

A Phenomenological Argument for Realism

Denis Seron

Preview

Metaphysical concerns occupy a central place in Ludwig Landgrebe's thought.¹ To a large extent, it is a contribution to metaphysics that he read and appropriated Husserl's work. Already in 1933's "The method of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology," one of his very first publications, he claims that the most central aim of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is to pave the route for a "universal philosophical science." Later, Landgrebe conceived the project of a metaphysics of his own, based on Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction. This project as well as his metaphysical reading of Husserl seem paradoxical, because the term "phenomenological reduction" usually denotes some sort of emancipation from metaphysics. The present paper aims to outline some aspects of Landgrebe's phenomenological metaphysics and thereby to explain why, in his view, this paradox is only apparent.

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Landgrebe's phenomenological metaphysics is deeply Husserlian. However, like virtually all of Husserl's followers, Landgrebe sharply criticizes transcendental idealism and argues instead for a strong metaphysical realism. Roughly, we could say that Landgrebe provides a phenomenological version of the Russell-Moore argument for realism. Russell and Moore claim that realism is better because it aligns with our ordinary beliefs about the world and these beliefs should be presumed true unless shown otherwise. Landgrebe holds that realism is better because it accords with how we actually experience the world. Thus,

¹ Algis Mickunas, "Landgrebe's school of phenomenology," *Analecta Husserliana* 36 (1991): 243, points out that metaphysics is one of the three "basic concerns" of Landgrebe and his school, besides transcendental experience and history. The most important source here is Ludwig Landgrebe, *Phänomenologie und Metaphysik* (Hamburg: Marion von Schröder, 1949). This book contains six chapters, the first five of which are lectures or journal articles from 1932 to 1945. I will here focus on the only original contribution of the book, namely the sixth and final chapter entitled "Phänomenologische Bewusstseinsanalyse und Metaphysik." This chapter was reprinted in 1963 as chapter 4 of *Der Weg der Phänomenologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963), 75–110.

² Ludwig Landgrebe, "Die Methode der Phänomenologie Edmund Husserls," *Neue Jahrbücher für Wissenschaft und Jugendbildung* 9/5 (1933), 385.

³ Herbert Spiegelberg, with the collaboration of Karl Schuhmann, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982), 244.

Landgrebe's metaphysical realism and his critique of modern antirealism involve a certain view of experience. In what follows, I will discuss a thought-provoking idea that is at the heart of his metaphysical enterprise as a whole. This idea is that immediate experience presents us not only with physical bodies or sensory qualities such as noises, colors and shapes, but also with subjects endowed with an intentional life. Echoing similar themes in Levinas and Buber, Landgrebe terms this experience the "evidence of the You" (*Evidenz des Du*).

A "New Beginning"

Landgrebe regarded the task of laying the foundations for a phenomenologically-based metaphysics as a crucial task for the philosophers of his time—a crucial task dictated by the historical situation of philosophy and mankind.

Landgrebe's initial diagnosis runs as follows. First, metaphysics has broken down due to Descartes's *Ego Cogito* and his misconception of metaphysics as a *mathesis universalis*.⁴ Until Descartes, metaphysics was a "life stance" (*Lebenshaltung*)—a "theory" in the Greek sense of the word.⁵ Metaphysics sought to disclose the fundamental relation between humanity and the world as a whole. Descartes lost this original understanding of metaphysics by construing beings as objects of knowledge and, consequently, metaphysics merely as a form of knowledge. In Landgrebe's view, there was a momentary rebirth of metaphysics in the early 19th century with the German idealists.⁶ Immediately after them, the arrival of positivists and Young Hegelians put a temporary end to the history of metaphysics.⁷

This fundamental relationship to the world dealt with in the pre-Cartesian and post-Kantian metaphysics constitutes man's essence or soil (*Boden*). Accordingly, the end of metaphysics in modern times is not merely a chapter in the history of philosophy or culture. As Landgrebe says, "the breakdown of metaphysics has ultimately led to the breakdown of the human essence."⁸ Therefore, it is the philosopher's historical task to recover man's essence by restoring metaphysics in its original dimension. This task requires laying a "new foundation for metaphysics" (*Neubegründung der Metaphysik*)⁹ and thus

⁴ Ludwig Landgrebe, *Phänomenologie und Metaphysik*, 155–156; Ludwig Landgrebe, "Phenomenology and Metaphysics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 10/2 (1949): 201.

⁵ Ludwig Landgrebe, *Phänomenologie und Metaphysik*, 154; Ludwig Landgrebe, "Phenomenology and Metaphysics," 200.

