Gregor Samsa and the Problem of Intersubjectivity

Rochelle Tobias

Abstract: This paper examines Husserl’s theory of other minds through an unusual lens. It argues that Kafka’s short story “Die Verwandlung” poses a unique challenge to Husserl’s account of the apprehension of other minds by highlighting the experience of a being (Gregor Samsa) that is like-minded but not like-bodied and hence cannot be recognized as a subject. It might be tempting to dismiss Kafka’s story as a mere play of the imagination, but such a judgment ignores the stakes of a work in which the protagonist is shown to constitute the world as an egological sphere while, at the same time, being excluded from the community of his fellow beings or subjects by virtue of his appearance. Gregor Samsa’s exclusion from the shared world of his family calls into question the normative basis of Husserl’s claims that it is through the motor coordination of another body that I discern a mind at work; I ‘appresent’ the consciousness of another that is never given directly to me but accompanies my perceptions. Kafka’s implicit critique of Husserl’s notion of analogical apprehension is all the more trenchant as his tale otherwise affirms the intentional structure of the universe so central to Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. How do we respond to the animal in our midst? How do we acknowledge another that may be like-minded but not liked-bodied and in whom we cannot recognize ourselves? To what degree do we—or can we—inhabit a shared sphere when the subjectivity of another remains all but inaccessible to me? For Kafka, the answer to these questions lies in fiction, which is unique among genres in its capacity to represent other minds in the third person.

In the second volume of Ideen, which Husserl wrote in 1912 but did not publish in his lifetime, he refers briefly to the playing of the violin to illustrate the ways in which the world we construct through our intentionality motivates us in turn:

Höre ich den Ton einer Geige, so ist die Gefälligkeit, die Schönheit originär gegeben, wenn der Ton mein Gemüt ursprünglich lebendig bewegt, und die Schönheit als solche ist eben im Medium dieses Gefallens ursprünglich gegeben, desgleichen der mittelbare Wert der Geige als solchen Ton erzeugender, sofern wir sie selbst im Anstreichen sehen und anschaulich das Kausalverhältnis […] erfassen.¹ (Hua IV, pp. 186–87)

¹ The work we call Ideen II is drawn from several sources and was compiled by multiple editors and scholars over a forty-year period. Husserl conceived the volume and wrote significant portions of it in 1912 but then set the text aside for other projects. Edith Stein produced two longhand versions of the work based on Husserl’s shorthand text as well his notes on related themes in 1916 and 1918, which Husserl edited, annotated, and revised. Between 1924 and 1925 Ludwig Landgrebe produced a typoscript of Ideen II and III based on Stein’s 1918 version, which Husserl also proceeded to edit and revise over a four-year period. Marly Biemel edited and compiled the text of Ideen II in printed in the Husserliana based largely on Stein’s 1918 longhand version and Landgrebe’s 1924-25 typoscript. See her Editorial Introduction in Hua IV, pp. viii-xx.
It may be hard to hear the strains of the violin in Husserl’s less than musical prose, but a few points are worth noting as they bear on Kafka’s “Die Verwandlung,” whose protagonist is likewise moved by the sound of a violin. As soon as Gregor Samsa hears his sister play, he is moved to venture forth from the room that served as his simultaneous prison and shelter in a final attempt to rejoin his family. The scene marks a crucial episode in the tale to the extent that Gregor is forever excluded from his family following this episode and dies soon thereafter. What both the passage from Husserl and the corresponding scene in “Die Verwandlung” tell us is that the surrounding world should not be confused with the physical world. It is not limited to empirical objects. Something as evanescent as the beauty of a musical composition can be said to make up ‘my’ surroundings because it stimulates ‘me’ and directs ‘my’ thoughts and actions. This means—and this is the second point—that cultural phenomena are “given originarily” [originär gegeben] in consciousness. They do not present themselves as anything other than themselves, and in this they differ from what we traditionally think of as a phenomenon, which is either the effect of a foreign cause or the outward manifestation of something hidden.

Throughout his career Husserl sought to distinguish his concept of a phenomenon from two related but opposing accounts. The first was the Kantian notion of experience, which he insisted was based in an inaccessible but necessary reality (the so-called Ding-an-sich) that precedes all consciousness. He emphasized that the idea of a thing independent of consciousness is a contradiction in terms, since what defines things in the first place is that they present themselves to consciousness. From a phenomenological standpoint, reality is

---

2 Kafka wrote “Die Verwandlung” between November and December 1912 but did not publish it until 1915 in the journal Die weißen Blätter. Kurt Wolff published the story in book form in 1915 and then again in 1916. See KKA VI/2, pp. 177-91. To the extent the story was drafted in 1912, it overlaps with Husserl’s work on the second volume of Ideen, though Kafka could not have had any knowledge of the latter text since it was not published until 1952.

3 In the first volume of Ideen, Husserl declares, “Was die Dinge sind, […] das sind sie als Dinge der Erfahrung” (Hua III, p. 100). The presumption of anything apart from experience is to be bracketed following the method of the epoché, so that philosophy can explore how consciousness constitutes its objects and generates their sense. Sebastian Luft notes that this procedure is very much in keeping with Kant’s Copernican turn, even if Husserl
what appears to us. To suggest otherwise is to engage in fiction, not ‘philosophy as a rigorous science,’ to quote the title of Husserl’s 1911 essay. The second concept he took issue with was what he characterized as the theoretical or scientific approach to phenomena, which reduces phenomena to signs of an intelligible order that is never empirically manifest, even if it represents the truth of all phenomena. As an example, he points to the ideal world of mathematics, which is not embodied anywhere, but which provides the measure for all empirical objects. According to him, it was the founder of modern science, Galileo, who introduced the split between physical nature, which is composed of bodies that are sui generis, and intelligible nature, which consists of geometrical forms derived from the laws of mathematics.

