

Phenomenological Reflections on the Possibility of First Philosophy

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Abstract

In this paper, I will examine the possibility of first philosophy from a phenomenological point of view. I will do this by assessing Levinas's criticism of Husserl's conception of first philosophy. In section 1, I will delineate Husserl's conception of first philosophy. In section 2, I will introduce Levinas's conception of ethics as first philosophy and sketch out his criticism of Husserl's conception of first philosophy. In section 3, I will assess Levinas's criticism of Husserl's conception and show that from a phenomenological point of view, it is possible to develop first philosophy only in a relative sense, and not in an absolute sense. The possibility of first philosophy in a relative sense implies that both Husserl's and Levinas's conceptions of first philosophy have some limitations and should be revised, since in a certain way, they are each conceived from an absolute point of view. In section 4, I will show that the conception of first philosophy in a relative sense is a phenomenological one and sketch out some basic features of first philosophy in a relative sense.

The concept of first philosophy was introduced by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* and revived in modern philosophy by Descartes in his *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*. However, the idea of first philosophy did not receive any special attention during the development of the philosophical tradition from Descartes to the philosophy of the 19th century. It was Husserl who introduced the concept of first philosophy into contemporary philosophy. In his Lectures on "Erste Philosophie" from 1923/24, revisiting the idea of first philosophy in Aristotle and Descartes, Husserl attempts to rehabilitate the idea of first philosophy, and holds the view that first philosophy should be conceived as "transcendental theory of knowledge" (Hua VII, 369)¹. In the second part of the Lectures (Hua VIII), he deals with the problem of the transcendental-phenomenological reduction as a phenomenological method for realizing the idea of first philosophy. It was Husserl's intention to found a true first philosophy. But it is not clear if he succeeded in his aim. For example, Levinas criticizes Husserl's concept of first philosophy and proposes a different one, claiming that the true

¹ In this paper, Husserl's works published in *Husserliana* (Den Haag/Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff/Kluwer Academic Publishers/Springer, 1950ff.) are cited with the abbreviation Hua and the volume number.

first philosophy is not a transcendental theory of knowledge, but an ethics that attempts to clarify the structure of infinity.

In my view, neither Husserl nor Levinas was successful in founding a true first philosophy. This is due, first of all, to the fact that neither of them was able to clarify the basic idea of first philosophy from a genuinely phenomenological point of view. In this paper, I will accordingly attempt to clarify the basic idea of first philosophy from a phenomenological point of view. And I will do this by assessing Levinas's criticism of Husserl's conception of first philosophy. Thus in section 1, I will delineate Husserl's conception of first philosophy. Then in section 2, dealing with Levinas's criticism of Husserl's idea of first philosophy, I will sketch out Levinas's idea that ethics is the true first philosophy. In section 3, I will assess Levinas's criticism of Husserl's conception of first philosophy. Finally, in section 4, I will try to show that a true first philosophy is possible only as first philosophy in a relative sense, and I will sketch out some of its main characteristics.

1 Husserl's idea of first philosophy

Husserl borrows the concept of first philosophy from Aristotle, who was the first to use that concept in the history of Western philosophy. Aristotle's first philosophy is the philosophical discipline known as his metaphysics. However, what Husserl borrows from Aristotle is not the content, but only the name of first philosophy. Husserl maintains that what is crucial in the definition of first philosophy is the "literal sense" (Hua VII, 3) of the concept. Thus one should not expect Husserl to consider first philosophy to be identical with metaphysics, as was the case with Aristotle.

What, then, is first philosophy in Husserl? Husserl tells us that the "literal sense" of first philosophy could give us "the formal predelineation of the theoretical aim that the new discipline—along with its problem-content, which will be defined more distinctly only later—is to actualize" (Hua VII, 3). The "literal sense" of first philosophy implies that it must be "a philosophy ... that is precisely the first among the philosophies of all sorts that make up, in their totality and wholeness, the one philosophy" (Hua VII, 4). And here first philosophy must be a philosophy that is not by chance, but essentially—that is, "in itself," on "inner, essential grounds" (Hua VII, 4)—the first among various kinds of philosophy. In this context, Husserl claims that "the idea of science and philosophy involves an order of cognition, proceeding from intrinsically earlier to intrinsically later cognitions; ultimately, then, a beginning and a line of advance that are not to be chosen arbitrarily but have their basis '*in the nature of things themselves*'" (Hua I, 53).²

In order to understand in more detail what the literal sense of first philosophy means, one has to note that the various disciplines of philosophy as a universal science are not a mere cluster of disciplines that have nothing to do with each other. Rather, they form an organic whole, which Descartes, for example, compares to a tree.³ However, it is precisely due to the foundational rela-

² E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations. An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. D. Cairns (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 12.