⁶ Ludwig Landgrebe, *Phänomenologie und Metaphysik*, 156.

⁷ Ludwig Landgrebe, "Phenomenology and Metaphysics," 198, 201. Ludwig Landgrebe, *Faktizität und Individuation: Studien zu den Grundfragen der Phänomenologie* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1982), 11ff.

⁸ Ludwig Landgrebe, "Phenomenology and Metaphysics," 158.

⁹ Ludwig Landgrebe, *Phänomenologie und Metaphysik*, 9, 157.

initiating a “new beginning” (*neuer Anfang*) for German philosophy.¹⁰

In Landgrebe’s view, Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology constitutes such a new foundation for metaphysics, insofar as its aim is to clarify man’s fundamental relation to the world as a whole:

If we understand that the end of metaphysics in the 19th century is not only an event in the history of philosophy, but a symptom of the absence of soil (*Bodenloswerden*) of modern life in general, and if we realize that phenomenology means a return to the soil which the Occident bore in itself, then the apparently extravagant claim of Husserl’s phenomenology in its later phase becomes understandable: not to be only a renewal of the foundations of the sciences and philosophy, but a tool for a renewal of life as a whole.¹¹

This diagnosis is very similar to that of Husserl in the *Crisis*. For Husserl as well, the cause of the crisis of European mankind is the rise of the objective sciences in modern times, which brought metaphysics to its end. For Husserl as well as for Landgrebe, only transcendental phenomenology—which the former calls a “metaphysics” in several texts of the 1920s and 1930s—enables us to overcome that crisis.¹² Nevertheless, for some reasons I will discuss below, Landgrebe did not consider that Husserl had successfully carried out the task of restoring metaphysics. The phenomenological metaphysics Landgrebe had in view is better seen as a potentiality of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology.¹³

Metaphysics, Phenomenology

To understand Landgrebe’s idea of a phenomenological metaphysics, we need to know what he means by “metaphysics” and “phenomenology.”

Let us begin with metaphysics. Landgrebe defines metaphysics from two distinct perspectives. The first is anthropological, and the second is more ontological.¹⁴ From the point of view of man, as we have seen, the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 151–152.

¹² Denis Seron, “Landgrebe et Fink sur l’universalité de la philosophie phénoménologique,” *Les Études philosophiques*, July–September 2002, 281–292. Dan Zahavi, “Phenomenology and Metaphysics,” in *Metaphysics, Facticity, Interpretation: Phenomenology in the Nordic Countries*, ed. Dan Zahavi, Sara Heinämaa, Hans Ruin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003), 3–22. Nam-In Lee, “Husserl’s View of Metaphysics: The Role of Genuine Metaphysics in Phenomenological Philosophy,” in *Phenomenology 2005*, Vol. 1: *Selected Essays from Asia*, Part 2, ed. Cheung Chan-Fai and Yu Chung-Chi (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2007), 441–462. See also Emilio Trizio, “Husserl’s Concept of Metaphysics as the Ultimate Science of Reality,” *Phainomenon*, 26 (2017), 37–68, for Husserl’s earlier works.

¹³ Ludwig Landgrebe, *Phänomenologie und Metaphysik*, 152.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 156ff.; Ludwig Landgrebe, “Phenomenology and Metaphysics,” 199ff.

metaphysician's job is to clarify our lost link to the world—to uncover our original relationship to the whole of being. This must be the starting point of any metaphysics according to Landgrebe. However, man's being-in-the-world is “neither the only nor the ultimate object” of metaphysics.¹⁵ From the point of view of being, Landgrebe claims, metaphysics investigates the world itself, or more precisely what he calls “the absolute,” namely the objective or transcendent world. This absolute is that which reveals itself in knowledge. An object of knowledge is expected to transcend individual, subjective experience.

In other words, the object of metaphysics is *transcendence* in two distinct senses. First, “transcendence” means, as in Heidegger, man's relation to being in the most general sense—a relation which Landgrebe, unlike Heidegger, identifies with Husserl's intentionality. Second, “transcendence” is to be understood in the sense of that which transcends man and to which man stands in a relation of transcendence in the former sense. Transcendence is the object of metaphysics in both senses.