In lieu of these two methods, Husserl proposed that philosophy should be guided by what presents itself to us without reference to any external reality or preexisting concept. In the section on the “principle of all principles” in the first volume of Ideen, he specifies,

daß jede originär gebende Anschauung eine Rechtsquelle der Erkenntnis sei, daß alles, was sich uns in der ‘Intuition’ originär, (sozusagen in seiner leibhaften Wirklichkeit) darbietet, einfach hinzunehmen sei, als was es sich gibt, aber auch nur in den Schranken, in denen es sich gibt. (Hua III, p. 51)

The principle that governs phenomenological inquiry is quite literally the principium: the beginning of all knowledge in the phenomenon. Phenomenology in this sense turns “zu den

tries to distance his version of transcendental idealism from Kant’s method. He argues that there is a way in which Husserl even preserves the Ding-an-sich in spite of his disavowal of this position. The ‘thing itself’ functions for Husserl as a regulative idea. It is the idea of an object experienced in all its aspects all at once: “Thing-in-itself and thing-as-experienced (noematic sense) differ not as two different viewpoints on the same thing, or as two different considerations...The difference concerns the object as experienced now, at point t₁, and the (idea of the) object experienced at all points in time, all of which would only show appearances but appearances of the real thing ‘in the flesh’” (Luft 2007, p. 382). Iso Kern stresses that while Husserl frequently attempts to portray Kant as a realist thanks to his notion of the Ding-an-sich, he does rely on Kant to make the point that were one to posit “eine unerkennbare Ursache der Erscheinungen” (Kern 1964, p. 123) cognition would be a mere causal phenomenon and consciousness would acquire the status of something innerworldly, such as the mind of an individual. Philosophy would be no different than psychology, were it concerned with the effect of causes external to the ego (Kern 1964, pp. 119-134).

Husserl discusses the presuppositions that underlie the scientific and theoretical attitude at some length in the first volume of Ideen. See especially Hua III, pp. 110-118. His remarks in this text are surprisingly consistent with those on the emergence of the scientific method in the Crisis of the European Sciences, published shortly before his death in 1938. See Hua VI, pp. 36-41.

Husserl highlights Galileo’s role in establishing intelligible nature as a purely mathematical sphere in Hua VI, pp. 23-59. Empirical nature, by contrast, is a mere approximation of the ideal figures of mathematics according to the attitude (Einstellung) of the modern sciences.
Sachen selbst,” to quote the motto most often associated with this philosophical movement. The same approach is evident in the passage quoted in the introduction to this essay concerning the sound of a violin. Husserl indicates that the instrument has only intermediate value (“mittelbare[r] Wert”) as the ostensible cause of the sound. The immediate phenomenon is the music itself, which moves me and commands my attention because I am more than merely a physical body (Körper), or even an animated body (beseelter Leib), but a person or Geisteswesen. Husserl introduces this threefold classification in Ideen II to underscore the difference between things, animals, and humans, who are the only beings capable of producing and responding to cultural phenomena like music. In “Die Verwandlung,” the narrator would seem to concur with this threefold classification when he asks, “War [Gregor] ein Tier, da ihn Musik so ergriff?” (KKA VI/1, p. 185).

One does not have to be too shrewd a reader to catch the irony of this statement. Gregor is not recognized by his sister or parents as a member of the social community in spite of his love of music. Indeed, the episode marks a turning point in the tale to the extent that he ceases to be called Gregor after this incident, and his sister is adamant that he be referred to henceforth as “it,” not “he”:

“Liebe Eltern”, sagte die Schwester […], “so geht es nicht weiter. […] Ich will vor diesem Untier nicht den Namen meines Bruders aussprechen, und sage daher bloß:

---

6 The slogan likely derives from Husserl’s pronouncement in the second volume of the Logical Investigations (1901): “Wir wollen auf die ‘Sachen selbst’ zurückgehen” (Hua XIX, p. 10).

7 In Ideen II, Husserl makes a three-fold distinction between things, which he designates as Körper, animate organisms, which he designates as Leiber or beseelte Leiber, and finally persons, which he designates with multiple terms including Person, Ichsubjekt, Ich-Mensch, and Geisteswesen. See Hua IV, pp. 27-33 and pp. 90-97. David Woodruff-Smith argues with respect to the various designations of the subject as an embodied being, person, and pure ego that these are all aspects of one and the same ego understood in different contexts: “In [the Second Book of Ideen] Husserl stressed that there is just one entity that is I, but it has very different aspects including those that qualify it as a subject and those that qualify it as an embodied, psychophysical organism, an ‘empirical ego.’ These views eventually appeared in Cartesianische Meditationen (1931)” (Woodruff-Smith 1995, p. 339). Dermot Moran notes that in terms of lived experience these different aspects are organized as a progression from the ego’s encounter with itself as an embodied being to its discovery of itself as free agent. He explains, “Husserl gives primacy to the notion of the person as a sum cogitans (Ideen II §22) which does not primarily apprehend itself as a body – but rather thinks of itself as a free-acting ego which makes decisions, forms independent judgements, moves at will, and so on” (Moran 2017, p. 21). He emphasizes, however, that the person as a “spiritual self” is never divorced from the social and historical order. Rather what distinguishes the “spiritual self” from the psychophysical ego is that it “consider[s] the individual under the universal” (Moran 2017, p. 21).
wir müssen versuchen, es loszuwerden. Wir haben das Menschenmögliche versucht, es zu pflegen und zu dulden”. (KKA VI/1, p. 189, emphasis added)

The statement is as remarkable for its denigration of Gregor, as it is for the elevation of the family to the level of exemplary human beings, who, according to the sister, have done “everything humanly possible” [das Menschenmögliche], even as they come more and more to resemble brutes. Gregor, by contrast, is described as an Untier which, taken literally, means that he does not fit into any known category of being, not even that of an animal, and for this reason is so terrifying. The narrator’s initial description of Gregor as “ein ungeheures Ungeziefer” (KKA VI/1, p. 115, emphasis added) likewise stresses his distance from any species we could name, save the singular creature named Gregor Samsa. Michael G. Levine pointedly observes that “ein ungeheures Ungeziefer” is a “doubly negative monstrosity” (Levine 2008, p. 127). Why “Die Verwandlung” would matter in the context of Husserl’s theory of intersubjectivity is worth spelling out, especially since the pretext of the tale—namely, that a member of the social community could wake up one morning to find himself in an insect’s body—strains credulity in anything but the realm of fiction.

