

Finitude, Fallenness, and Immediacy Husserlian Replies to Westphal and Smith

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Merold Westphal and James K. A. Smith have been at the forefront of the discussions amongst Christians about the extent to which we should embrace a more Continental “postmodern turn” to interpretation.¹ In contrast to Nancey Murphy, who develops an “Anglo-American” postmodern philosophy by focusing on Wittgenstein, Austin, and others, Westphal’s and Smith’s arguments utilize insights from continental philosophers, Derrida, Heidegger, Lyotard, Gadamer, and others. But not far in the background lies the importance of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, which helped mentor Heidegger and had significant influence upon Derrida. Westphal and Smith realize they must address Husserl’s work on the “metaphysics of presence” and our supposed ability to be in direct acquaintance with reality. For if Husserl’s work is correct, then their own claims that *all* epistemic access requires interpretation would be undermined.

Against Husserl, they argue that he abandons the “natural standpoint.” They see him saying that we somehow can transcend all our particularity to achieve a naked gaze directly, immediately into reality, which Westphal claims only God can do. To them, Husserl advocates that we can, in effect, become disembodied and shed all our historical situatedness, including our past and our finitude. But such an attitude is rife with presumption and is contrary to two important Christian teachings: the finitude of our perspectives and the fallenness of our existence.

But, do they properly understand and rightly reject Husserl? Or, might they have missed something important from Husserl that actually might address their key objections against our abilities to know reality directly? I think Husserl’s views of immediacy, if properly understood, actually meet

ABSTRACT:

1. Consider, for instance, how they are in demand as authors. See their contributions in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005). Or, consider their books in the Church and Postmodern Culture series, edited by Smith. He wrote *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006). Westphal authored *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

their many concerns quite well. Yet, contrary to them, I believe he still explains cogently how we can have direct acquaintance with reality. To help explore this, I will focus on Westphal's interaction with Husserl and then how that fits into his own positive views. I will supplement that understanding by appealing to Smith, to help round out their views and interpretation of Husserl. But then I will argue that they are quite mistaken about Husserl. This argument also will allow me to show why their view, that "everything is interpretation," is mistaken. Of course, that conclusion will have much significance beyond merely Smith's and Westphal's own claims, for it also will allow me to show why Husserl's earlier work actually shows us how we can know reality directly.

Taking Husserl to Task: Westphal's and Smith's Cases

Westphal sees modernity's core goals as an attempt to achieve absolute clarity and certainty in our knowledge. This is important background for seeing how Westphal's case against Husserlian immediacy is situated. Two main strategies have been used to try to achieve these goals: (1) Cartesian immediacy and (2) Hegelian totality. The former has been construed as the "mutually naked presence of thought and its object to each other," in which both remain "pure and unadulterated" in this mutual presence.² Westphal characterizes this view as one in which "neither inference nor interpretation separates us from immaculate, immediate, infallible intuition . . . the object is totally here and at no distance that might dim or distort our view of it."³ Moreover, such "pure presence" is concerned just with the present, and thus it has no reference to a past "in which it is essentially indebted" or the future "in which it will be completed."⁴ According to him, this "metaphysics of presence" is a claim of immediate access and presence to either meanings or facts, and it is tied to a quest to make philosophy autonomous, and place theology in the service of philosophy's own project.⁵

On the other hand, postmodernism is a critique of this metaphysics of presence. It is a denial of any clear and distinct ideas and any unmediated, infallible, pure access to the very presence of things themselves. As such it is a rejection of the Cartesian aspiration; but it also is a rejection of Hegelian totality, in which the totality has the only true immediacy.⁶

There are at least two main places in which he discusses Husserl's project and (in his view) its failure. In *Phenomenologies and Religious Truth*,

2. Merold Westphal, "Postmodernism and Religious Reflection," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38 (1995): 128–9.

3. *Ibid.*, 129.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 130.

6. *Ibid.*, 128–9.

