



## “My life and that of Plato are the same” (Hua XIV, 198). Husserl and the philosophical question

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**Abstract** The philosophical question has an existentially touching dimension but, at the same time, entails an experience that goes beyond the self. It involves the contemporary others that ask the same questions and those who lived before beset by similar doubts. This work explores this second aspect. It reflects on some methodological issues related to the kind of question we address when we look at the past. We will characterise some views on the ancient philosophical question often associated with first philosophy. Then, we will consider some contemporary views, and in this framework, we will dwell on Husserl's contributions related to the retrospective question, the institution of meaning, and the notion of *Denkergemeinschaft*.

**Keywords** question, phenomenology, Husserl, Plato, *Urstiftung*, intersubjectivity.

The two main branches of philosophy, theoretical and practical, are the offspring of two primary questions: what is and what is to be done. They contain all the other questions. In both cases, their object and format are significant since addressing the details of a common phenomenon differs from exploring

the principles of a complex realm of things, and an anxious glance is not comparable with an outlook *sub specie aeternitatis*. Hence, since these aspects can condition the answer, we should explore them carefully. This is especially relevant when we go beyond common phenomena, and the questions begin to deal with the so-called first philosophy.

We may start from an idea stated by Fausto Frairopi in his *Philosophie et demande. Sur la métaphilosophie* regarding the complexity of phenomena. He says that it would be an illusion to think of freeing oneself from the speculative task by saying that the idea of first philosophy is devoid of meaning.<sup>1</sup> So, what questions and what meaning are at stake in these kinds of investigations become crucial issues. Following these footsteps, we will characterise some approaches to the ancient philosophical question often associated with first philosophy as the most fundamental level of theoretical reflection. Then, we will consider some contemporary views concerning historiography, and on this basis, we will dwell on Husserl's contributions related to the retrospective question, the institution of meaning, and the notion of *Denkergemeinschaft*.

## 1. Ancient questions

Let us begin by noting that the obsession with Greek origins is a typical feature of Western thought in so far as they represent the tradition's birth. Contemporary approaches have reinforced this attitude based on the strong similarities between both periods. Indeed, the rise of argumentative explanatory systems as an alternative to mythical accounts implied a radically new way of looking at phenomena.<sup>2</sup> This change has significant links with the contemporary attempt to think « outside or beyond metaphysics » by distrusting general theories. In this sense, even if Antiquity may be the origin of ontotheology, it also came up with alternative ways, which can be understood as new types of questions.

Three related cases are relevant to us. The main question often associated with Presocratic philosophy tends to seek a univocal answer oriented to reduce multiplicity (Everything can be reduced to water, air or the *apeiron*). Still, in the very origin there was a different kind of question which, with the opposite spirit, was open to exceedance. Indeed, Parmenides was traditionally linked to the birth of ontology in the manner of a « super-answer » that marked

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<sup>1</sup> Frairopi 2021, 223.

<sup>2</sup> On this turn, see Marsico 2011.

the way to come. However, a less biased look may find a very different attitude, closer to a new kind of question, aimed not so much at establishing an adequate discourse but at producing an experience of certainty that could counterbalance the chaotic contact with the phenomena.

Hence, against these traditional views, we can think that Parmenides' goddess leads his visitor to an exercise that provides him with certitude. If he takes a particular perspective, he could grasp attributes of the notion of being without risk or error, contrasting with the rest of our beliefs, which are dubious and lack trustworthiness. Hence, Parmenides' poem demonstrates that the notion of being is special as its features can be grasped with total reliability. This exercise implies giving up the common-sense idea of being and thinking of its absolute meaning to make its traits evident. Hence, truth is possible, its structure corresponds to conformity between thought and reality, and we can access the latter and gain knowledge. Parmenides offered a clear scheme of this view about truth and its elements, i.e., reality, thought and language, and proved with an example that it can be achieved.