Although the evidence is limited, there is good reason to believe that Kafka had more than a passing familiarity with phenomenology. Barry Smith has shown that he took several philosophy classes at the Charles University with Christian von Ehrenfels and Anton Marty, both committed students of Franz Brentano, who was Husserl’s mentor as well (Smith 1997, pp. 2-11). In 1901 and 1902, he enrolled in Marty’s lecture course on descriptive psychology where he would have been introduced to theories of intentionality. According to Arnold

---

8 Melissa de Bruyker highlights the passage in which Gregor’s mother catches sight of him as “den riesigen braunen Fleck auf der geblümten Tapete” (KKA VI/1, p. 166) as yet another example of Gregor’s ontological indeterminacy: “The protagonist is reduced to a shapeless brown spot that disturbs the bright flowery wallpaper. His legs, belly, and head are no longer mentioned. The already fragmented hybrid body is expelled from human categorization” (de Bruyker 2010, p. 194). Of note is that in the absence of any species designation, Gregor assumes the status of a “stain” [Fleck] with all the biblical resonances associated with this term: the mark of what is unholy, not created or sanctified by God, evil.

9 Kafka’s fascination with animals (Josefine, Rotpeter, among others) and otherwise unclassifiable creatures (Odradek) may be connected to his own name, which is close to the Czech noun kavka for a jackdaw, a member of the blackbird family.
Heidsieck, Kafka joined the Brentano Circle—a study group that met regularly at the Café Louvre in Prague—from 1902 to 1906 at the invitation of his friend Hugo Bergmann, himself a Bolziano and Brentano scholar (Heidsieck 1994, pp. 5–9). In this context he likely read portions of Husserl’s *Logische Untersuchungen*, which would have been a subject of heated debate in this circle.\(^\text{10}\) Yet he could not have had any familiarity with Husserl’s writings on intersubjectivity and the role it plays in the formation of a common world, since most of these texts were not published until after Kafka’s death in 1924.

Nevertheless “Die Verwandlung” would seem to anticipate, if not preempt, these works inasmuch as it exposes phenomenology at its weakest point: at the point it tries to construct an ethics out of what Husserl referred to as both a monad and a solipsistic subject. “Die Verwandlung” demonstrates with almost clinical precision the pitfalls of a philosophy that attempts to build a common surrounding out of a world grounded in a transcendental ego that can never know, only surmise the mind of another. In the first part of this essay, I will summarize Husserl’s argument concerning intersubjectivity and the role it plays in the construction of a shared world or what Husserl also calls an objective sphere. Although his thought changed considerably from his middle to his late period, he remains remarkably consistent in his account of intersubjectivity from the second volume of *Ideen*, drafted in 1912, to the *Cartesianische Meditationen*, delivered as a series of lectures in 1929. In the

\(^{10}\) Although Kafka is known to have taken courses with both Ehrenfels and Marty and to have attended the meetings of the Brentano Circle, there has been little work done to date on the connection between his writing and either empirical psychology or phenomenology. The absence of scholarship in this area is all the more striking given the number of close friends he had who were committed to Brentano’s thought including Max Brod, Hugo Bergmann and Felix Weltsch. Neil Allan’s *Kafka and the Genealogy of Modern European Philosophy* (2005) is one of the few studies devoted explicitly, if not exclusively, to the traces of Brentano’s philosophy in Kafka’s work (Allan 2005, pp. 11–57). Cyrena Norman Pondrom examines the similarities between Husserl’s account of how the ego constitutes the sense of the world and Josef K.’s attempt to know and decipher his universe in one of the only works, besides Heidsieck’s study, which explores the similarities between Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology and Kafka’s narrative strategies” (Pondrom 1967, pp. 78–95). More recently Sonia Kaminska has argued for the importance of Anton Marty’s and Brentano’s philosophy for understanding Gregor Samsa’s experience in “Die Verwandlung.” She argues that Kafka was inspired by Brentano’s definition of psychology as the “science of mental phenomena” (Kaminska 2015, p. 39) and that “Die Verwandlung” largely consists in Gregor’s perception of his own mental life. (Kaminska 2015, pp. 41–42). Kafka’s debt to phenomenology, however, deserves a more extensive study than has been pursued to date.
second part, I will turn to “Die Verwandlung” to highlight the story’s debt to phenomenology and especially to the idea of the subjective constitution of the world. It is this debt, however, which also makes the tale’s critique of Husserl’s account of other minds all the more salient, as I explain in the third section, which addresses whether a world construed as an egological sphere can serve as the basis for a community. How do we respond to the animal in our midst that is more stirred by music than we are? How do we acknowledge another that may be like-minded but not like-bodied and in whom we consequently cannot see ourselves? The four walls of Gregor’s room with its many doors and one window turn out to be the test case for the possibility for exchange between subjects of whatever stripe through the orifices of their bodies.

** * * * **

In the notes for his 1907 lecture course Die Idee der Phänomenologie, Husserl poses a series of rhetorical questions,

Soll ich sagen: nur die Phänomene sind dem Erkennenden wahrhaft gegeben, über den Zusammenhang seiner Erlebnisse kommt er nie und nimmer hinaus, also kann er mit wahrhaftem Rechte nur sagen: Ich bin, alles Nicht-Ich ist bloß Phänomen […]?
Soll ich mich also auf den Standpunkt des Solipsismus stellen? (Hua II, p. 20)

If the questions are rhetorical, it is because the answer should be a resounding no. Here, as elsewhere, Husserl will contend that the accusation of solipsism mistakes the nature of phenomenology, which concerns itself not with the existence of the world but with the intentional structure of consciousness. David Carr explains that Husserl’s aim was not to prove the existence of the world on the basis of the ego, as it was for Descartes, but to elucidate the sense of the world for a transcendent ego that is not itself a phenomenon (Carr 1987, pp. 46–48).

According to Husserl, consciousness is always directed outside itself toward something that transcends it in the sense that it is never exhausted by the ego’s intentional acts, be they thoughts, dreams, memories, or fantasies. The orientation of consciousness
toward what lies beyond it represents the opposite of solipsism, which consists in the claim that the only being is the subject which, in projecting its thoughts, generates the world. With the introduction of the transcendental reduction, Husserl believed he made sufficiently plain that the object of phenomenology is not reality itself, whatever the merits of this concept may be, and that his philosophy, consequently, could not be accused of passing judgment on the world’s existence. Yet the charge of solipsism would continue to trouble him until his final years, and in 1929 he devoted the fifth of his *Cartesianische Meditationen* to the experience of other minds and the relation of this experience to the establishment of a common sphere.