Westphal portrays Husserl as advocating a “Cartesian dream of rigorous science.”⁷ According to him, Husserl advocated our ability to achieve a “complete and ultimate grounding on the basis of absolute insights, insights behind which one cannot go back any further.”⁸ But these claims strike Westphal suspiciously, especially in light of our tendencies toward “situated self-deceptions.”⁹

Indeed, to him, these Husserlian claims are flat-out mistaken. Instead, he claims that Heidegger has shown successfully that all experience actually has an as-structure; that is, “even at the level of ordinary sense perception and prior to any explicit assertion there is no ‘mere seeing’ but always the act that sees something *as* something.”¹⁰ Westphal takes Heidegger’s paragraph 32 of *Being and Time* as the “crucial transition” to realizing that all seeing really involves interpretation, thereby eliminating any possibility for immediacy.¹¹

For Westphal, this point undermines Husserl’s project to achieve immediacy in two ways. First, the “as-structure” of all experience introduces an inevitable element of mediation into any and all experience. As Westphal says, “only that which is taken can be given—which is to say that nothing is given free of interpretation.”¹² Second, we can never achieve a foundation of certainties, based on experiences (or beliefs based on those experiences) in which their objects are directly given. Instead, every interpretation presupposes an earlier one.¹³ Thus we find ourselves in something like Heidegger’s hermeneutical circle, and “no reflection, no matter how methodologically rigorous, enables us to outflank life and escape our entanglement with it.”¹⁴ Indeed, Westphal is so confident that he claims that the “necessity of this turn [from the Cartesian/Husserlian transcendental project to the hermeneutics of finitude] has been *thoroughly* established by the work of Heidegger, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, and others (including, incidentally, Wittgenstein).”¹⁵

Ironically, Westphal thinks Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology finds its natural fulfillments in the hermeneutics of finitude due to Heidegger’s hermeneutical circle, and then in turn in the hermeneutics of suspicion, since we distort what we see due to hidden, devious desires. Whereas

7. Merold Westphal, “Phenomenologies and Religious Truth,” *Phenomenology of the Truth Proper to Religion*, ed. Daniel Guerrière (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 109.

8. *Ibid.*, quoting Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorin Cairns (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973), 2. Husserl wrote this book in 1931.

9. Westphal, “Phenomenologies and Religious Truth,” 110.

10. *Ibid.*, 112.

11. *Ibid.*, 111.

12. *Ibid.*, 112.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 115 (emphasis and bracketed insert mine).

the hermeneutics of finitude are about our blindness from perspective, the hermeneutics of suspicion are about our blindness due to perversity.¹⁶ Our hidden desires shape “the intentionalities that give shape to human existence,” and so “the phenomenological project completes itself only when it incorporates into itself the kind of suspicion that carries the task of interpretation to this level.”¹⁷

In his “Hermeneutics as Epistemology,” Westphal attacks Husserl’s use of the “phenomenological reduction,” which involves his notion of “bracketing.” In Westphal’s understanding, “the phenomenological reduction abandons the natural standpoint of empirical consciousness in the midst of a surrounding real world.”¹⁸ Moreover, he thinks Husserl bracketed “the question of the relation of thought to reality,” thereby forcing the phenomenologist “to focus on the ways in which the contents of consciousness, whatever their ontological status, are given to a pure or transcendental consciousness.”¹⁹ However, for Westphal that move commits a crucial fallacy, for that consciousness is one “which intends a world of which it is not a part,” and thus Husserl advocates the very thing that Westphal says we cannot do—extricate ourselves from our situatedness and avoid the effects of our fallenness.²⁰ Thus, Husserl’s “bracket” is an attempt to abandon the natural standpoint and achieve access to “a realm of pure consciousness where presuppositionless, apodictic intuitions of essences can occur.”²¹ Westphal understands the bracket as a “rite of purification” from our situatedness, which for him is a grandiose mistake.²² To him, Husserl is so misguided that even one of the supposedly paradigmatic cases of clear knowledge, that of the self being objectively present in introspection, is mistaken.²³

In addition to his appeal to Heidegger’s point that all experience exhibits an “as-structure,” and his hermeneutical circle (with the related view of the hermeneutics of finitude), Westphal supports his own positive views by appealing to his interpretation of Kant. He utilizes an example of a black-and-white television to show that, like the television, our “receiving apparatus” allows things to appear only in certain ways. Suppose we are watching a newscast on television, and Brian Williams has on a real red and blue tie. It would be a silly mistake to attribute the existence of the tie itself to our television set. Yet, the tie *as known by us* (which seems gray) “owes its existence

16. *Ibid.*, 121.