Is this enough and something that prompts us to do pure ontological research? No. In fact, Parmenides was a multifaceted thinker. According to Rossetti's recent studies, the poem, partially preserved, reveals many argumentative abilities that should not be reduced to ontology.<sup>1</sup> Parmenides can be considered a scientist. He explored geographical issues, including the spherical form of the Earth, its climate regions, the location of the Mediterranean Sea, and astronomical, biological and gender topics. This diversity invites us not to overestimate the doctrine of being, not because it is unimportant, but because its relevance is better understood in the overall context. Hence, Parmenides is not fixed in a single question.

A similar approach is present in Plato. In general, the method inspired by Socrates considers the question as a fundamental element in philosophical investigation. The success of dialectics rests on the relevance of this element and its correspondent skill. The respondent controls the argumentation offering an inter-subjective guarantee, but the leading voice depends on the one who makes the question and his ability to produce valuable theoretical outcomes. This is the fundamental difference with eristics, which focuses on refuting the interlocutor. Instead, Plato's questions guide the ascent in the simile of the line in *Republic VI*, and, as in Parmenides, they conduct beyond common phenomena and try to reach the Idea of the Good. Indeed, the crowning of the process is not a theory but a vanishing point of pure insight and secure knowledge. Moreover, the non-hypothetical principle proves to be behind the

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<sup>1</sup> See the comprehensive presentation of this view in Rossetti 2020.

questions that guided the ascent, as the meaning that frames the philosopher's wandering.

The structure of Plato's question is critical. The question "what is x" (*ti esti x*) has been traditionally associated with Socrates, although other members of this group adhered to different variants. The case of Antisthenes is enlightening. He chose the question "how is x" (*poion esti x*), which by adding features in comparison with other entities ends up revealing diverse regions of reality. A well-known example provided by Aristotle offers the case of tin, claiming that we should search how it is until describing the semantic field of the metals, which according to Antisthenes' peculiar metaphysical view, coincides with the structure of reality.<sup>1</sup>

We could say that Antisthenes' question follows the scheme of Parmenides' question according to the model "how is x", i.e., how is being. For this reason, it produces the attributes of being through the steps in *Frag.* 8. Indeed, Antisthenes' approach was in some sense similar since it broadens this procedure to any notion in language.<sup>2</sup> Following Parmenides and his description of being, we can explore any notion and obtain knowledge when we grasp the network in which this notion is contained. Yet he did not look for attributes but substances and their links in the framework of the whole reality conceived as a set of material entities. For Plato, this way of questioning was confusing and must be exchanged for the "what is x" model, which is also capable of functioning in a two-level ontology.

This kind of question leads to the method of hypothesis, as seen, for instance, in the *Phaedo* 99-100, which closes the description with a warning about the admissible questions and those that must be rejected. Going beyond appearances depends on asking the right questions. However, later dialogues discussed the so-called "method of division", which seems to be an alternative way in which questioning seems to be in the background. The philosopher takes a dichotomy separating the genre into two parts through the criterion of distinction. This procedure can be applied several times until the intended species is reached or indivisible species appears, as seen in the *Sophist*.

However, this passage aims at proving that mere semantic analysis, in line with Antisthenes' proposal, is meaningless. The investigation does not produce the definition of the sophist but seven dubious statements.<sup>3</sup> After the

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<sup>1</sup> *Met.* 8.3. On this passage, see Brancacci 1990.

<sup>2</sup> On this point, see Marsico 2022.

<sup>3</sup> He appears first as a hunter of rich young people for a payment, then as a merchant of knowledge about the soul, in the third place as a producer, then as vendor of knowledge, in the fifth place as a verbal athlete, and in the sixth place as a purifier of

sixth, it is necessary to step back and abandon some of the findings. Hence, the moral is that semantic analysis only produces superficial features that create confusion. Theaetetus is clueless and repeats that he ignores where they have arrived. If the method of semantic analysis were so efficacious, the intended definition would have come much earlier. Then, the research focuses on the skill to question everything (232e), which leads to the relation between things and images. This step indicates that far from solving the initial question, the speculative dimension, in the line of our opening reference, is inevitable. Its success depends on the ability to raise the right questions.