³ R. Descartes, *Principes. Traduction française*, IX-2, *Œuvres de Descartes*, publiées par C. Adam & P. Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1978), 14.

tionship between first philosophy and the other parts of philosophy that the various disciplines can be integrated into an organic whole at all. First philosophy thereby provides the so-called foundation for all of the other philosophical disciplines, which can accordingly be collectively called second philosophy. Thus first philosophy is the part of philosophy as a whole that deals with the “beginning” (Hua VII, 5) without which second philosophy could not be built up. As a philosophy that deals with the very beginning, the origin, or the root of second philosophy, then, first philosophy is the very condition of the possibility for second philosophy. For this reason, Husserl claims that first philosophy would be “the first in value and dignity, bearing the inner sanctum of philosophy, as it were, within itself, whereas the rest, the ‘second’ philosophies, would have to represent only the necessary preliminary stage—the antechamber, as it were—to the inner sanctum” (Hua VII, 4).

Husserl attempts to develop the idea of first philosophy from the perspective of “Wissenschaftstheorie.” What interests him most in developing the idea of first philosophy is the methodological and theoretical foundation of the various philosophical disciplines. His aim in developing the idea of first philosophy is therefore to provide a foundation for philosophy as a whole as an “absolutely justified science” (Hua VII, 13). But for him, this idea can only be achieved if we live a life in which we practice “a critique—an ultimately evaluating critique”—not only of the “aims” of life, but also of our “ways of life,” of our particular “means” (Hua VII, 9). Thus the spirit of “calling to account and critique” (“Rechenschaftsabgabe und Kritik—Hua VII, 9) is decisive for Husserl’s conception of first philosophy.

Husserl considers the “transcendental theory of knowledge” (Hua VII, 369) to be the first philosophy.⁴ Transcendental theory of knowledge is “a universal methodology that justifies itself absolutely, or ... a science of the totality of the pure (a priori) principles of all possible knowledge and of the entirety of the a priori truths that are systematically contained in [these principles] and can thus be purely deduced from them” (Hua VII, 13–14). As “a universal methodology that justifies itself absolutely,” then, transcendental theory of knowledge is the philosophy that deals with the beginning or the origin of every other kind of philosophy, and is guided by the spirit of “calling to account and critique.” As such, it is the first in “value and dignity” among all of the various kinds of philosophy.

⁴ It should be noted that Husserl’s concept of first philosophy is not clear; in fact, it is ambiguous in many respects. He normally considers transcendental phenomenology—first of all, transcendental theory of knowledge—to be the first philosophy. In this case, the second philosophy that is the counterpart of first philosophy in this sense includes formal ontology, regional ontology, metaphysics, and the empirical sciences. But sometimes he considers eidetic phenomenology to be the first philosophy (Hua IX, 298). In this case, eidetic phenomenology is not identical with transcendental phenomenology or transcendental theory of knowledge. It includes, besides transcendental phenomenology, such disciplines as formal ontology, regional ontology, and even eidetic metaphysics. The second philosophy that is the counterpart of first philosophy in this sense is empirical science and the metaphysics of facticity or the factual. In this paper, I do not deal with the problem of the ambiguity of the concept of first philosophy in Husserl, since it does not play any important role for the thesis that I will develop below. In fact, Levinas does not pay any attention to the ambiguity of the concept of first philosophy in Husserl, and simply considers the transcendental theory of knowledge to be the first philosophy in Husserl. I have dealt with the problem of the ambiguity of Husserl’s concept of first philosophy in a working paper on “E. Husserl’s Idea of First Philosophy Revisited.”

2 Levinas's conception of first philosophy

In an article published in 1984,⁵ Levinas considers ethics to be the first philosophy. However, the idea of ethics as first philosophy is not first introduced in this article. Levinas already attempts to clarify the idea of ethics as first philosophy in his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*,⁶ from 1961. In Part I, A, section 4 of this work, which bears the title "Metaphysics Precedes Ontology," he deals with the thesis that ontology presupposes ethics or metaphysics. What the title "Metaphysics Precedes Ontology" concretely means is that ethics is the presupposition or the condition of the possibility for ontology; for this reason, the former can be called first philosophy, whereas the latter should be called second philosophy. However, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas does not actually call ethics "first philosophy," but uses the term "metaphysics" instead. It is not until the 1984 article mentioned above that Levinas explicitly claims that ethics is the first philosophy.

Levinas's thesis that ethics is the first philosophy should be understood in the general context of his phenomenology of the face. His thesis is based on the distinction between ethics and ontology. Thus in order to understand the meaning of the thesis, it is necessary to understand this distinction. For Levinas, ethics and ontology are two philosophical disciplines that are entirely different from one another. Ontology is the title for the sub-disciplines of the phenomenology of the face that deal with the plane of totality. As the topic of ontology, the plane of totality consists of the relations between the ego and the other in a relative sense, as the other that is entirely absorbed by the ego. This is why Levinas maintains that ontology "reduces the other to the same" (TI, 42). In contrast, ethics is the title for the sub-disciplines of the phenomenology of the face that deal with the plane of infinity. As the topic of ethics, the plane of infinity consists of the relations between the ego and the other in an absolute sense, as the other that is not absorbed by the ego. This is why Levinas maintains that ethics "does not reduce the other to the same" (TI, 43). According to this distinction between ethics and ontology, then, ethics is the first philosophy, while ontology is the second philosophy.