17. *Ibid.*, 120.

18. Merold Westphal, “Hermeneutics as Epistemology,” *Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, ed. John Greco and Ernest Sosa (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 419.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 420.

23. *Ibid.*, 422.

to the receiving apparatus, though the thing in itself does not."²⁴ If we were in the studio, then we could see the tie itself as it truly is.²⁵ So, what is real in itself (the red and blue tie) does not depend for its existence on how it is apprehended by us. But, the tie-as-it-is-known-by-us does depend on how we perceive it.²⁶

Similarly, when Kant talks about the noumenal and phenomenal worlds, Westphal claims these ideas are best understood as being two ways of apprehending the one real world.²⁷ Accordingly, there is a real world, which is the world as it is known by God—the world in itself. Kant's phenomenal world is not to be identified with the real world; it is the world as it is apprehended by us. Parallel to the television illustration, to know the tie in itself (as it really is) is to be in the studio, to see the tie without any mediation from the television. To have that view is to be God, for only He has an absolute, all-encompassing point of view.²⁸ But our minds are like the black-and-white television; the mind "is a receiving or interpreting apparatus that does two things: it gives us real access to the real and, in so doing, it distorts it so that what it really is cannot be equated with the way we apprehend it."²⁹

Thus, to claim that there is a language-independent world is not sufficient to demarcate realism from Westphal's "creative anti-realism." According to him, there is objective "Truth," but only for God, for as finite and fallen creatures we can never achieve God's view, and thus we always work from a standpoint of how the world appears to us.³⁰ Indeed, for us, there will be "a pluralistic account of the phenomenal world," for "the a priories that define human cultures, paradigms, language games, and so forth are legion."³¹ Like Kant, this mindset is cemented by his view that we "never get beyond appearances or phenomenal knowledge."³² If that is the case, it would be misguided to search like Husserl did for essences or universals we can know, for we never could have what he called an eidetic intuition, that is, of a universal being immediately present before the mind. We could only have appearances of universals (for example, an appearance of the red in the ball), but never could we have access immediately to the color red itself.

24. Merold Westphal, "Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution," *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, ed. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 166.

25. *Ibid.*, 165.

26. *Ibid.*, 166.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 167. See also Merold Westphal, "Onto-theology, Metanarrative, Perspectivism, and the Gospel," in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 151.

29. Merold Westphal, "Of Stories and Languages," in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, 232.

30. Westphal, "Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution," 176.

31. *Ibid.*, 176–7.

32. Westphal, "Hermeneutics as Epistemology," 425.

Westphal also appeals to Derrida's insights, in particular his claim that "*there is nothing outside the text.*"³³ This is not a license to arbitrariness, for it signifies "textuality as a limit within which we have whatever freedom we have."³⁴ Instead, Westphal unpacks Derrida's statement epistemologically and metaphysically. Epistemically, it means that "Being must always already be conceptualized," in that we do not have access immediately to things as they really are.³⁵ Even more significantly, metaphysically the things themselves are signs and not what is signified, and as such they "essentially point beyond themselves."³⁶ Therefore, Westphal claims that "there is no signified that 'would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign' by failing to refer beyond itself."³⁷

For Derrida, there is always an absence "to" things, which somehow is present. What is not present is somehow essential to what is present. He denies that things, such as thoughts, facts, or linguistic utterances are wholes that are complete in themselves. Rather, from one re-presentation to another, there always will be *differance*, for nothing has an identity that can be circumscribed. Similarly, for Westphal our limited perspectives are "constituted to a significant degree by contingencies of linguistic usage and sociohistorical location," and they "hide" certain things from our view.³⁸ That is, our "points of view, by analogy with vision, enable us to see what can be seen from that site only by hiding from us what cannot be seen from there."³⁹

In sum, for Westphal finitude and fallenness both should be considered epistemological categories.⁴⁰ Since we, not to mention our concepts and judgments, are embedded in our milieu, we never can completely extricate ourselves from them by reflection. This does not mean that anything goes; we do have perspectives of the real world, but, like Kant, we live in the phenomenal world. We can achieve a "fusion of horizons" (that is, perspectives), in which we can mutually understand each other, sufficient for life together, despite our different perspectives.⁴¹ But, we do not ever achieve what Husserl thought we could through the metaphysics of presence—an immediate, direct access to the nature of reality itself. Only God can do that, but we cannot, for we are finite. Not only that, we are not even ideally human, due

33. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1976), 158, quoted in Westphal, "Hermeneutics as Epistemology," 429.