Let us mention a third influential model related to Aristotle's diaporetic method. It puts in the forefront a thread already addressed in Plato's *Sophist*, in the passage of the gigantomachia, which was already present in Parmenides' allusion to mythology, and Homer's poetry concerning history. In *Met.* III, Aristotle establishes three dialectic moments, which consist of establishing the *aporia*, the problem to be dealt with, and then the *diaporia*, which involves going through them in detail, to arrive, if possible, at the *euporia*, the finding of an acceptable answer. The beginning implies analysing the question on which the success of the whole attempt depends. But immediately, a dialogical dimension in a broad sense gains strength, given that *diaporia* implies the discussion of *endoxa*, that is, the previous reputable opinions that have dealt with the subject and constitute the research's ground. This move is the birth of the history of philosophy and foregrounds the historical dimension of the overall method but especially the philosophical question. Indeed, it is inseparable from the context in which it arises and defines the field in which we think. The *endoxa* are the horizon of the question and the tool with which we advance towards the desired *euporia*.

The very possibility of reaching first philosophy depends, again, on the questions to be made. It is no coincidence that the categories in Aristotle's work of the same name are presented through interrogative pronouns. Hence, they are diverse types of questions oriented to different regions of reality. Only the first one, focusing on substances and their causes, can produce first philosophy in its senses of study of the causes, ontology, "ousiology", and theology.<sup>1</sup>

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the opinions that prevent the soul of getting knowledge. In this point, the sink of the exploration occurs, and in the midst of the confusion the sophist seems not to be different from the philosopher, *i.e.* there is a mix "of the wolf with the dog" (231a). On this point, see Marsico 2023a.

<sup>1</sup> On the senses of first philosophy, see Reale 1980.

In short, ancient philosophy offers a horizon that, far from obstructing the question, confers on it a fundamental role in which openness to exceedance and the historical dimension of all questioning are combined.

## 2. The philosophical question today

These views bring us back to the present. What is to be done with this hindsight or, in other words, with history in the context of philosophical research? In the field of the philosophy of history, there is no lack of attempts to clarify this point. Reflection in this area has made dizzying progress in recent decades, especially concerning how we know the past. This is the case of intellectual history, in its English, German and French strands, characterised by a marked discursivism, as can be seen in the work of Koselleck, Foucault and Skinner.<sup>1</sup> Something similar occurs with the lines of hermeneutics and, to a lesser extent, with the developments associated with the notion of « field » coined by Bourdieu<sup>2</sup> and the notion of « imaginary » proposed by Castoriadis.<sup>3</sup> Rescher's proposal for the analysis of the production of philosophical ideas in terms of "aporetic clusters",<sup>4</sup> as well as Hayden White's developments associated with metahistory can be added,<sup>5</sup> as well as post-analytical Bayesian historiography.<sup>6</sup> Hence, state of the art in this field seems like an "archipelago" in the common sea of dissatisfaction with inherited parameters.

Within this framework, *Konstellationsforschung* accounts for the interaction of thinkers in a *Denkraum* (a space of thought) by alluding to philosophical problems, life situations and the debates that shape it.<sup>7</sup> With Foucauldian airs, this strand focuses on the detailed study of particular cases, which are blurred when structures are prioritised. However, it is theoretically grounded in sociological concepts, as the notion of "constellation" and its Weberian echoes suggest. Therefore, it has limitations for its transposition into historical-philosophical contexts. On the other hand, it is not a general method. Due to the small number of testimonies, it excludes Antiquity and a large part of the Middle Ages, which are nevertheless of vital prominence and provide vital examples of theoretical exchanges.