Likewise, metaphysics is “transcendental” in two distinct senses.¹⁶ First, it is transcendental inasmuch as it has to do with the conditions of possibility of our knowledge of the world. Second, it is transcendental in the medieval sense in which “transcendentalia” were the basic features that constitute the character of being of all beings.¹⁷

To sum up: metaphysics is an inquiry into transcendence, that is, into both the transcendent world and humanity's stance to it. In his 1947 lecture entitled *Was bedeutet uns heute Philosophie?*, Landgrebe presents this twofold characterization as a definition not of metaphysics, but of philosophy in general. In this text, he takes seriously Heidegger's view that the end of metaphysics—as a unitary thought of being—has resulted in an endless conflict of worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*). Worldviews, as he conceives them, are opposed to philosophy. They are not sets of beliefs, but provide a “basis” (*Boden*) for beliefs. By contrast with philosophy, which is always uncertain, a worldview provides a basis that is characterized by its firmness and fixity.¹⁸

Let us now turn to phenomenology. Landgrebe defines phenomenology as a method for the analysis of consciousness—a method whose most central aspect is the phenomenological reduction.¹⁹ This definition is in explicit opposition to the realist phenomenologists' understanding of phenomenology as a

¹⁵Ludwig Landgrebe, *Phänomenologie und Metaphysik*, 157.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁷ Similarly, Heidegger explains in *Being and Time* that he uses “transcendental” in reference to both Dasein's “outstanding transcendence” (*ausgezeichnete Transzendenz*) and being taken as the “*transcendens* pure and simple.” See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1967), 38; *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 62.

¹⁸ Ludwig Landgrebe, *Was bedeutet uns heute Philosophie?* (Hamburg: Marion von Schröder, 1954), 44ff.

¹⁹Ludwig Landgrebe, *Phänomenologie und Metaphysik*, 149.

theory of essences. It would be incorrect to view Landgrebe's attempt to build up a phenomenological metaphysics as a continuation of the essentialist, Platonic metaphysics promoted by the Munich Circle. The reason why Landgrebe thinks it necessary to elaborate a phenomenological metaphysics is his conviction that only the phenomenological reduction—not the intuition of essences—will allow the metaphysician to tackle and accomplish the task outlined above:

The problem of what a phenomenological metaphysics should look like can only be suitably posed if phenomenology is taken not merely in the popular and vague sense of an intuition of essences (*Wesensschauung*), but as a method for the analysis of consciousness on the basis of the phenomenological reduction—this most intimate core (*innerster Kern*) of phenomenology.²⁰

Landgrebe's Argument

In Landgrebe's view, a phenomenological metaphysics is a metaphysics that uses the phenomenological method, and this phenomenological method centrally involves operating the phenomenological reduction. This, however, raises a crucial problem, for the reduction is usually seen as a reduction to the *Ego Cogito*; that is, to subjective immanence.²¹ How could the phenomenological reduction, as a reduction to immanence, be of help for a metaphysics that is defined as a thought of transcendence? "How, asks Landgrebe, can a metaphysics that has 'the reduction to the *Ego Cogito*' as its starting point (...) lead to a knowledge that constitutes man's link to the transcendence?"²² The idea of a phenomenological metaphysics seems to make no sense.

While this concern led most of Husserl's followers to distance themselves from the transcendental idealism of *Ideas I*, Landgrebe attempted to engage with it in a way that is fully in line with Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. His starting point is the view that the objectivity or transcendence of the world has to do with intersubjectivity: "The world is objective inasmuch as it is intersubjective."²³ The objective world is, by necessity, something that is shared in common by at least two individuals including myself. The reason for this is that, as Landgrebe says, "there is a correlation between thinking a being and thinking a subject for which this being is a being."²⁴ The world is said to be "objective" insofar as it contains an endless variety of things I have never seen and has a past that extends far before my birth. But on the other hand, every object of the world, whatever it is and however long

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

ago it existed in the past, must be the correlate of a possible consciousness that has it as its object. Therefore, objectivity entails intersubjectivity. The plurality of subjects draws what Landgrebe calls a “community horizon” (*gemeinschaftlicher Horizont*)—a horizon without which an objective world would be inconceivable. This, we could say, is a conceptual constraint regarding the use of the words “objective” and “transcendent.”²⁵

However, this means only that accepting the existence of an objective world involves accepting the existence of more than one ego. In other words, metaphysical realism presupposes the existence of more than one ego. This does not rule out the possibility that the transcendent world is no more than an illusion and hence that realism is false. It can be that I think there is an objective world but that actually there is only one ego, namely myself. In that case, Landgrebe’s metaphysics would not really be a phenomenological metaphysics, but rather a phenomenology of metaphysics, that is, a theory whose subject matter is not the objective world’s existence as such, but its appearing to me as existent. Husserl himself goes no further than this. The metaphysical neutrality of his transcendental phenomenology simply means that it implies neither realism nor anti-realism—and that it is compatible with both. As a matter of fact, the only existence thesis endorsed by the transcendental phenomenologist is the pure “I am” of the Cartesian way of reduction.