34. Westphal, "Hermeneutics as Epistemology," 430.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 49, as quoted in Westphal, "Hermeneutics as Epistemology," 430.

38. Westphal, "Onto-theology, Metanarrative, Perspectivism, and the Gospel," 151.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Merold Westphal, "Positive Postmodernism as Radical Hermeneutics," in *The Very Idea of Radical Hermeneutics*, ed. Roy Martinez (New Jersey: Humanities, 1997), 56.

41. *Ibid.*, 55.

to our own sin.⁴² Thus, we are not neutral, and all too often we are guilty of a will to power.

Compared to Westphal's essays, Smith's works do not engage as much with Husserl and his specific ideas. Nonetheless, his positions align quite closely with those of Westphal. For Smith, Husserl, the supposed paradigmatic champion of immediacy, ends up supporting the view that we never achieve immediate access.⁴³ Smith cites approvingly Husserl's "principle of all principles," which he understands to be the doctrine of intuition, according to which "intuition gives the phenomenon, and the phenomenon gives itself through intuition."⁴⁴ Smith understands Husserl to mean that the "heart of the principle of all principles is that '*everything originarily . . . offered to us in "intuition" is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being.*'"⁴⁵ But this should not be understood to mean that we somehow can achieve immediacy. Rather, Smith follows John Caputo, who claims that for Husserl, "to intuit the given means to know how to construe what presents itself, failing which there is only the flux."⁴⁶

Regeneration is a condition for a person to be able to receive the truth, but Smith denies that we can ever have objectivity, in the sense that we could ever have self-evident givenness (immediacy), with no need for interpretation.⁴⁷ But forming a framework for interpretation enables us to "see" the world as we should as Christians, through the word of God (or, to borrow a Wittgensteinian phrase, "under that aspect").⁴⁸

Does this mean that our interpretations are arbitrary, that anything goes? Like Westphal, Smith sharply disagrees. For one, we all see the same material reality. The real world provides a limit to the range of interpretations, for they are interpretations "of the world."⁴⁹ Indeed, since "the world is a fundamentally given, objective world that is shared by all, thought will be

42. Westphal, "Of Stories and Languages," 232.

43. James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 172.

44. *Ibid.*, 171. This is given in the context of a discussion of passages from Husserl's *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, which was written originally in 1913.

45. *Ibid.*, 172, citing Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, bk. 1 of *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), § 24, 44–5 (emphasis in Smith's text). Indeed, it seems that Smith's discussion of Husserl in pages 171–2 focuses almost entirely on passages from *Ideas*. Yet, on 171, he does mention an unpublished manuscript by Husserl called "Contra Heidegger," yet that quoted section does not seem to support the points (such as those I have mentioned above) that Smith makes with reference to the *Ideas*.

46. John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Deconstruction, Repetition and the Hermeneutical Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 43, quoted in Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation*, 172.

47. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 27n19, and 43n10.

48. *Ibid.*, 55.

49. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation*, 171.

constituted differently by those who share it as a lifeworld.”⁵⁰ Or, following Husserl and Heidegger, “it is ‘the things themselves’ (*die Sachen selbst*) that stand before every construal and function as that which limits interpretation and prevents arbitrariness.”⁵¹ There are such things as “empirical transcendentals” (though not to be understood as *a priori* ones) that are the world as given and experienced.⁵² For instance, Smith explains that

the tree outside my window is, from a phenomenological perspective, transcendent to my consciousness and imposes itself upon me. As “outside” of me, or transcendent, the tree is not “mine” to be manipulated. As such it imposes upon me limits for its interpretations; bad interpretations will be precisely those construals that transgress those limits.⁵³

Texts act similarly, such that not just any interpretation goes.