Throughout the Fifth Meditation he reiterates that the other cannot be there for me like any other object for several reasons, which are worth enumerating, as they draw attention to some of the fundamental concepts of transcendental phenomenology, which also structure Gregor Samsa’s experience. First and foremost, the other is not an object understood specifically as the synthetic unity produced out of the stream of my mental life and operations, “dem Strom meiner reinen Bewußtseinserlebnisse.” In other words, it is not an intentional object that I perceive in always different aspects—*Abschattungen* in Husserl’s vocabulary—but which I recognize as aspects of one and the same object. Furthermore, the other does not exist for me as an innerworldly phenomenon or object I intend but constitutes the condition for such phenomenality as a consciousness itself. This amounts to saying that the ego does not belong to the world as an object but represents instead the conditions necessary for an object to appear to us as a thing of the world.

This leads to Husserl’s second point: every ego inhabits its own sphere or *Eigenheitssphäre* (*Hua* I, pp. 124-130)—a fact phenomenology brings to the fore in bracketing the assumption, characteristic of the natural attitude, that the world is there for us.

---

11 Husserl’s shorthand for the world-in-itself apart from all thought is “das An-sich-Seiende,” which is how he describes Descartes’ notion of formal reality in *Hua* VI, 81.

12 The phrase appears in one form or another throughout Husserl’s writings, especially from the first volume of *Ideen* onward. The quoted phrase is found in the *Cartesianische Meditationen* (*Hua* I, p. 121), though this and similar locutions can be found in countless other texts by Husserl.
as an incontrovertible reality that not only precedes but also succeeds our existence. In setting this assumption aside, phenomenology directs our attention toward the objects and practices given to each of us as egos that occupy individual spheres, i.e., spheres whose “Sinn” and “Seinsgeltung” \((Hua\ I, \ p. \ 65)\) derive from mental acts, or what Husserl calls \emph{Erlebnisse} in an idiosyncratic translation of Descartes’ \emph{cogitationes}. How another ego can present itself to me in its subjectivity when we do not share a universe becomes a problem for Husserl, and the only way he can resolve it is through what he calls an “‘analogisierende’ Auffassung” \((Hua\ I, \ p. \ 110)\) in which the subject perceives another as analogous to itself. To make this claim, however, Husserl must first consider how the subject experiences itself as an embodied being, since it is only this experience which enables it to perceive others as psycho-physical unities or, in the vocabulary of \emph{Ideen II}, as Ich-Menschen. \(^{14}\)

In both \emph{Ideen II} and the \emph{Cartesianische Meditationen}, Husserl insists that even after the ego has set aside everything other than itself in the transcendental reduction a synthetic unity remains: the world as a phenomenon, a correlate of consciousness, an intentional object. So all encompassing is this unity that he will proclaim, “Wir haben eigentlich nichts verloren, aber das gesamte absolute Sein gewonnen, das, recht verstanden, alle weltliche Transzendenzen in sich birgt, sie in sich ‘konstituiert’” \((Hua\ III, \ 94)\). The absolute being referred to in this passage is the pure I that serves as the basis for phenomena understood specifically as something experienced, apprehended, \emph{erlebt}; in Cartesian terms one could say that the \emph{cogito} is the ground for all meaningful entities or intentional objects generated through its own \emph{cognitiones}. Yet \emph{Ideen II} and the \emph{Cartesianische Meditationen} will

\(^{13}\) Dermot Moran and Joseph Cohen offer an lucid definition of the \emph{Eigenheitssphäre} or what they translate as “sphere of ownness”: “‘Sphere of ownness’ (Eigenheitsphäre) or ‘original sphere’ (Originärsphäre) are expressions used by Husserl to refer to the range of conscious experiences, in which one experiences oneself in one’s own particular domain of immanent, egoic, conscious experiences, after the transcendental reduction has taken place” \(\text{Moran and Cohen 2012, p. 304}\).\(^{14}\) Curiously, this turn of phrase is reversed to become \emph{Menschen-Ich} in the \emph{Cartesianische Meditationen}, as if Husserl wanted to indicate that there is no particular species of ego, such as an \emph{Ich-Menschen}, only one ego that presents itself to us in the cultural and social sphere as a human ego or \emph{Menschen-Ich}.\(^{14}\)
complicate this argument otherwise so central to Husserl’s later work. In both texts he will assert that what is given with the world that appears to me is my own body (Leib) as a perceptual organ.

In Ideen II Husserl writes with uncharacteristic bluntness, “Zunächst ist der Leib das Mittel aller Wahrnehmung, er ist das Wahrnehmungsorgan, er ist bei aller Wahrnehmung notwendig dabei” (Hua IV, p. 56); and in the Cartesianische Meditationen he elaborates,


Among the sensations that present themselves to the pure ego, there is one that is like no other, namely, the sensations of my body, which Husserl refers to as kinaestheta, to distinguish them from aestheta, the sensations associated with foreign objects. Whereas all the other bodies that the ego perceives are merely things that it intends (Körper), the body (Leib) I regulate and govern (“schalte und walte”) is unique in that it accompanies all my mental acts and is an essential component of my representations. In Ideen II, Husserl points to the example of a centaur to demonstrate that even imaginary creatures bear a relation to my body:

Imaginiere ich mir einen Zentauren, so kann ich nicht anders als ihn in einer gewissen Orientierung und in einer gewissen Beziehung zu meinen Sinnesorganen imaginieren: er steht ‘rechts’ von mir, ‘näher’ sich oder ‘entfernt’ sich, ‘dreht’ sich, wendet sich ‘mir’ zu oder ab. (Hua IV, p. 56)

Whenever I perceive an object, whether real or imaginary, I do so from a vantage point in space and time and my experience of myself as an embodied being paves the way for my recognition of others as embodied beings, that is, alter egos, similarly situated in space and time.