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<sup>1</sup> See Koselleck 2000 and 2006, Foucault (1969) and Skinner (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu 1989, 1991, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Castoriadis 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Rescher 1977.

<sup>5</sup> White 1973.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Tucker 2004.

<sup>7</sup> See Mulsow 2005.

On the contrary, the Zones of Dialogical Tension approach also appeals to a “spatial” notion to comprehend historical interaction through the notion of “zone” but offers instruments for global historiography in both the synchronic and diachronic dimensions. It is rooted in the philosophy of history and accounts for the “behaviour” of theoretical concepts without thematic restrictions. This approach studies the dynamics between ideas within the same period and the trans-historical dialogue that moves philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

Now, in line with Fraiso’s text, which appeals to Phenomenology, we want to consider some contributions from this strand concerning the philosophical question and its bonds with history. In fact, Husserl paid attention to this realm and identified a group of philosophers that foreshadowed some of his views, which could be seen as part of the general strategy to explain his position. However, this step is even more relevant since it entails essential aspects of his views about spiritual heritage. The philosopher’s responsibility is inherent to this task and involves a historical sense that should be made explicit.<sup>2</sup> That is the same as saying that he must be conscious of their generativity, understood as the historical horizon of any philosophical research. Every investigation is rooted in a tradition, understood as a process of constitution of meaning through intersubjective and intergenerational relationships. In this sense, pointing toward generativity implies questioning the philosopher’s place within a tradition and, by extension, the position within the tradition of a given community. Through this exercise, the philosopher embodies community awareness and asks questions that reveal the generativity of the whole.

On these questions lies its character of critical understanding of history.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the philosophical character of the history of philosophy should never be blurred or biased toward mere historiographic views, as we will see later. The philosophical question focuses on the origin and its transformation, and in this sense, it is a retrospective question, a *Rückfrage*,<sup>4</sup> focused on the community background.

This scheme is strongly linked with Husserl’s views about the Western tradition. Despite his “crisis” rhetoric, he does not embrace a model of fall, in the line of Nietzsche’s description of how the real world became a fable in *Twilight of the idols*. In that case, the luminous origin and the celebration of

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<sup>1</sup> Marsico, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, *Crisis* #15 and Supplement XXIV.

<sup>3</sup> Hua VI,72.

<sup>4</sup> Hua VI, 364. Hua XXIX, 399 and 424-426 seem to imply the priority of this way, although we must understand that this is the more adequate to account for the kind of intersubjective and historical phenomena. See H. Inverso, 2015 and 2018.

life associated with the Dionysian impulse weaken because of the growth of the Apollonian synthesised in Socratism and its main spokesman, Plato. All that follows is the fall, and only at its endpoint looms the possibility of a new beginning. Instead, in the case of Husserl, the movement fluctuates and tends to rise rather than decline.

The question about the origin is at the forefront, and the strategy for dealing with it appeals to the notion of *Urstiftung*. It is the primal institution that reveals the authenticity of the community.<sup>1</sup> It is linked to the Greek past and the search for certain knowledge. However, the achievements of this stage were not stable and became weak, ruined by disruptive elements. What could seem a decline is so only at first glance when we focus on the continuous essence of tradition. This process leads to a further institution, a *Nachstiftung*, that brings the primal impulse back into a new environment. Descartes is the exemplary case of a new attempt at a radical reflection. Phenomenology appears as the final institution, the *Endstiftung*, as the achievement of the original goals and signs of long-term stability.

