* [not included in the English translation].<sup>17</sup> While acknowledging biology as a “massive accomplishment of scientific operations” in the aforesaid addendum, Husserl speaks of biology as a concrete theory in the life-world and contrasts it with mathematics “so completely rootless, entirely freed from naive evidence, from the source of intuition.”<sup>18</sup> It is because of its proximity to the life-world – the original source of all scientific evidence – that biology deserves special attention. It “is better able to avert falling into the kind of Crisis that is inherent in mathematical physics”, says Husserl.

Crisis occurs not merely with the technicalization and formalization which cannot but happen to some extent for a science to be a science. The crisis occurs mainly because science is unable to address the crisis itself; it is unable to trace the genesis of its meaning back to the life-world as the source of all original evidence. Crisis in mathematics and physics occurs because they are not able to go back to their meaning-structure in the life-world. Biology, by contrast, is better able at averting this fall into crisis because it never takes leave of the life-world. In biological sciences, the sciences of life, we may discern an overcoming of the sharp discontinuity

between scientific theory and the origins of this theory in pre-scientific experience. Biology is a “concrete theory of the life-world.”<sup>20</sup>

In the very first paragraph of the Addendum Husserl says, very significantly, that biology is founded upon “variant forms of empathy”. Let us quote the relevant portion from the Addendum. “For human beings biology is essentially guided by its humanity, which is experienceable in a truly original manner; there alone life is given in an original way and in the most authentic manner through the self-understanding of the biological dimension. Such is the guiding thread of all biology and for all the variant forms of empathy (*Einfühlung*),” only through animals have sense.<sup>21</sup> Just as we, human beings gain understanding of other human beings and our human world, through empathy, similarly, “the sense of other classes of living things (than ourselves), i.e., animals, plants and perhaps other types of living organisms, is attained through a variation of empathy.”<sup>22</sup> There is spontaneous sensory-motor and affective coupling not only with another as a living body subject like oneself but also with other kinds of living things. Through empathy we come to understand better the motivational structure of another person. This empathetic understanding can be extended to other kinds of living things too.

There is no doubt that there is a gap between human subjectivity and the sensory-motor perception and action in other biological species. Yet, there is a deep continuity between life and its manifestations in humans and biological life studied in biology. Hence, in one meaning of the project of naturalizing phenomenology, which has taken the form of a movement now, it is not enough for phenomenology to describe and phenomenologically analyze the lived experience; it needs to understand and interpret its investigations in relation to those of biology, and thereby relate itself to ecology.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, tr. with an introduction by David Carr, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.
2. *Ibid*, Sec.37, pp.142-43.
3. *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, tr. D. Cairns, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969.
4. *Experience and Judgment*, tr. J.S.Churchill and K. Ameriks, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973.
5. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, BK II, tr. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1989.
6. Adam Christopher Kanopka has listed three such scholars as Lester Embree, Ulrich Melle and Steven Crowell. See Kanopka, *An Introduction to Husserl's*

*Phenomenology of Umwelt: Reconsidering the Nature/Geist Distinction Towards an Environmental Philosophy*, New York: Fordham, 2008, Introduction, p. 3.

7. In this group Kanopka has included David Wood and Ted Toadvine., Kanopka, op.cit., p.4.
8. R. Sundararjan, *Studies in Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and Deconstruction*, New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1991, pp. 19-24.
9. James Richard Mensch writes that an examination of Husserl's unpublished manuscripts indicates that from 1920s Husserl began to engage in a series of examinations of how the body functions in knowing and considered the ways our bodily sensations – kinaesthesia – function in our grasp of objects. As a part of this he examined the role of bodily instincts themselves as the source of our perceptual intentions. Mensch, *Post-Foundational Phenomenology: Husserlian Reflections on Presence and Embodiment*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001, pp.36-37.
10. John C. McCarthy, "Parts, Wholes and the Forms of Life" in *Phenomenology of Natural Science*, eds., L. Hardy and Lester Embree, Netherlands: The Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992, p. 143.
11. *Ideas II*, op.cit., Sec.32, Sec.29.
12. *Ideas III*, tr., Ted E. Klein and William E. Pohl, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1990, Sec. I.
13. *Ideas II*, Sec.14, *Ideas III*, Sec. 2a.
14. John C. McCarthy, "Parts, Wholes and the Forms of Life", op. cit.
15. Javier San Martin and Maria Luz Pintos Penaranda, "Animal Life and Phenomenology" in *The Reach of Reflection: Issues for Phenomenology's Second Century*, eds., Steven Crowell, Lester Embree and Samuel J. Julian, Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, Boca Raton, Florida, USA, 2001. The authors specially mention *Husserliana XV*, p. 177 in this context.
16. Lester Embree, "Ecology" in *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, eds., Lester Embree et al, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1977, p. 149.
17. Translated from German by Niall Keane, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2013, pp. 6-9.
18. Addendum XXIII, p.6.
19. Dorian Meacham, "Biology, The Empathic Science: Husserl's Addendum XXIII of *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*", *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, op.cit., p. 12.
20. Ibid, p.20.
21. Addendum XXIII, p.6.
22. Dorian Meacham, "Biology, The Empathic Science; Husserl's Addendum XXIII and *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*", op.cit., p.14.