At first glance, Husserl would seem to suggest that the perception of the other should be understood as a reciprocal process. For instance in Ideen II he writes,
To recognize the other as another means to understand that it inhabits a ‘here’ from which it regards and intends what transcends its consciousness. In this respect, it functions as an analogy of myself. It constitutes its surroundings, as I do mine, from the vantage point provided by its body, which stands opposite me and figures as the ‘there’ to my ‘here.’ My ‘here’ as such constitutes the other’s ‘there’ and vice versa, in what would seem like a perfect instance of mirroring. If there is any hesitation in Ideen II, it is in the admission that the ego of the other is not given to me in exactly the same fashion as its body. Rather the other’s subjectivity, its status as a thinking being is ‘appresented,’ which is a term Husserl coins to designate what accompanies an intuition but is not presented directly in the intuitions. What is appresented is “Mit-da” but not “Selbst-da” (Hua I, p. 139), to quote from the Cartesianische Meditationen. By comparing or analogizing the other’s movements and gestures with my own, I am able to discern that the other is not a thing, animal, or machine but a person like myself. The mental life of the other is appresented with his or her movements, which resemble mine, and the similarity is what enables me to empathize with him or her as my counterpart. Indeed, in Ideen II Husserl underscores that empathy is the sole means for establishing a common world: “Die von Anderen gesetzten Dinge sind auch die meinen: in der Einfühlung mache ich die Setzung des Anderen mit… ich stelle mich auf den Standpunkt des Anderen” (Hua IV, pp. 168–69). In adopting the vantage point of the other, I succeed in seeing the world through its eyes, and this provides the foundation for a shared world or what Husserl also calls an ‘objective’ sphere, i.e., a sphere anyone would agree to, were they to stand in my position and I in theirs.
If there is a critical difference between *Ideen II* and the *Cartesianische Meditationen*, it is that in the latter work Husserl questions whether the self can occupy the position of the other and vicariously experience its mental acts. He continues to emphasize the importance of an analogizing apprehension, but this time he is insistent that the apprehension of the other still occurs within an egological universe, an “Eigenheitssphäre,” as previously mentioned. The difference may appear slight but it is crucial all the same, as it reveals the necessity but also difficulty of justifying a shared, objective sphere from a transcendental perspective.

In the *Cartesianische Meditationen*, Husserl stresses that the body of the other is not an “Ausdruck” (*Hua* I, p. 96), “Anzeichen” (*Hua* I, p. 166), or “Organ” (*Hua* I, p. 96) of the other’s spirit, as he had argued in *Ideen II*. It is not the vehicle for a subjectivity that exists independently of me. Such a claim would amount to positing the existence of something apart from consciousness, which, as discussed previously, is a presumption that philosophy cannot substantiate and consequently must set aside in keeping with the phenomenological procedure known as the *epoché*. While Husserl had gestured at the act of bracketing any realist or dogmatic assumptions in his 1911 lecture course *Die Idee der Phänomenologie*, it is only in his 1913 publication *Ideen I* that he introduces the technical term *epoché* as a preliminary step toward the transcendental reduction, in which, as Sebastian Luft writes, “being” is reduced to “being-given” (Luft 2007, p. 374.) Looked at from this perspective, we can say that what philosophy addresses is the sense the world has for us and the operations of consciousness that produce this sense. On this basis we can distinguish between, say, a fellow conscious being and an insect which would appear from the outside to be governed not by its intellect but by natural instinct as a near machine rather than a free subject. In this vein Husserl writes,

> Es ist nicht so und kann nicht so sein, daß der Körper meiner Primordial sphäre, der mir das andere Ich […] indiziert, sein Dasein und Mitdasein also appräsentieren könnte, ohne daß dieser Primordialkörper *den Sinn gewöhnne* eines mit zu dem anderen Ego gehörigen, also nach Art der ganzen assoziativ-apperzeptiven Leistung
While the point Husserl makes here would appear to be technical, it is of central importance to his claim that the world I perceive can have objective value even if I cannot see it from the other’s perspective. Owing to its coordinated movements and gestures, the body facing me strikes me as belonging to another person; it has this sense. This is its function within the universe that presents itself immediately to me, which is to say within my own “primordial sphere.”

Where Husserl differs in this text from Ideen II is in his explication of what it means for the ego of another to be appresented or given indirectly along with its body. In lieu of defining the other merely as an opposing pole, he emphasizes instead that the other has a relation to its body and, by extension, to the world that appears to it through this medium. This is what it means to apperceive another as an alter ego. It belongs to its definition or sense that it exists with its own intentional life, as do I, with one notable exception. The other as apperceived is not independent of me; it remains a part of my world. It derives its meaning from my experience of it as another mind that exists for itself: “[eine] in mir als fremd[e] und somit für sich seiend[e]… Monade” (Hua I, p. 156).

Throughout the Fifth Meditation, Husserl argues again and again that I apperceive the other in me as something other than me and this has significance for two reasons. First it shows that even within my egological sphere, I can experience “Nichteigenes” (Hua I, p. 176), what is not my own, and secondly, this experience enables me to recognize other perspectives on the world I inhabit, thereby establishing the latter’s legitimacy and objectivity as a common surrounding. Dan Zahavi comments in this vein: “When I realize that I can be an alter ego for the other just as he can be it for me, a marked change in my own constitutive significance takes place […] I come to the realization that I am only one among many and that my perspective on the world is by no means privileged” (Zahavi 2001, p. 160).
My world is enlarged and turned into the shared, if contested, property of all through the encounter with the other in my own primordial sphere. The *alter ego* in me transforms the nexus of meaning and ontological validity that is properly speaking my own into something that others also have a stake in, even if their impressions are widely divergent.

Much the same could be said of Gregor Samsa, who is as moved by his sister’s violin playing as he surmises his parents are. He assumes he is a member of the community once he sees the tension drain from their faces and presumes that they, like him, are transported by his sister’s art: “Die Familie war gänzlich vom Violenspiel in Anspruch genommen” (KKA VI/1, p. 185). Yet, the experience of community is short-lived, since it turns out that neither Gregor’s sister nor his parents find ‘appresented’ in his body another ego. What Kafka’s “Die Verwandlung” reveals is that Husserl’s account of intersubjectivity, of a community of like-minded subjects hinges on the presence of another in a body that is also like mine and which I consequently recognize as belonging to a fellow human being. In the pages that follow I will consider what place a character like Gregor Samsa has in a world so conceived. Husserl’s contention that I apprehend the other, the *alter ego*, by comparing its bodily movements to my own meets its match in a figure like Gregor who is like-minded but not like-bodied and hence cannot be recognized as a member of the community—in this case, his family. Kafka’s tale exposes the difficulties transcendental phenomenology has in accounting for other minds. At the same time, through the force of its own example it shows the power of fiction to represent other minds as other minds, that is, subjectivity in the third person.