This topic is addressed, among other passages, in a short text included in the volume about the *Lebenswelt* (Hua XXXIX) focused on the universe of pre-giveness and world and the role of habituality. In this framework, Husserl refers to the diversity of original institutions, which act as a basis for later re-activations in the life of consciousness.<sup>2</sup> This mechanism peculiar to the personal life is like that which occurs in cultural traditions regarding the past. It varies and allows updating, modification, correction and abandonment of the *Urstiftungen* that guided the personal or communal realm at a particular moment.<sup>3</sup>

These acts involve restatements of the same opinion, which remains valid from its origin.<sup>4</sup> Thus, they imply an after-foundation, a *Nachstiftung*, with diverse levels of coincidence and confirmation or validation (*Bekräftigung*) of the original instance. If this confirmation becomes weak, the *Urstiftung* loses its power progressively together with its motivational power in the broader context of consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Husserl stresses that the opinions rooted in these confirmations can decay if left aside in the face of new views. If they conflict with each other, the *Nachstiftungen* atrophy and wither until it

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<sup>1</sup> Hua XXXIX, 527.

<sup>2</sup> Hua XXXIX, 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Hua XXXIX, 46-49. On Husserl's notion of tradition, see Moran 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Hua XXXIX, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Hua XXXIX, 47.



disappears.<sup>1</sup> But at the same time, an opinion can be renewed by restoring the *Urstiftung*.

Hence, the horizon of our lives and beliefs involves the historical dimension. For Husserl, natural life has a present changeable universe, the whole past, and the entire open future.<sup>2</sup> Material things, organic bodies, souls, psychophysical units, personal subjects and subjective communities, and culture are intertwined.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the diagnosis of the European crisis is not a prophecy of doomsday but a warning about the decline of the ancient *Urstiftung* and at the same time, an invitation to restore it. The loss is never complete and could even produce growing familiarity. In the repeated *Nachstiftung* of the original *Urstiftung*, « the knowledge “deepens” in the form of the increase of familiarity (*Steigerung der Vertrautheit*), albeit up to a limit of perfect familiarity ». <sup>4</sup> Therefore, the past is always at hand and ready for a novel institution.

However, in this framework, Husserl foresees a peculiar re-institution characterised as *Endstiftung*, not so much because it implies an end but because it is the goal of a process already present in origin, as we will see in the next section. It is worth noting that this long-term perspective is not focused on a fixed development model in the manner of “great stories” or Hegelian arrays but on the comprehension of the evolution of communities. They are supposed to have an identity that can be grasped through philosophical exploration.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, the set *Urstiftung*, *Nachstiftung*, and *Endstiftung* guide the philosophical question about the history of ideas and the destiny of communities, i.e., the *Rückfrage*. This kind of question seeks to grasp the past significant milestones, their reinstitutions and the quality of these reinstitutions, ranging from a partial view to a deep comprehension of historicity. As we have said, for Husserl, the better instance of this three-steps process is represented by Plato, Descartes, and himself. The Greek original institution was recovered by Descartes’ attempts in a powerful *Nachstiftung*, reinforced by Husserl’s developments on phenomenology. The mention of isolated figures could lead to thinking of the philosophical question as a solitary task. On the contrary, it always involves a joint undertaking, which even manages to cross time. Hence, we must explore the nature of our dialogue with the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Hua XXXIX, 48.

<sup>2</sup> Hua XXXIX, 49.

<sup>3</sup> Hua XXXIX, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Hua XXXIX, 463.

<sup>5</sup> Hua VI, 72.

### 3. The retrospective question

A giant figure looms on the horizon when we look at the philosophical past. It is Plato, surrounded by a colourful and noisy group. He appears as Socrates' disciple, Aristotle's master, Dionysius' host, friend and enemy of the many members of the complex Socratic circle, and illustrious part of a prominent family. Above all, he was not alone. Neither was he nonchalant about the community. His *Republic* stresses the philosopher's role in the framework of a community of philosophers that lead society as a whole. Husserl is far from thinking of these philosophers as a ruling group, but he confers them an equally important task. It consists of the institution of meaning that clarifies the shared goals of its members. In this sense, they are « functionaries of modern philosophical mankind ».<sup>1</sup> This is far from the philosopher king, but not too far. They must accomplish that work since communities, as we saw, tend to forget the original institution and become blind concerning their objectives. Hence, the past needs to be reactivated to avoid inauthentic paths that result in crises, understood precisely as the anxiety produced by forgetting one's origin and ignoring how to face the future.<sup>2</sup> How could the philosopher bring back to the present that origin? This point puts the structure of the philosophical question at the forefront, and its most prominent feature is that it addresses a non-living other.