Yet, the reality of our finitude, and thus the mediated status of all experience and knowledge, means that there will be a hermeneutical kind of pluralism. This does not mean that every interpretation of the world is equal; indeed, Smith thinks that interpreting the world as creation is the *true* interpretation.⁵⁴ Instead, all it means is that due to our seeing the world from different angles and locations, we will have different interpretations, which is just the result of our finitude and created status. But there also is a deeper, “directional” pluralism, which is due to our fallenness, and this relates to our deep differences over fundamental issues, such as “what it means to be authentically human and how we fit into the cosmos.”⁵⁵

If we cannot (and should not) escape our finitude, and thus our viewpoints are just that—finite—then to attempt to gain a God’s-eye-view, to rise above all our situatedness, actually betrays a lustful pride to become like God, the essence of the devil’s enticement in the garden to sin. The Enlightenment’s optimism is fueled by a lack of appreciation of the noetic effects of sin, which in turn tends to discredit appeals to a supposedly neutral reason.⁵⁶

Finally, Smith’s own proposal includes a rejection of a neo-Platonic, docetic dualism that denigrates the body and stresses a hierarchical bifurcation between the material and the immaterial.⁵⁷ By stressing a mistaken, non-Christian view that devalues the body, and by trying to escape our bodily

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*, 170.

52. *Ibid.*, 169.

53. *Ibid.*

54. James K. A. Smith, “Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? A Response to the ‘Biola School,’” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 218.

55. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* 50.

56. *Ibid.*, 28.

57. James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 198.

limitations, to know reality immediately, we denigrate creation, which God made as good. We also denigrate the value God places upon creation through the Incarnation. Instead, we need to affirm the goodness of the materiality of creation, and so we can affirm a holistic anthropology, a Christian materialism, in which we take bodies seriously because “we *are* flesh and blood. Being embodied is an essential feature of being a human creature.”⁵⁸ Though a material creation, this “creational theology” still has room for transcendence, in that the goodness of creation points to its Creator.⁵⁹

In sum, for Westphal and Smith, Husserl is a quintessential modern: he is arrogant in his pretensions to be able to know reality directly, without any mediating influences, and in particular in his attempt to develop his phenomenology into a rigorous science in which we can attain certainty. He is utterly mistaken that we can have nonconceptual experiences of reality, and his project repeats the modern mistake that we can, in effect, become disembodied and know reality, even universals, directly.

But, are they right in their interpretation of Husserl?

The Later Husserl

If they are accurate in their understanding, then we too should reject Husserl’s views. It is *true* that the “later” Husserl, whose works originated after 1901, sought to develop a phenomenology that would be a rigorous science. Interestingly, the Husserl that Smith and Westphal cite is the one who wrote in 1913 or much later.

Indeed, Smith and Westphal seem quite right to reject the later Husserl’s pretensions to achieve an exact, rigorous science of knowledge across all disciplines, even philosophy. For instance, Husserl seems exceedingly overconfident when he makes the following claim (boast?):

The far horizons of a phenomenological philosophy, the chief structural formations, to speak geographically, have disclosed themselves; the essential groups of problems and the methods of approach on essential lines have been made clear. The author sees the infinite country of the true philosophy, the “promised land” on which he himself will never set foot.⁶⁰

Consider also these excerpts where he claims that phenomenology can enable us to reach an “infinite of knowledge previous to all deduction,” or how we can enter “the realm of essential structures of transcendental subjec-

58. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* 136 (emphasis in original).

59. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 220, 222.

60. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. by W. R. Boyce Gibson (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1931), 28–9. This is a translation of *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, first published in 1913.

tivity immediately transparent to the mind.”⁶¹ If these kinds of claims were not enough, Husserl comes across as audacious when he claims that those who do not see his phenomenological claims about essences are blinded by their own prejudices, for he is an authority in phenomenology, who “has really wandered in the trackless wilds of a new continent and undertaken bits of virgin cultivation.”⁶²

When Husserl claims that a rigorous body of knowledge entails that it is crystal clear, that all presuppositions are precisely analyzed, and that it has no theoretical doubt, Dallas Willard rightly rejects such hubris on the grounds that these are “demands which no science of *concrete* realities, whether physical or psychical, can possibly meet.”⁶³ He rejects Husserl’s attempts to claim that we can achieve precise concepts that are not “vague in application and justification” at higher (and even the highest) levels of abstraction.⁶⁴ This is because “long before a phenomenological mode of inquiry attains to anything remotely approaching the comprehensiveness of philosophy on the traditional model, the quality of *Evidenz* has been utterly dissipated.”⁶⁵ So, “the quest for—and the pretensions of—*systematic* certainty, or certainty and rigor *throughout* the range of topics traditionally dealt with by philosophers is greatly at fault.”⁶⁶