Levinas's thesis that ethics is the first philosophy represents the opposite position to Husserl's thesis that the transcendental theory of knowledge is the first philosophy. In this context, one should pay attention to the fact that Levinas considers Husserl's transcendental phenomenology to be the most radical form of ontology. Levinas's thesis that ethics is the first philosophy is therefore in line with his general criticism that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is the most radical form of ontology as the philosophy of totality. This implies that contrary to what Husserl claims, his transcendental phenomenology turns out to be the most derivative form of second philosophy. Thus Levinas's thesis that ethics is first philosophy represents the most severe criticism of Husserl's thesis that the transcendental theory of knowledge is the first philosophy.

Why does Levinas consider ethics to be the first philosophy? It is because in his opinion,

⁵ E. Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. S. Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 75–87, subsequently cited with the abbreviation EFP. This article was originally published as "Éthique comme philosophie première," in *Justifications de l'éthique*, ed. G. Hottois (Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1984), 41–51.

⁶ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), subsequently cited with the abbreviation TI.

ethics has the main characteristics of first philosophy—characteristics that we have already identified in our discussion of Husserl’s conception of first philosophy, where transcendental theory of knowledge is called first philosophy because 1) it is first in “value and dignity,” 2) it is “critical,” and 3) it deals with the most original realm of being. But according to Levinas, it is ethics that should be called first philosophy, since ethics is what is really first in “value and dignity,” as well as being “critical” and dealing with the most original realm of being. Levinas’s thesis that ethics is the first philosophy is the necessary consequence of his criticism of Husserl’s conception of first philosophy. Let me now clarify in more detail why Levinas claims that ethics should be regarded as the true first philosophy.

First, Husserl claims that transcendental theory of knowledge is the first philosophy because it is first in “value and dignity.” According to Husserl, the question of first philosophy is the most valuable and important of all philosophical questions. Levinas, however, claims that it is not the question of the transcendental theory of knowledge, but the ethical question that is the most valuable question in philosophy: it is “the first and final question” (EFP, 86) of philosophy. In this respect, he criticizes not only Husserl, but the entire tradition of Western philosophy for taking the most valuable and important question of philosophy to be: “Why being rather than nothing?” (EFP, 86). By considering this to be the most valuable and important question, such philosophers are pursuing ontology as a philosophy of totality. In contrast, Levinas considers the most valuable, important, and urgent question to be one that has been completely neglected in the long tradition of Western philosophy—namely, the question of “How being justifies itself?” (EFP, 86). In this context, that on the ground of which “being justifies itself” is “justice,” and what justice means concretely is “hospitality to the Other” (EFP, 86). Justice is that which “involves obligations with regard to an existent that refuses to give itself, the Other, who in this sense would be an existent *par excellence*” (TI, 45). Here justice is exactly the opposite of the freedom that functions as the necessary correlate to the openness of Being that phenomenology since Husserl has understood in terms of “horizon.” It is the essential characteristic of freedom “to maintain oneself against the other, despite every relation with the other to ensure the autarchy of an I” (TI, 46). Hence freedom is “not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same” (TI, 46). But this means that freedom is nothing other than injustice. In this context, Levinas claims that if something were not able to justify itself, it could not be called being in a genuine sense. Justice, as that which justifies being, could therefore be called the very condition of the possibility for being. This is the reason why an ethics that deals with the question of justice turns out to be first philosophy.

Second, Husserl claims that because transcendental theory of knowledge is guided by the spirit of “calling to account and critique,” it has a critical potential; the critique of dogmatism is one of the central functions of a transcendental theory of knowledge as first philosophy. However, Levinas does not agree with Husserl on this issue. He claims that transcendental phenomenology is not genuinely critical. Rather, as a kind of ontology, transcendental phenomenology should be classified as a kind of “dogmatism” (TI, 43), and hence as second philosophy. In this context, one should note that as ontology, transcendental phenomenology is a “philosophy of power” (TI, 46), for in reducing the other to the same, it aims at the suppression and possession of the other. Thus ontology is a “philosophy of injustice” (TI, 46), and as such, it is a kind of dogmatism. The dogmatism of ontology should therefore be overcome through a criticism that “calls into question the

exercise of the same" (TI, 43) and enables the same to be susceptible to the existence of the other in a true and absolute sense. But for Levinas, this kind of criticism of the dogmatism of ontology can only be carried out through ethics as first philosophy. And because it has this critical potential, ethics is the only philosophy that could lead us to the truth in a genuine sense. Thus one should pay full attention to the fact that "the ethical relation ... is not contrary to truth; it goes unto being in its absolute exteriority, and accomplishes the very intention that animates the movement unto truth" (TI, 47).