Indeed, history entails a community with the dead. Only through their voices can we know what happened before, and this hint is still stronger in the case of philosophy. We ask dead philosophers what they have to tell us. The philosophers of the past asked philosophical questions and unveiled the first institutions of meaning. Therefore, they are highly significant interlocutors for those who seek to recover them and investigate their role in the present. Hence, “the philosophical past is for the philosopher an actually motivating present”. Still, diverse philosophers have different horizons, which implies that the philosophical question oriented to grasp the *Urstiftung* must go beyond this limit to reach a sphere where all the philosophers from all times can cohabit.

The philosophical question will not find in this framework definitive answer. On the contrary, the horizon of each question conditions what is found. If the question lacks or weakens its force and direction, the dialogue disappears, and the past shows nothing relevant. In these cases, philosophical generativity loses its power. However, all is never lost. A new philosophical ques-

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<sup>1</sup> Hua VI, 72.

<sup>2</sup> On Husserl's notion of crisis and its link with history, see Carr 2014.

tion can change the picture. If so, “a new spiritual and philosophical generativity begins, overcoming the gap of the non-philosophical time”.<sup>1</sup> In some sense, the philosopher lives in a trans-historical community and travels through it by asking philosophical questions.

Husserl coined a specific name for this strange community: *Denkergemeinschaft*, the “community of thinkers”. Within the *Denkergemeinschaft*, time is not an obstacle but the background of a long-standing dialogue. In Husserl’s view, the philosopher puts time into brackets, and “this mundanity which goes back to the original creation of Philosophy and philosophical generativity is his living present. In this realm, he has his colleagues, his companions; he deals with Aristotle, Plato, Descartes, Kant, etc.”.<sup>2</sup> Philosophical questions and answers feed life in this peculiar realm. Plato comes back to life through his concepts and, above all, through his responses to a present-day philosopher.

On this basis, Husserl goes one step further and says, “my life and that of Plato are the same”.<sup>3</sup> What does it mean and in what sense they are the same? To answer this question, we can turn to Husserl’s comment on the nature of communication, which appears to be one-way or two-ways. In the first case, we can say that the one-way dialogue with a dead philosopher can be considered a phenomenon of real communication, so strong that it allows thinking of it as a deep, vital connection. If so, my life and that of Plato are the same since we share interests, objectives, and philosophical questions. Again, this kind of question is the tool to bridge the gap and build a common life beyond the limits of time. What is even more interesting, this common life within the *Denkergemeinschaft* is not a bubble closed in on itself. Its contents impact the present community and give it a channel to coexist with the past communities that guide its development. The sense of continuity leads to a sustainable evolution based on shared meanings and goals. These goals become manifest through the permanence of the philosophical questions and the peculiar answers within a given tradition.

Let us analyse a bit more the case of Plato. It is clear that in Husserl’s view, Plato represents more than Plato himself. He is the voice of the Greek past and its challenges that are very similar to the present ones. The whole tradition is a struggle between those who try to find solid grounds to get knowledge and those who deny this possibility and choose to be sceptics. In this battle, Husserl takes sides and feels himself as Plato’s continuator, struggling against the same forces. This is relevant since it entails that the original

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<sup>1</sup> Hua VI, Supp. XXIV, 488.

<sup>2</sup> Hua VI, Supp. XIII, 444.

<sup>3</sup> Hua XIV, 198.

institution does not lack conflicts. On the contrary, the conflict is at its very root and coping with this situation is part of the reactivation of the *Urstiftung*.