* * *

Although “Die Verwandlung” is narrated in the third person, it adopts Gregor’s point of view until his death a few pages before the end, and this means that every observation the narrator makes is unreliable in the sense that it reflects both the scope as well as limitations of Gregor’s perspective. Do Gregor’s sister and mother clean his room out of concern for him,
as he surmises? Do they realize that he hides himself, so as not to disturb them? Gregor is convinced that he understands their motives and they understand his, but this remains a supposition the text can only report but never corroborate, as it is limited to his perspective. A case in point for this constraint is the passage in which Gregor remarks on the swiftness with which his sister leaves his room after delivering food: “Und aus Zartgefühl, da sie wußte, daß Gregor vor ihr nicht essen würde, entfernte sie sich eiligst und drehte sogar den Schlüssel um, damit nur Gregor merken könne, daß er es sich so behaglich machen dürfe, wie er wolle” (KKA VI/1, p. 147, emphasis added). The number of speculative claims made in this one statement is nothing short of remarkable. Gregor imputes motives (“aus Zartgefühl”), awareness (“da sie wußte), and intentionality (“damit nur Gregor merken könne”) to his sister because he assumes that she is like him—a human? an animal?—and that they stand in a reciprocal relation.

Who or what is Gregor? However naïve this question may seem, the text can answer it with a surprising degree of certainty and in keeping with the phenomenological definition of a subject, which is as much a testament to as a critique of this school of thought for reasons I will explain shortly. To the degree that the text is focalized through Gregor, we are witness to his inner life, but the narrative also quotes his ruminations in a manner that immediately calls to mind another work central to the philosophical tradition and at the heart of phenomenology. The first citation reads, “‘Was ist mit mir geschehen?’, dachte er” (KKA VI/1, p.115), which is followed one paragraph later by, “‘Wie wäre es, wenn ich noch ein wenig weiterschließe und alle Narrheiten vergäße’, dachte er” (KKA VI/1, p.116). The sequence continues with the statement, “‘Ach Gott’, dachte er” (KKA VI/1, p. 116), and culminates in the exclamation, “‘Dies frühzeitige Aufstehen’, dachte er, ‘macht einen ganz blödsinnig’” (KKA VI/1, p. 117). As is likely evident, each of these claims is punctuated by the refrain “dachte er” which singles Gregor out as a thinking being, a res cogitans. Gregor is
first and foremost a *cogito*. And lest this interpretation seem too far-fetched, it is worth pointing out that he wonders in the first few pages whether he is asleep or awake much like Descartes, who in the first of his *Meditations* realizes that his dreams are indistinguishable from his waking reality: “Combien de fois m’est-il arrivé de songer, la nuit, que j’étais en ce lieu, que j’étais habillé, que j’étais auprès du feu, quoique je fusse tout nu dedans mon lit” (Descartes 1904, p. 14). The fact that Gregor awakens, as the first line of the text tells us, “aus unruhigen Träumen” (KKA VI/1, p. 115) and struggles to affirm the reality of his situation, “Es war kein Traum” (KKA VI/1, p. 115), echoes Descartes’ concerns, as does his position under a blanket (KKA VI/1, p. 115), which recalls Descartes’ own position in bed.

Descartes concedes that he can never know whether he is asleep or awake but adds that the difference is of little importance in any event since, in doubting his perceptions, he ends up confirming his existence as a thinking thing, a mind unencumbered by the flesh. Gregor, by contrast, does not have the luxury of ignoring his body given the pressures on him as the sole bread-earner for his family, who must rise early in the morning to travel to far-off places to generate sales for his firm. His is a life in which he has no time to sit by the fire or lie naked in bed. And yet circumstance compels him to do what for Descartes cannot be coerced: to meditate on his existence, which for the French philosopher is an act that rises above all contingency.

In other words, as a result of his physical inability to get out of bed, he is forced to reflect on his existence, which for Descartes is a contradiction in terms. Yet Gregor is not only a *cogito* but also an embodied being, which is why the text’s evident allusions to the *Meditations* are at the same time a parody. Gregor is trapped in the world of the flesh, weighed down by the body that prevents him from fulfilling his duties as a member of the

---

15 Stanley Corngold’s argument that the tale brings to the foreground the discrepancy between mind and body fits within this Cartesian frame. He characterizes Gregor Samsa as a distorted or mutilated metaphor, divided between an insect body as the vehicle and human consciousness as the tenor: “In shifting incessantly the relation of Gregor’s mind and body, Kafka shatters the suppositious unity of ideal tenor and bodily vehicle within the metaphor” (Corngold 1988, p. 56).
social world. It is this body that he must first learn to manipulate and control to participate in a world of supposedly like-minded individuals in an almost textbook demonstration of Husserl’s theory of kinaesthetics or bodily motion based on the ego’s perceptions of its own body. Indeed, following an initial awkward period, in which he could not figure out how to rotate his body or to orchestrate the movement of his many thin legs, he becomes quite skilled in scaling the walls and ceiling of his room: “Aber nun hatte er natürlich seinen Körper ganz anders in der Gewalt als früher” (KKA VI/1, p. 159). One could say that mind is victorious over matter, depending on how much emphasis one places here on the use of “force” [Gewalt]. Yet Gregor’s body is also the obstacle to his integration, the hurdle he cannot surmount no matter how deft he becomes in his locomotion. Thus, he is continually astonished that the world in which he sees himself does not see him, and the individuals to whom he turns for support do not recognize him.