Third, Husserl maintains that transcendental theory of knowledge as first philosophy deals with the beginning, the origin, or the ultimate foundation of philosophy as a whole. However, Levinas claims that it is not transcendental theory of knowledge, but ethics that deals with the beginning, the origin, or the ultimate foundation of the whole of philosophy in the genuine sense. In order to clarify the relationship between ethics as first philosophy and transcendental theory of knowledge as second philosophy, Levinas operates with the concepts of the activity and passivity of the ego. According to Levinas, the transcendental theory of knowledge as the philosophy of totality deals with the active relation of the ego to the other, whereas ethics as the philosophy of infinity deals with the passive relation of the ego to the other. Needless to say, the passive relation of the ego to the other should be called the origin or foundation of the active relation to the other, since the latter presupposes the former. Levinas claims that the main topic of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology as the philosophy of representation is knowledge. "Husserl, returning to a medieval tradition, then describes it as intentionality, which is understood as 'consciousness of something', and so is inseparable from its 'intentional object'" (EFP, 77). The essential characteristic of Husserlian intentionality is activity that reduces the other to a "noema" (TI, 127) as the intentional object. And to make the other into a noema is to reduce the other to a kind of "same" that is entirely under the control of the knowing ego, since it is something constituted by and known to the ego in the mode of apodictic evidence. But the activity of representational intentionality presupposes and is founded upon the passive dimension of egoic life—the very dimension that is the main topic of Levinasian ethics. Thus as a philosophy that deals with the passive dimension of egoic life, Levinasian ethics should be considered to be the genuine first philosophy, whereas the transcendental theory of knowledge that deals with the active dimension of egoic life should be considered to be second philosophy.

In this context, Levinas admits that in deepening the analysis of representational intentionality, Husserl was indeed aware that there is a passive dimension of life beneath the active dimension of the life of the ego. For example, Husserl already realized in his 1905 Lectures on "Internal Time-Consciousness" (Hua X) that "a non-intentional consciousness itself" (EFP, 79), as a kind of passive consciousness, is incessantly operating beneath the layer of representational intentionality. What matters here is thus "a non-intentional consciousness operating ... unknowingly as knowledge, as a non-objectivizing knowledge" (EFP, 79). "As such it accompanies all the intentional processes of consciousness and of the *ego (moi)* which, in that consciousness, 'acts' and 'wills' and has 'intentions'. Consciousness of consciousness, indirect, implicit and aimless, without any initiative that might refer back to an ego; passive like time passing and ageing me without my intervening (*sans moi*)" (EFP, 79). For Levinas, however, even though Husserl was aware of such "non-intentional consciousness" as a passive consciousness, he failed to grasp its real meaning. Instead, he attempts

to interpret it as “a still confused representation to be duly brought to ‘light’” (EFP, 80), that is, as a form of possible consciousness that could be developed into a representational intentionality as an active consciousness. In this way, he attempts to interpret passive, non-intentional consciousness as a representational intentionality in the mode of possibility. In so doing, however, he misses the basic characteristic of passive, non-intentional consciousness as a consciousness that is entirely different from representational intentionality: namely, the *susceptibility* of passive consciousness. Non-intentional consciousness is susceptible to the other in an absolute sense, since it is a passive or receptive consciousness. It is hospitality to the Other. For this reason, Levinas calls passive, non-intentional consciousness “a form of *mauvaise conscience*” (EFP, 81) that calls the same into question.⁷ As a *mauvaise conscience*, non-intentional consciousness is filled with “responsibility,” “sensitivity,” “vulnerability,” “proximity.”⁸ And in order to emphasize the passive character of non-intentional consciousness, Levinas calls the passivity of non-intentional consciousness “a passivity more passive than all passivity” (OBBE, 14; cf. 15, 50, 55, 72). Thus as the philosophy that deals with “a passivity more passive than all passivity,” Levinasian ethics turns out to be the true first philosophy, since it deals with the ultimate origin, foundation, or condition of possibility for philosophy as a whole. In contrast to Levinasian ethics, Husserl’s transcendental theory of knowledge turns out to be a mere second philosophy that deals with a derivative realm of being and is founded on ethics as the true first philosophy.