If the later Husserl attempted to achieve a modernist-inspired philosophy as a rigorous science, what about his views that originated *by* 1901? What seems to be absent from Westphal’s and Smith’s discussions is the Husserl who wrote before that time, who laid out in his *Logical Investigations* his basic phenomenological project. If those views are cogent, then the question will be if they are undermined by his later hubris in trying to develop his phenomenology further than it should have been pushed, into a full-blown, rigorous science. I will attempt to sketch the early Husserl’s views, followed by applications to Westphal’s and Smith’s claims and my own positive views. Another question to address will be if my own views are somewhat anachronistic; that is, since Husserl himself developed his later views, would he have been willing to consider privileging his earlier ones?

The Early Husserl

To begin, a core of Husserl’s project is to try to answer how a mental act can reach beyond itself and be “together” (or, enter into a relation) with its

61. *Ibid.*, 12.

62. *Ibid.*, 23.

63. Dallas Willard, *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1984), 259.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*, 266.

66. *Ibid.*, 270.

intended object. Husserl begins with the metaphysical principle of determinacy, that every existent is a determinate whole. It has specifiable parts and properties, even though we may not be able to know all of them as such.⁶⁷ This principle encompasses acts of consciousness just as much as it would physical objects, for they too are existents. Thus, mental acts are wholes with their parts and properties, just as intended objects have theirs.

A crucial property of mental acts is their “directedness” toward, or “selectivity” of, some intended object. All mental acts have this property of *intentionality* (its ofness or aboutness), but of course that property of a mental act does not guarantee that the intended object obtains in reality. For we can hallucinate that we are seeing something that does not obtain in reality, such as Pegasus or the present-day king of France. Or, we can think of possible states of affairs that may or may not obtain in reality, such as my thought about where I left my glasses when I left home as being on the coffee table (when I may indeed have left them on my dresser).

Husserl stresses this distinction between that which is intended and the phenomenological content which is immanent as a property of *an experience*.⁶⁸ This is important because *mere intentional direction of a mental act is indifferent to the ontological status of the intended object*. If we have an experience of Pegasus, all that entails is that we are having “a certain presentational experience, which may be dismembered as one chooses” without turning up Pegasus.⁶⁹ So, that experience of Pegasus is a whole with its parts, but Pegasus itself is not a *part* thereof. If it were, then a winged horse would be a part of that experience itself.

Ontological Transcendence and Immanence

Here we may see an important distinction Husserl makes between *transcendence* and *immanence* in an *ontological* sense. Consider a cat and a thought about that cat. Transcendence in this sense means that the intended object (the cat) with its parts and properties is *not* a part of the thought about that cat. On the other hand, immanence ontologically focuses upon the parts and properties of (or, present in) that thought. Applying that distinction, Husserl draws an important conclusion, that the objects

are also unable to create differences among presentations, and especially not the differences so familiar to us from the proper content of each presentation in respect of what it presents. . . . That a representation refers to a certain object in a certain manner, is not due to its

67. This will become evident with his treatment of physical objects in particular.

68. See Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 2, trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 1970), 576–80. (Note: for either volume 1 or 2, I will refer hereafter simply to “*LI*” and the page numbers. Also, importantly, the original *LI* was written by 1901.)

69. Willard, *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge*, 220.

acting on some external, independent object, ‘directing’ itself to it in some literal sense, or doing something to it or with it, as a hand writes with a pen. It is due to nothing that stays outside of the presentation, but to its own inner peculiarity alone . . . a given presentation presents *this object in this manner* in view of its *peculiarly differentiated presentational characteristics*.⁷⁰

Therefore, the mental act’s own *intrinsic* parts and properties *alone* determine what its object is and *how* that object is presented for the act.

For instance, suppose I pay attention to my thought about what I ate for breakfast. To be *that* thought, it does not seem it could be about anything else. Of course, I could think instead about when the installation of my car’s new tire will be finished, or any number of other states of affairs, including possible ones. But those would be different thoughts, for they would have different intentional contents. Indeed, thoughts (and other mental states) seem to have intrinsic qualities, such that they are essential to what they are. That is, they seem to have their intentionality intrinsically.