Landgrebe, by contrast, believes that the Cartesian reduction is only a first step and that the phenomenological reduction needs to be pushed further.²⁶ In a sense, he argues, the ego uncovered by Husserl’s phenomenological reduction is limited to being a *solus ipse*, the *Residuum der Weltvernichtung*. But on another hand, the reduction reveals that this ego is essentially intentional and that it is in its nature to have a world. That is why the reduction can be a first step towards a metaphysics conceived of as a theory of transcendence:

Only in the radicalism of this return the subjectivity is revealed in its essence, which is to be understood as intentionality (...). ‘Thereby the subjectivity’ can discover this: it is not so poor that nothing remains to it but the logical reasoning from the isolated ego to its “object”; rather, it has in itself all that is necessary to get out of this lowest point and start again: gaining the world requires having lost the world.²⁷

Thus far, Landgrebe’s line of argument is strictly Husserlian. The idea underlying Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology is that the reduction makes us lose the world we posit as mind-independently existent in the natural attitude, but leaves unchanged the world conceived as a pure appearance or “noema,” that is, as something that appears as existent in the natural attitude. However, Landgrebe in fact makes a much stronger claim, advocating a metaphysical realism that Husserl surely never endorsed as a phenomenologist. For this reason, he

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 167–168.

explicitly denies that phenomenology is metaphysically neutral: “The phenomenological analytics is not a neutral method that can then be overcome by any metaphysical position.”²⁸ Landgrebe offers an interesting argument for this claim. This argument can be reconstructed as follows:

First, Landgrebe regards it as nonsense to seek to demonstrate the existence of the objective world. It is nonsense precisely because it is nonsense to conceive of the subject as *a solus ipse*, a sphere of subjective immanence the metaphysician has to get out of. Actually, we as phenomenologists do have the right to accept as existent not only a world, but the objective world—a world that we share in common with other egos. We are warranted in doing so just because this is what we experience.

What is the phenomenologist as such licensed to posit as existent? In order to answer this question, we need a criterion. Such a criterion has been provided by Husserl in his *Ideas I*. The so-called “principle of all principles” states that we have the right to posit something as existent only if we have an intuition of it. This is what Landgrebe calls the “intuitionistic fundamental principle of phenomenology.”²⁹ But of what do we have such an intuition? What is actually given in our perceptual experiences at the most basic level? A natural answer is that what the subject primarily experiences is a set of inert objects, devoid of any intentional life, i.e., physical things or sensory qualities such as colors and shapes. The only subject she directly experiences is herself. She primarily experiences no other intentional subject, but she presumes, by analogy with herself, that some of its objects also have a world and that this world is one and the same with hers. It follows from this that transcendence is only a secondary construction. Since intersubjectivity is a necessary condition for objectivity, it is only on the basis of such an analogical construction that she can constitute an objective world. Therefore, the world she primarily experiences is not objective; it is as relative, subjective, mind-dependent as a dream. The only absolute being that is given to her at the most basic level is her own sphere of immanence.

Landgrebe strongly rejects this line of reasoning as flawed and misleading, arguing that the atomic account of sensory experience it rests upon is incorrect. On this account, the primary data of experience are individual elements that the subject secondarily associates and interprets. For example, a seen human face is primarily a set of individual sensory qualities, namely colors and shapes, and this set of qualities is secondarily grasped as the face of a person who has intentional states such as beliefs and feelings. As Landgrebe emphasizes, Gestalt theory and developmental psychology show that this account of experience is

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 184–185. See also Ludwig Landgrebe, “Phenomenology and Metaphysics,” 197, and Nam-In Lee, “Husserl’s View of Metaphysics,” for a comparison with Husserl.

²⁹ Ludwig Landgrebe, *Phänomenologie und Metaphysik*, 173.

totally false.³⁰ What we are actually given in experience are not individual elements, but a “total impression” (*Totaleindruck*).³¹ When you see a human face, you primarily see a face with feelings—a face that is immediately demarcated and identified as the face of a person with an intentional life. Psychologists have shown that newborns as well as nonhuman animals already see faces as expressing feelings, for example as a friendly or angry face. A dog reacts quite differently depending on how you look at it. This is how we actually experience the world at the most basic level: “The early forms of the images of the world,” Landgrebe argues, “grasp the whole domain of being not only as lived, but also as expressing life and will.”³²

Landgrebe terms the experience of others thus conceived “the evidence of the You” (*die Evidenz des Du*) and considers it a component of our most immediate experience of the world. As he insists, this evidence is not merely a higher order feeling or thought that is superadded to experience. Rather, it must intrinsically determine the original data of experience.