3 An assessment of Levinas’s criticism of Husserl’s conception of first philosophy

Criticizing Husserl’s conception of first philosophy, Levinas claims that ethics has overcome the limitations of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, and should therefore be considered to be the true first philosophy. According to him, ethics as first philosophy opens an entirely new horizon of phenomenology that not only goes beyond the scope of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, but embraces it as a constitutive part. And this is why Levinas addresses Husserl’s phenomenology in the beginning part of *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas’s position is most clearly expressed in his claim that ethics as first philosophy deals with the most original realm of being, since “non-intentional consciousness” is a consciousness with “a passivity more passive than all passivity.” In my view, however, his claim that such ethics has overcome the limitations of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, and should therefore be considered to be the true first philosophy, is highly problematic.

⁷ “This implication of the non-intentional is a form of *mauvaise conscience*; it has no intentions, or aims, and cannot avail itself of the protective mask of a character contemplating in the mirror of the world a reassured and self-positing portrait. It has no name, no situation, no status. It has a presence afraid of presence, afraid of the insistence of the identical ego, stripped of all qualities. In its non-intentionality, not yet at the stage of willing, and prior to any fault, in its non-intentional identification, identity recoils before its affirmation. It dreads the insistence in the return to self that is a necessary part of identification. This is either *mauvaise conscience* or timidity; it is not guilty, but accused; and responsible for its very presence” (EFP, 81).

⁸ E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 9ff., 61ff., subsequently cited with the abbreviation OBBE.

Before I attempt to deal with the difficulties of Levinas's position in detail, I will briefly take into account the system of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology as a whole and show the place of transcendental theory of knowledge within it. As I have emphasized on many occasions,⁹ in his later phenomenology Husserl attempts to make a distinction between static and genetic phenomenology as two different types of transcendental phenomenology. According to this distinction, it is the general task of static phenomenology to clarify the structure of validity-foundation (*Geltungsfundierung*) in constitution, whereas it is the task of genetic phenomenology to clarify genesis-foundation (*Genesisfundierung*) in constitution. Hence static and genetic phenomenology represent two different types of transcendental phenomenology that cannot be reduced to one another, since they each have a different task. In this context, it should be noted that it is the task of a transcendental theory of knowledge to clarify the condition of the possibility for the various kinds of knowledge. Such clarification, however, means nothing other than the clarification of the foundational relationships among different kinds of validity, since not only the various kinds of knowledge, but also their conditions of possibility are all bearers of validity. For this reason, one can say that it is the task of a transcendental theory of knowledge to clarify validity-foundation in constitution. Thus it turns out that transcendental theory of knowledge is identical with static phenomenology.

Levinas, however, does not pay any attention to the fact that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is divided into static and genetic phenomenology. According to him, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is identical with static phenomenology as a transcendental theory of knowledge that deals only with "representation" or "objectifying intentionality" (TI, 122ff.). Of course, he knows that Husserl was also engaged in the problem of transcendental genesis. But he does not realize that the phenomenology that deals with transcendental genesis—namely, genetic phenomenology—is totally different from static phenomenology. This is the reason why in criticizing Husserl's phenomenology, he focuses only on the transcendental theory of knowledge, not on genetic phenomenology.

Since Husserl makes a distinction between static and genetic phenomenology, the question of whether Levinas's ethics has overcome Husserl's transcendental phenomenology consists of two separate questions: the question of whether it has overcome static phenomenology, and the question of whether it has overcome genetic phenomenology. Below I will deal with these two questions and show that Levinas's ethics has overcome neither static nor genetic phenomenology.

Let me first deal with the question of whether Levinas's ethics has overcome Husserl's static phenomenology as a transcendental theory of knowledge. In order to clarify this point, I will compare the structure of the foundational relationship between reflective self-consciousness as a kind of representational intentionality, on the one hand, and hospitality to the Other, on the other, in terms of how this relationship is characterized in static phenomenology and in Levinasian ethics.

From the perspective of Levinas's ethics, hospitality to the Other is more original than reflective self-consciousness as a kind of representational intentionality. As the derivative form of inten-

⁹ See Nam-In Lee, *Edmund Husserl's Phänomenologie der Instinkte* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), 17–30, and Nam-In Lee, "Static-Phenomenological and Genetic-Phenomenological Concept of Primordality in Husserl's *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*," *Husserl Studies* 18 (2002), 165–83.

tionality, reflective self-consciousness is founded on hospitality to the Other as the original form of intentionality. However, from the perspective of static phenomenology, one can observe a different foundational relationship in which reflective self-consciousness is more original than hospitality to the Other. In this context, one should note that as already mentioned, Husserl's conception of first philosophy as transcendental theory of knowledge is identical with a static phenomenology that aims to clarify the logical foundational relationship of validity among various kinds of intentionality. From the perspective of validity-foundation, reflective self-consciousness is the most original form of intentionality, since in order to justify the validity claim of any kind of intentionality, one ultimately has to appeal to reflective self-consciousness. And hospitality to the Other is no exception in this regard: in order to justify any validity claim with respect to hospitality to the Other, one has to appeal to the reflective self-consciousness that could accompany it. From the perspective of static phenomenology, then, reflective self-consciousness is the most original form of intentionality, whereas hospitality to the Other is a derivative form of intentionality.