Indeed, when one of the sides prevails to the point of stifling the other, it is a sign of crisis. Both parts of the Greek legacy, i.e., the search for truth and the doubts about the possibility of such an endeavour, are equally important. A sceptical position that abandons any serious investigation is dangerous, but a naïve belief in any truth without solid grounds is also negative. The Greek *Urstiftung* tells the story of a struggle in which the doubts prompted the best efforts to build reliable approaches, i.e., they lead to Plato's philosophy. This perspective is evident in Husserl's First Philosophy, of 1924, where he reviews the points of contact between his approach and that of Plato. Plato's Ideas foreshadow the eidetic reduction and the method of variations, providing important keys for thinking about subjectivity and its relation to the intelligible level.<sup>1</sup>

The very *Urstiftung* warns against leaving behind the philosophical question of living at the bottom of the cave. Thus, Plato acts as a responsible functionary who remembers the importance of thinking about personal enhancement and the community's destiny. This conviction is reflected in the idea of the ruling philosopher, who takes it upon himself to guide the city not because he pursues political power but because he understands his role as an official of humanity.

Through this combination of features, his philosophy synthesises the antecedent of Husserl's views. However, also according to Husserl, this original establishment has flaws that produce a subsequent weakening. In Husserl's view, Plato was dazzled by the Ideas, in a sort of metaphysical bias, and fell short of the transcendental reduction. It could be said that Plato missed the philosophical question and rushed into paths that were not sufficiently solid. This failure destroys the original establishment and reveals limits that make it unstable.

Each of these re-institutions is a *Nachstiftung*, characterised by the return of a similar programme of a search for solid grounds. As we saw, the Neoplatonic versions, the medieval persistences<sup>2</sup> and above all, the return of a resolute search for truth in Descartes are re-institutions of the original impulse, which appears each time as a reactivation of the *Urstiftung*. Husserl sees phenomenology as one of these re-institutions on the two levels we mentioned,

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<sup>1</sup> Hua VII, 322. This view is already present in the introductory course of 1922-23 and the lectures *Einleitung in die Philosophie* (1919/1920). See Mietinen 2013, 244ff.

<sup>2</sup> On the re-institutions of Platonism, see Marsico 2023b.

both theoretical, related to the foundations, and practical, concerning the philosopher's role and the community's relevance. Thus, phenomenology is a re-institution but also something more. Husserl conceives himself as a continuator of Plato to such an extent that he considers phenomenology as an *Endstiftung*, i.e., as a final establishment, insofar as it can fulfil the aims of justification and method he sought in Plato.

This statement can lead to misunderstandings if the *Endstiftung* is understood as a closure of possibilities or a definitive answer to philosophical questions. From what we have already said, this is not a risk. The very structure of the retrospective question and its link to the philosophical question implies that philosophy is dynamic and in permanent re-creation. Where, then, does the “*Ende*” in *Endstiftung* lie? At this point, it is worth recalling the polysemy of the term *telos* in Greek, which implies “end” but also “perfection” and “goal”. In this case, *Endstiftung* refers to an institution that completes and perfects the original institution fulfilling its objectives.

Thus, the final institution never implies that philosophy is finished or that the philosophical question has finally been answered. On the contrary, it entails a reinforcement of this kind of question because it guarantees a certain direction. Instead of the hesitant questioning that fails to establish a genuine link with the past and ends up fossilised as a mere record, the final establishment implies that the original demand is fulfilled. Therefore, the dialogue with the past is fully open and functions as a basis for a solid programme oriented to the future. Phenomenology is experienced as the device that offers a firm ground for philosophical research and allows it to flourish and advance. Would this not imply changes that paradoxically leave *Endstiftung* behind? Not really, since sustained work in a philosophical direction, embodied in the work of a philosophical community, confirms the central role of the *Endstiftung* concerning the destiny of tradition.