It begins with his voice which to his mind is still suitable for verbal communication but which no one else can understand despite his best efforts at concealing its metallic undertone: “Man verstand zwar also seine Worte nicht mehr, trotzdem sie ihm genug klar, klarer als früher, vorgekommen waren, vielleicht infolge der Gewöhnung des Ohres” (KKA VI/1, pp. 131-32). And it ends with his attempt to touch his sister whose music so touched him:

Er war entschlossen, bis zur Schwester vorzudringen, sie am Rock zu zupfen, und ihr dadurch anzudeuten, sie möge doch mit ihrer Violine in sein Zimmer kommen, denn niemand lohnte hier das Spiel so, wie er es lohnen wollte. Er wollte sie nicht mehr aus seinem Zimmer lassen, wenigstens nicht, solange er lebte. (KKA VI/1, pp. 185–86)

What links these two incidents which function in more than one way as bookends for the text is that each revolves around Gregor’s efforts to make himself understood not merely as a living being but as a member of the social community. Such a community should in principle

16 Margot Norris likewise emphasizes Gregor’s experience of his own body within the context of Gregor’s metamorphosis from an exploited clerk with little metaphorical backbone to an insect that literally has no spine (Norris 2010, p. 21).
consist of like-minded beings with the capacity to discern the intentions and motivations of another based on the movement of their musculature, be it the musculature of the mouth and throat that produces speech or that of the legs that carry one forward in space.\textsuperscript{17} In the vocabulary of phenomenology members of this community should have the ability to ‘appresent,’ that is, to make present to themselves that the other has an ego or psychic life, even though that life is never empirically manifest. For Husserl, the ability to see the other not simply as an animated body but as an “Ich-subjekt” (\textit{Hua} VI, pp. 175-76) distinguishes human beings from animals, who live but do not take part in a social sphere.

Animals, in short, are animated beings, who are in possession of a soul, as are humans, themselves living creatures. Both humans and animals are characterized by their psycho-physical constitution; both display the unity of body and soul in their animated bodies (\textit{beseelte Leiber}) in contrast to things, which are defined exclusively by their extension in space as material bodies (\textit{Körper}). In this context it is worth noting—and in keeping with the possible allusions to the \textit{Meditations} in Kafka’s text—that Gregor’s sister is described in the final sentence specifically as a \textit{res extensa}; indeed the final word of the text is ‘extended’: “Und es war [den Eltern] wie eine Bestätigung ihrer neuen Träume und guten Absichten, als am Ziele ihrer Fahrt die Tochter…ihren jungen Körpert \textit{dehnte}” (KKA VI/1, p. 200, emphasis added). Yet humans are not only living organisms, according to Husserl. They are also thinking beings, and here his philosophy must go through the most strenuous contortions to make the claim that the transcendental ego can also serve as the basis for the personal ego and social subject.

Husserl was not the first thinker to observe that the subjectivity of another can never be represented as an object and still remain subjectivity; consciousness objectified is not

\textsuperscript{17} “Die Verwandlung” places peculiar emphasis on Gregor’s mouth. We learn of his surprise as he tries to chew food and discovers that he does not have any teeth in his mouth. We are also told about the extraordinary effort he makes to lock his door with his mouth, since he no longer has any hands. His mouth becomes a tool for numerous mechanical functions once it is no longer used for speech.
consciousness lived, which is why the term ‘Erlebnis’ holds such importance for him. Our minds operate in a continuous stream (the so-called ‘Erlebnisstrom’), which we can reflect on but never bring to a halt. Consider the stream of associations that run through Gregor’s head in the following sentences chosen almost at random from the text:

Und er sah zur Weckuhr hinüber, die auf dem Kasten tickte. “Himmlischer Vater!” dachte er. Es war halb sieben Uhr, und die Zeiger gingen ruhig vorwärts, es war sogar halb vorüber, es näherten sich schon dreiviertel. Sollte der Wecker nicht geläutet haben? (KKA VI/1, p. 118)

The combination of seeing, hearing, wondering, trying to retrieve from memory, and so on in this passage offers some hints as to why the subjectivity of another can never be turned into an object and still remain subjectivity. This impasse, however, brings to the fore the problem of how I can ever be sure there are other egos like me. Husserl proposes that I come to know the other through a reciprocal relation, but the relation does not in any way challenge my status as a pure ego or monad that exists for itself. The other does not construct me as a subject, interpolate me into the social order, or embed me in a symbolic system. On the contrary I constitute myself as a social being in recognizing the other as another ego. This operation will distinguish Gregor from his family.

As indicated previously, the process by which I apprehend another as a subject is called ‘appresentation’: the inner life of the other accompanies my experience of its physical being. When this happens, the corporeal movements of the other assume for me the status of signs:

So bildet sich allmählich ein System von Anzeichen aus, und es ist schließlich wirklich eine Analogie zwischen dem Zeichensystem des ‘Ausdrucks’ seelischer Vorkommnisse […] und dem Zeichensystem der Sprache für den Ausdruck von Gedanken. (Hua IV, p. 166)

For all its seeming self-evidence the analogy between the gestures of the body and the signs of language articulated in this passage ignores an important difference, which Husserl will underscore elsewhere in the volume but ignores here for the sake of his analogy. To assume that the body is an expression of psychic life requires some justification, especially given that
the psyche does not exist in space and has no extension, as Husserl reminds us on more than one occasion. If the body nonetheless serves as a vehicle for the psyche, enabling it to be discerned and read, it is because the two are wedded to each other in a way that becomes apparent only through the experience of the other. The other, one could say, allows me to experience myself.

It enables me to locate myself in time and space. Through the other I am able to acquire a here-and-now that functions as the zero point of orientation for all my intentional experiences. Husserl does not shy away from making this point. What is curious—at least for readers of phenomenology in a post-Freudian age—is that it is not the gaze of the other that situates me. As noted earlier, the ego cannot be an object and still remain an ego that carries out freely or of its own accord a stream of mental operations. Rather the other provides me with an occasion to regard myself from the vantage point of the other erected almost exclusively for the purpose of this self-examination. Husserl intimates as much in the following passage from *Ideen II*:

Erst mit der Einfühlung und mit der beständigen Richtung der Erfahrungsbetrachtung auf das mit dem fremden Leib appräsentierte […] Seelenleben konstituiert sich die abgeschlossene Einheit Mensch, und diese übertrage ich im weiteren auf mich selbst. (Hua IV, p. 167, emphasis added)

As is evident from this quote, Husserl calls the process by which I adopt the vantage point of another empathy and it is among the most problematic concepts in his work, chiefly because it does not help me overcome but instead reinforces my isolation.