This consideration implies that Husserl's static phenomenology as transcendental theory of knowledge cannot be absorbed by Levinas's ethics as a phenomenology of the face. Levinas's ethics does not represent a more comprehensive form of phenomenology that might embrace Husserl's transcendental theory of knowledge as a constitutive part. Transcendental theory of knowledge has its own inalienable right, just as Levinasian ethics does. Thus transcendental theory of knowledge and Levinasian ethics represent two different types of phenomenology that cannot be reduced to one another.

I will now deal with the question of whether Levinas's ethics has overcome Husserl's genetic phenomenology. In order to clarify this point, I will compare the foundational relationship between sensible life and hospitality to the Other in both Levinasian ethics and genetic phenomenology. From the perspective of Levinasian ethics, sensible life is more derivative than hospitality to the Other, since the former belongs to the plane of totality, whereas the latter belongs to the plane of infinity. This is closely related to the fact that sensible life is deaf to the existence of the Other, whereas hospitality to the Other is susceptible to the Other. For this reason, sensible life can be considered to be founded on hospitality to the Other. However, from the perspective of genetic phenomenology, one can observe a different foundational relationship, one in which sensible life is more original than hospitality to the Other, since the latter cannot come into being without the former: sensible life is a kind of passive intentionality, whereas hospitality to the Other is a kind of active intentionality. In this context, one should not forget that the passivity that Levinas calls "a passivity more passive than all passivity" *is not the same passivity that is at stake in genetic phenomenology*. From the perspective of transcendental genesis, the ethical relation to the Other as an other in an absolute sense should not be characterized as passive, but rather as active, since it is equipped with conscience and moral consciousness. The "vulnerability" that Levinas sees as the basic character of ethical consciousness—and that he calls "an inversion of the *conatus of esse*" (OBBE, 75)—cannot be the most passive of all, since the very inversion of the *conatus of esse* is a genetic event that presupposes the genetic event of the *conatus of esse* as its genetic condition of possibility, and as an event that is even more passive than the inversion. In fact, the inversion should be characterized as one of the most active forms of life, since in many cases "an inversion of the *conatus of esse*" needs a very high degree of concentration and moral education.

Thus Levinas's claim that "non-intentional consciousness" is "a passivity more passive than all passivity" is valid only from the perspective of his ethics as a phenomenology of the face. In this case, passivity means "sensibility," "responsibility," "vulnerability," "proximity" to the other. It does not mean "passivity" in the sense of genetic phenomenology. In his ethics as a phenomenology of the face, Levinas is not exploring the most passive layer of transcendental genesis. For this reason, contrary to what Levinas seems to believe, genetic phenomenology cannot be replaced by Levinas's ethics as a phenomenology of the face. Levinas's ethics does not represent a more comprehensive form of phenomenology that might embrace genetic phenomenology as a constitutive part. Instead, genetic phenomenology and the phenomenology of the face represent two different types of phenomenology that cannot be reduced to one another.

4 The possibility of first philosophy in a relative sense and its main features

The assessment of Levinas's criticism of Husserl's conception of first philosophy shows that Levinasian ethics cannot claim to be first philosophy in an absolute sense, but only in a relative sense. And the reason that Levinasian ethics should be called first philosophy in a relative sense is because it is only from a certain perspective—namely, from an ethical perspective—that it can be said to deal with the most original realm of being, as well as to be "critical" and first in "value and dignity." The same is also valid for Husserl's static phenomenology as transcendental theory of knowledge. Contrary to what Levinas claims, static phenomenology as transcendental theory of knowledge is not a mere second philosophy. As I have already indicated, static phenomenology deals with the most original realm of being from the perspective of validity-foundation, and thus it can indeed be called first philosophy—again, however, only in a relative sense. In the same way, even though Husserl himself does not refer to genetic phenomenology as first philosophy, it too could be termed first philosophy in a relative sense, since it deals with the most original realm of being from the perspective of transcendental genesis.

On the basis of these considerations, I draw the conclusion that first philosophy is possible only in a relative sense. This is valid not only for the three kinds of phenomenology discussed above—namely, Levinasian ethics, static phenomenology as transcendental theory of knowledge, and genetic phenomenology—but also for the first philosophy of Aristotle, as well as that of Descartes. Below I will sketch out some basic characteristics of first philosophy in a relative sense.

First, the conception of first philosophy in a relative sense implies that past conceptions of first philosophy are not viable as long as they are conceived in an absolute sense. They should be transformed into conceptions of first philosophy in a relative sense. At the same time, it implies that the universalistic or imperialistic trait contained in the traditional conceptions of first philosophy should be discarded. Past conceptions of first philosophy from Aristotle to Husserl and Levinas are universalistic or imperialistic insofar as each of these philosophers implicitly claims that the conception of first philosophy he proposes is the only possible conception. In this case, each of them claims that the first philosophy he proposes can embrace all other types of philosophy as its constitutive parts.