Concluding Remarks

Although Landgrebe’s jargon bears a strong whiff of post-Kantianism, his phenomenological metaphysics should not be regarded merely as a relic of old-fashioned German metaphysics. In my estimation, Landgrebe’s phenomenological line of argument in favor of metaphysical realism offers an important contribution to the realism debate as posed in his time. First and foremost, it has the merit of addressing the issue of the nature and starting point of metaphysics on a substantially new basis. As Debabrata Sinha has rightly pointed out, Landgrebe’s phenomenological metaphysics is more of a “descriptive” than a “revisionary” metaphysics.³³ Its aim is not to lay down a firm foundation for knowledge by grounding it in a more robust ontological framework, but rather to elucidate “the question of the meaning of Being, of what

³⁰ Landgrebe does not explicitly refer to Gestalt theory in the mentioned text, but he uses the word “Gestaltung” (*Phänomenologie und Metaphysik*, 174). In his “Prinzipien der Lehre vom Empfinden,” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 8/2 (1954), 195–209, he regards the Berlin Gestalt theory as a first crucial step towards the overcoming of the old atomic psychology, to which he thinks Husserl is still indebted. Among other things, he refers to Koffka’s claim that so-called “expressive qualities” (*Ausdrucksqualitäten*) must be given in experience prior to the division of the phenomenal field into “internal” and “external” elements (*Ibid.*, 203–204). See, for example, Kurt Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1936), 407, on “emotions that are not experienced in the ego.” Koffka rejects both the theory of empathy and the theory of analogical inference, claiming that emotions are as directly experienced in ourselves as in other human beings, animals, and even non-living objects, for example a sad landscape.

³¹ Ludwig Landgrebe, *Phänomenologie und Metaphysik*, 174.

³² *Ibid.*, 174.

³³ Diego Sinha, *Studies in Phenomenology* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969), 126–127. See P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London New York: Routledge, 1959).

we really mean when we say ‘Something is’ and ‘It is this or that.’”³⁴ This may be a way to make sense of Landgrebe’s claim that to answer metaphysical questions, we have to investigate what experience is at the most basic level.

Metaphysics deals with the world as it is given in experience, and the world is experienced as a public world shared in common by a plurality of egos. Just as there is no such thing in experience as a purely immanent ego that can be separated out from the objective world, the idea of a world composed of “objects” isolated from us as “subjects” is (as we could say) an abstraction. Our most original contact with the world does not confront us with a jumble of lifeless physical phenomena that need to be further elaborated in order for them to form a human world. Our original world is a world imbued of meanings and values (Landgrebe doesn’t use the term, but Gestalt-theorists do)—a world inhabited by moms and daddies, familiar and unfamiliar, angry and friendly eyes, starving predators that want to devour us, and fellow beings that want us to comfort, hug, or kiss them.

The world appears to me as a transcendent world. This is just how it is given in experience. Do we need more to embrace metaphysical realism? Landgrebe’s answer is “no.” There are several ways to understand this. One is to focus on the claim that metaphysics is as much concerned with being as with man’s relation to being and “the functional dependence of what we call ‘our world’ on subjectivity.”³⁵ Thus conceived, the metaphysical elucidation of “transcendence” requires no more than experience just because transcendence itself is no more than our experience of being. As Landgrebe says, following Nietzsche, *there is nothing behind it*. This is the deepest reason why, for Landgrebe, the phenomenological reduction not only does not conflict with metaphysics, but is the royal road to it:

How far, then, is phenomenology a metaphysics in the sense of a cognition of Being itself, of the absolute as the origin? In the first place, by cutting short, as a method of reduction, any rash answer to the question, τί τὸ ὄν? — by prohibiting any answer by which a part of the world, be it matter or mind, is hypostasized as the ultimate principle. But underlying this negative result there is something positive — the knowledge that the absolute which we are seeking, is none other than which at any given time, by constructing a world in the performances of consciousness, is revealed to itself; that there is “nothing behind it” (also in the sense of “nothing to it”).³⁶

³⁴Ludwig Landgrebe, “Phenomenology and Metaphysics,” 199.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 204.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 205. See Ludwig Landgrebe, *Faktizität und Individuation*, 26.