No one seems to have been more aware of this than Kafka, who in “Die Verwandlung” shows that to adopt the vantage point of another is hardly to bridge a divide. One need only think of Gregor’s failed effort to appease his father when the latter finds him outside his room:

Und so flüchtete er sich zur Tür seines Zimmers und drückte sich an sie, damit der Vater beim Eintritt vom Vorzimmer her gleich sehen könne, daß Gregor die beste Absicht habe, sofort in sein Zimmer zurückzukehren. (KKA VI/1, p. 168)
Needless to say, Gregor fails in the attempt to anticipate how his father will see him, since his father’s psyche is nothing but a projection of his own intentionality. For Husserl, in empathizing with the other ‘I’ adopt his position and in so doing learn that his ‘here’ is my ‘there’ and vice versa. This insight, as he would have it, is the prerequisite for the creation of an objective world. Via the experience of the other, I encounter myself as an embodied being that stands not only at the center of its own universe, but also as a member of a common sphere. In this sphere, I can make myself understood to others and others to me because we recognize each other as like-minded subjects thanks to our similarly organized bodies, that is, bodies with a gestural language that would appear to be the same.

It is clear that Gregor is excluded from this community and that the text in large part turns on the increasing brutality of the family as Gregor comes more and more to resemble household dirt. In his last appearance in the living room, he tells us that he is “staubbedeckt” and carries with him “Fäden, Haar, Speiseüberreste,” having long since abandoned any grooming or care of the self. In this condition, and with a rotting apple on his back, he exemplifies the definition of Ungeziefer given in Grimms’ Dictionary:

\[\text{Der begriff wurzelt im heidnischen opferwesen […] durch das präfix un wird nun das zum opfer nicht geeignete bezeichnet, das unreine, verdorbene, asigle fleisch, unkraut, unbrauchbare früchte, unrauth sowohl wie das zu opferzwecken nicht geeignete thier. (Deutsches Wörterbuch, vol. 24, column 943)}\]

Gregor becomes, like the rotting vegetables and food scraps he eats, waste—a matter so polluted that it cannot serve as a sacrificial offering to expiate communal sins. His ungroomed and withered body comes to figure as a “brauner Fleck” (KKA VI/1, p. 166), which is how he previously described himself in a scarcely veiled allusion to the doctrine of original sin and the stain associated with it. In this capacity, he puts the idea of community to the test. The brutality of the family toward Gregor reveals the brutality of an ethical system that identifies the person by way of her corporeal form. In such a system, any physical

\[\text{\textsuperscript{18} For further discussion of these points, see Hua I, pp. 145-49 and Hua IV, pp. 131-34.}\]
element that does not fit within this established frame can only return as vermin or dirt, that is, as a terrifying creature or an inconsequential speck. It is no accident that as soon as Gregor dies he is swept up with a broom and discarded with the trash, which signals his final transformation from a feared creature to an ignored object.

What would the alternative to such a system be in which even empathy with the other would seem to amount to nothing more than empathy with oneself? The narration of other minds in fiction provides one answer to this dilemma. As Käte Hamburger noted in her landmark study *Die Logik der Dichtung*, the representation of subjectivity in the third person is so typical of the novel that we hardly notice it all (Hamburger 1994, pp. 72–78). Dorrit Cohn expands on this insight, “The special life-likeness of narrative fiction [...] depends on what writers and readers know least in life: how another mind thinks, another body feels” (Cohn 1978, pp. 5-6). A case in point for this theory would be the opening line of “Die Verwandlung”: “Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer verwandelt” (KKa VI/1, p. 115). The authority with which the narrative portrays Gregor’s self-perception would make no sense in any other context save in fiction, where we expect the mental life of characters, human or not, to be rendered transparent.19 The self-evidence of this practice in fictional narratives is itself an index of the degree to which we take the risk of fiction in daily life. We do so not because fiction is a plausible untruth, but because plausibility is all we have when it comes to other

---

19 Both Cohn and Hamburger cite numerous examples of narrated, third-person consciousness in fictional works, including works by Kafka. Cohn points to the following passage from *Das Urteil* as a classic example of “free indirect discourse” or what she calls “narrated monologue,” which is closer to the German *erlebte Rede*: “Seine Blicke fielen auf das letzte Stockwerk des an den Steinbruch angrenzenden Hauses. Wie ein Licht aufzuckt, so fuhren die Fensterflügel eines Fensters dort auseinander, ein Mensch, schwach und dünn in der Ferne und Höhe, beugte sich mit einem Ruck weit vor und streckte die Arme noch weiter aus. Wer war es? Ein Freund? Ein guter Mensch? Einer, der teilnahm? Einer, der helfen wollte? War es ein einzeln? Waren es alle? War noch Hilfe” (cited in Cohn 1978, p. 123). Hamburger, for her part, turns to *Das Schloß* in her analysis of the link between the epic preterite and the narration of inner states: “Und er verglich in Gedanken den Kirchturm der Heimat mit dem Turn dort oben” (cited in Hamburger 1994, p. 75). Whether Kafka’s animal stories speak not only “for the animal,” but “as the animal,” as Margot Norris contends, is subject to question (Norris 2010, p. 19). What they do is narrate consciousness, which, as Husserl insisted, is not something empirical like the mind studied in psychology but a transcendental condition for the world to be known, imagined, or experienced.
minds. Fiction is the precarious but powerful basis of a community of the presumably liked-minded, a community that cannot be substantiated only supposed in a manner that makes life together no more and no less than art in action.

Husserl himself seems to have recognized the degree to which we take a leap of faith, or, rather, a fictional leap when it comes to other minds. In a note written some time between 1932 and 1935, he points to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* to ask whether the animals in our world also contribute to the constitution of that world as fellow psychic beings:


The animals we confront may be fundamentally different than Gulliver’s horses and yet Gulliver’s horses teach us that what distinguishes humans and animals are not their bodies but their minds. Fiction offers a window into other minds and in so doing expands the lifeworld at once made and shared by variously embodied subjects.

---

20 For a lengthier discussion of the role that animals play in Husserl’s theory of transcendental intersubjectivity, see Heinämaa (2013), pp. 90-97. As Heinämaa points out, animals belong to our cultural world but do not co-constitute it because they lack language, and more specifically writing, which is necessary for the unfolding of a common sphere that stretches into the past and extends into the future (Heinämaa 2013, pp. 97-98). I am grateful to Sara Heinämaa for drawing my attention to Husserl’s comment in his notes on *Gulliver’s Travels*. 
WORKS CITED