Second, the conception of first philosophy in a relative sense is pluralistic. According to this

conception, there are various kinds of first philosophy, each of which attempts to clarify the most original realm of being *from a certain perspective*. The possibility of a pluralistic conception of first philosophy is already implied in the various past forms of first philosophy. A typical example is Husserl's conception of first philosophy. As I have already mentioned, Husserl originally attempted to develop a transcendental theory of knowledge as first philosophy. But he also had to develop a genetic phenomenology that deals with the most original realm of being from the perspective of transcendental genesis. Misguided by the universalistic or imperialistic tendency of first philosophy in an absolute sense, he does not actually call genetic phenomenology "first philosophy." But he would have to admit that genetic phenomenology should be called first philosophy in a relative sense, since it deals with the most original realm of being from a certain perspective.¹⁰ In this context, it should be noted that he does speak of various concepts of origin (Ursprung),¹¹ and correspondingly he implicitly admits that various conceptions of first philosophy are possible.

A pluralistic conception of first philosophy is also already implied in Aristotle's first philosophy, which is not a well-defined discipline, but a cluster of various philosophical theories such as the theory of being qua being, the theory of substance, the theory of the principles of knowledge, philosophical theology, and others. Even though Aristotle maintains that they all deal with first principles and should therefore be called first philosophy, they do not deal with first principles in an unequivocal sense.¹² For example, the principles that are dealt with in the theory of being qua being are not of the same character as those principles that are discussed in the theory of the principles of knowledge. Aristotle himself was already aware of this fact, and it is not by chance that he discussed the different meanings of "principle" in the 5th Book of *Metaphysics*.¹³ In short, the various disciplines of Aristotle's first philosophy are not all developed from a single perspective. And if we make a strict distinction among the different perspectives from which the various disciplines of Aristotle's first philosophy are developed, we could bring out the corresponding conceptions of first philosophy in a relative sense.

Descartes' conception of first philosophy also has the possibility of being developed into a pluralistic conception of first philosophy. He too considers metaphysics to be the first philosophy.

¹⁰ It should be noted that genetic phenomenology has its own critical potential. The critical potential of genetic phenomenology is distinct from that of both Husserl's static phenomenology and Levinas's ethics. It is similar to that of Nietzsche's genealogy.

¹¹ For example, see Appendix XLV (<1916>/1917) of Hua XIII on "Phenomenological Problems of the Origin. Concerning the Clarification of the Sense and Method of Phenomenological Constitution," where Husserl makes a distinction between the static-phenomenological and the genetic-phenomenological concept of origin.

¹² J. Barnes considers the science of first principles, the study of being qua being, theology, and the investigation into substance to be the important disciplines of Aristotelian metaphysics. See J. Barnes, "Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 69. With respect to the four disciplines mentioned above, he writes as follows: "The four characterizations of metaphysics do not cohere: there is no one science which they all describe, and hence there is (in a sense) no such thing as Aristotelian Metaphysics" (ibid., 108). For this reason, he claims that "the *Metaphysics* is a farrago, a hotch-potch" (ibid., 68).

¹³ Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. H. Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 1012 b – 1013 a.

But Cartesian first philosophy as metaphysics is different from Aristotelian metaphysics, since Descartes developed first philosophy as metaphysics from an epistemological perspective. In this context, he maintains that first philosophy deals with the “principles of knowledge.”¹⁴ Hence he claims that the most important task of first philosophy is to clarify “the principal attributes of God, the immateriality of our soul, and all the clear and simple notions in us.”¹⁵ But do “the principal attributes of God,” “the immateriality of the soul,” and “all the clear and simple notions in us” really represent the principles of knowledge in the same way? Are “the principal attributes of God” and “the immateriality of the soul” as clear and simple as “all the clear and simple notions in us”? How about “the principal attributes of God”? As the theory of the proof of the existence of God developed in the 3rd *Meditation* shows, Descartes believes that “the principal attributes of God” are the clearest and the simplest of all notions, and they accordingly represent the true first principles of knowledge. But are they really as clear and simple as Descartes claims? In my view, God cannot be the principle of knowledge in the way Descartes claims.¹⁶ Instead, I claim that Descartes’ first philosophy is composed of various philosophical disciplines, and cannot be called first philosophy in an unequivocal sense. It should be decomposed into various kinds of first philosophy in a relative sense.