When Husserl lamented the abandonment of his disciples and philosophical loneliness towards the end of his career, he was suffering for his personal condition but also for having found a channel that could enliven philosophy and was not valued by his contemporaries. A century later, the scene was not as dark as it seemed to Husserl at the time. However, the subsequent history of the approach was more oriented towards criticism attempting to overcome the initial stage or take it from a mere historical study as if it were an obsolete vision. At the same time, more recently, more than a few lines of thought consider Husserl's ideas a rich philosophical framework.

Let us assess the nature of this particular kind of question, which is not just a question but a “retrospective question”, a *Rückfrage*. As we saw, it tries to grasp the original institution, the *Urstiftung*, which entails a set of meanings

and corresponding goals. This question is rooted in the present circumstances of the one who asks this question. For this reason, as in any conversation, the result depends on many aspects. The past is rich and complex enough to give rise to many answers. If the philosopher's life and that of Plato are the same, it does not imply that a present philosopher will repeat Plato's findings. On the contrary, that philosopher will continue his task in a new environment. He will be in contact with Plato and other philosophers to keep the dialogue with the past open to better understand the present and its challenges.

As it happens in a real dialogue, Plato sometimes gives different answers because the philosophical questions are similar but never the same since they arise from diverse contexts. This diversity allows multiple exchanges that fit other times and traditions because, in the end, there is just one humanity. Therefore, each philosophical question unlocks new possibilities for novel responses. In this way, it keeps the dialogue with the past alive and active and turns this back-and-forth into a valuable tool to produce new meaningful answers.<sup>1</sup>

If the *Rückfrage* had a single structure, the answers would become stagnant and no longer meaningful. This happens when the community forgets the original institution and wanders aimlessly into the future. The questions it can ask are no longer philosophical, so the dialogue breaks down. Plato does not respond anymore because the philosopher's life has nothing to do with the life of previous philosophers. The *Denkergemeinschaft* disappears and leaves room only for a weakened history of thought, which in this sense, is the flip side of philosophy. The history of philosophy not only can be philosophical, but it is philosophy itself when it involves the retrospective question, i.e., philosophical questions within a *Denkergemeinschaft*. Still, it ceases to be so when it becomes a mere data recording turned out of the trans-historical dialogue.

In this framework, the mere history of philosophy is a sign of the crisis. Philosophy faints when the trans-historical dimension dries out and only offers meaningless data. Some strands that try to convert philosophy into science kill the philosophical question and pose only common questions that lack the power to activate the dialogue with the past. My life is no longer that of Plato, and Plato does not answer. Hence, the philosopher becomes a historian of philosophy reduced to organising and resuming Plato's work. No matter how hard he tries to make sense of it, he only gets dead words, unable to unveil the *Urstiftung*. This is a waste of opportunities and a lack of responsibility because the philosopher is a functionary of humankind. Hence, the whole community loses its way if the philosophers fail their task. It is left to his own devices. The

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<sup>1</sup> Hua Mat VIII, 222.

philosopher must manifest the historical background that reveals the community's origin and its purposes.

Hence, the philosophical weakening can be described as the vanishing of the *Denkergemeinschaft* due to the lack of retrospective questions understood as the root of the philosophical questions. When it happens, the bridge that unites the present and the past crumbles and the present is left alone and helpless, without clues to advance. Conversely, the philosophical strength lies in the activity within the *Denkergemeinschaft* that extends the dialogue with contemporary philosophers and those who preceded us.

In sum, philosophy, meaning and history are part of the same unit and rest on the nature of the questions that guide the theoretical research. In the framework of a growing interest in our link with the past and the ways to explain it, phenomenology offers powerful tools to account for these issues, putting the nature of the philosophical question at the forefront. From this perspective, it is the key to comprehending the philosopher's role as a functionary of humanity and the notion of *Denkergemeinschaft* as a trans-historical community. In this framework, the phenomenological approach and its attention to the philosophical question help to understand the institution of meaning and the relationship between the past, the present, and the future when we try to unravel the destiny of our communities.

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