Third, the conception of first philosophy in a relative sense implies that what is developed as first philosophy from one perspective could be seen as second philosophy from another perspective. For example, from the perspective of validity-foundation, transcendental theory of knowledge is the first philosophy, but it could be seen as a second philosophy either from the perspective of ethical foundation in the Levinasian sense or from the perspective of the foundation of transcendental genesis. In this context, it should be added that Husserl’s claim that transcendental theory of knowledge is not first philosophy by chance, but essentially—that is, it is first “in itself,” on “inner, essential grounds”—is not acceptable. There is no “inner, essential ground” that makes Husserl’s conception of first philosophy possible. In fact, it is not essentially, but by chance that transcendental theory of knowledge can be called first philosophy, since it is only from a certain perspective (namely, from the perspective of validity-foundation) that it can be called first philosophy. In this context, it should be noted that it was not “the matters themselves”, but just the philosophical situation of the second half of the 19th century with its strong skeptical tendency \neg that motivated Husserl to develop the transcendental theory of knowledge as first philosophy.

Fourth, with the conception of first philosophy in a relative sense, the thesis that first philosophy is first in “value and dignity” should be understood properly. First philosophy in a relative sense is not first in “value and dignity” unconditionally, but only from a certain perspective. The thesis that first philosophy is “critical” should also be understood properly: again, it is not critical unconditionally, but from a certain perspective. In this context, we have to pay attention to the fact

14 R. Descartes, *Principes. Traduction française*, IX-2, Œuvres de Descartes, publiées par C. Adam & P. Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1978), 14.

15 Ibid.

16 Husserl also maintains that God is a transcendency and should be excluded through the transcendental phenomenological reduction. See Hua III/1, 124f.; E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 133ff.

that there could be a number of different kinds of dogmatism that should be overcome through first philosophy. This implies that there are various kinds of philosophical critique of dogmatism. For this reason, in order to be really critical and to get at the truth in a genuine sense, we need all of the various kinds of first philosophy in a relative sense to work together in order to bring to light these various kinds of dogmatism. But this should not be misunderstood as a process of “reconciliation” (*Versöhnung*), as if the various kinds of first philosophy in a relative sense were all to be united into a single philosophical system (as in Hegel’s speculative idealism). It is impossible in principle for us as finite human beings to reconcile these various kinds of first philosophy in a relative sense.

Fifth, the truly phenomenological conception of first philosophy is the conception of first philosophy in a relative sense. In my view, this is the conception of first philosophy that the founder of phenomenology originally intended to develop. In fact, this conception is in total agreement with the phenomenological spirit of Husserl, whose commitment to developing a rigorous philosophy led him to criticize both positivism and Hegel’s speculative idealism. The conception of first philosophy in a relative sense is anti-positivistic in the sense that it implies that philosophy cannot be reduced to positive science: philosophy has its own field of investigation that cannot simply be handed over to the positive sciences. Moreover, contrary to what positivism claims, philosophy is the foundation for the positive sciences in as many senses as there can be conceptions of first philosophy in a relative sense. However, this does not mean that the conception of first philosophy in a relative sense necessarily leads back to the position of Hegel’s speculative idealism. In this context, one should note that Hegel’s speculative idealism is uncritical and unphenomenological, since it is sometimes developed on a plane that goes far beyond the limitation of the fate of the finite human being. Needless to say, according to the phenomenological “*principle of all principles: that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition*,”¹⁷ we can only develop philosophy and science within the limitations of the fate of the finite human being. This is why Husserl is so critical of Hegel. In fact, as I. Kern demonstrates in detail, Husserl’s conception of philosophy is very different from that of Hegel, who develops philosophy on the principle of the “absolute unity of philosophy”¹⁸ and does not make any distinction between first and second philosophy at all. In my view, however, even though Husserl was critical of Hegel, he was not phenomenological enough in developing his own conception of first philosophy. This is due to the fact that in developing this conception, he was not entirely free from the influence of Hegel. What I have in mind here is the fact that he too—like Hegel—fails to take due account of the fate of the finite human being. And in my view, this is the reason why he sticks to the conception of first philosophy in an absolute sense. In other words, the reason that Husserl’s conception of first philosophy is not phenomenological enough is that he still believes that it might be possible for us to adopt a single, privileged point of view from which it is possible to develop a single, privileged first philosophy. But the only truly phenomenological conception of first philosophy is the conception of first philosophy in a relative sense, since it is fully able to reflect the fate of the finite human being. From the start, it denies that

17 Hua III/1, 51; E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, 44.

18 I. Kern, *Idee und Methode der Philosophie. Leitgedanken für eine Theorie der Vernunft* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975), 341.

adopting a single, exclusive point of view is the condition of the possibility for the conception of first philosophy. Its denial, however, is not an empty speculative claim, but a genuinely phenomenological claim that can be justified by tracing every supposedly “absolute” first philosophy back to the correlative standpoint from which it is “first.” In this way a rigorously critical phenomenology can help us to appreciate not only the strengths, but also the limitations of each first philosophy in the relative sense, precisely because it refrains from dogmatically and imperialistically positing any of them as “absolutely” first.