But, “*the intentional essence does not exhaust the [mental] act phenomenologically*.”⁷¹ What then are other parts and properties of mental acts that have a bearing upon our verifying if our thought (or other mental act) is together with its intended object? According to Husserl, mental acts have *matter*, *quality*, and *sensa*.⁷² By *matter*, he means the *directedness of a given act upon a specific object*.⁷³ That is, while we can speak of distinctions among acts in general as between “presentative, judgemental, emotional, desiderative, etc.” (that is, their *quality*—the *propositional attitude toward the object*) we also can identify specifications among acts that present *this* particular thing, or judge *that* specific action, and so forth⁷⁴ Willard clarifies that “matter, then, is that aspect of the act’s content which determines the object and the way it is intended.”⁷⁵

Sensa are the act’s *representing content*. These are the same general types as sense-perceptible qualities, such as colors, flavors, smells, sounds, and more, even though Husserl did not limit what exists to what is sense-perceptible, as is seen readily by his affirmation of essences. An act may remain the same in intentional content (for example, it is of the coffee cup), yet the *vivacity* of its sensuous contents may increase or diminish; an object which now “appears with greater clearness and definiteness” also can become “lost in a mist,” and even become “paler in colour etc.”⁷⁶

70. Husserl, *LI*, 603.

71. *Ibid.*, 591.

72. *Ibid.*, 740.

73. *Ibid.*, 737.

74. *Ibid.*, 586.

75. Willard, *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge*, 223.

76. Husserl, *LI*, 591.

Husserl uses this account to draw two ideal types of limiting cases.⁷⁷ One extreme is the *purely signitive* act, in which the more or less vivid sensum might be utterly different from the intended object. The other extreme is the *purely intuitive* act, in which every property of the intended object matches a sensum which instances that same property. Importantly, Husserl thought that the latter kind of act is impossible with physical objects.⁷⁸

We now can sketch Husserl's general ontological schema of mental acts and how they can be together with their intended objects, if they obtain. Mental acts are wholes with parts and properties, as are their intended objects (if they obtain in reality). Determinate wholes can enter into relations, and second, from the general theory of relations, whatever relations obtain depend upon the properties of the relata. Since a thought and its intended object have their respective parts and properties, ontologically the object is indifferent to the thought and thus exists "in itself."⁷⁹ For a relation to obtain between the mental act with its intended object, the act's intentional property with its nature is "together with" the object's *intensional* properties due to their *natures*, or, alternatively, their "natural affinity" for each other. That is, it is the nature of my experience of my wife to be together with my wife, due to the properties of each. Or, the nature of my thought of my cat is to be of my cat, and it is together with it due to the intrinsic properties of each. This is how a mental act can "get outside itself" ontologically.

Fulfillment, and Epistemological Transcendence and Immanence

So much for the ontological explanation of how a mental act can be together with its intended object, if that object obtains in reality. But, how can we *know* if a given mental act of ours enters into a relation with its intended object? This brings us to a discussion of Husserl's notion of *fulfillment*, or verification. Through a series of increasingly closer examinations, an object that is thought of or referred to is found to be as it was thought to be. In the ideal case, the object's properties are found to match completely those in thought. This is *epistemological immanence*; in contrast, *epistemological transcendence* is when the intended object is not fully given.

Suppose I am walking down a long corridor of a shopping mall, and I see someone at a distance who looks like she might be my wife. Importantly, with my old eyeglasses, I no longer can see objects at a distance too clearly. But I can continue to move closer in the direction of that person, and along the way I can make more observations. Then I can start to see more clearly

77. *Ibid.*, 739.

78. *Ibid.*, 866.

79. On their differences, see, e.g., Husserl, *LI*, 567.

other aspects of that person. For instance, I can see that the color of the person's dress is like the one my wife is wearing today. As I approach that person, there can come a point when I can clearly see who it was, and then I can see if that the person is my wife or not.

In the example, I had a series of experiences, and each one could help fulfill the subsequent one, such that I could see that a relationship obtained between each experience in the sequence such that each one helped me come *closer* epistemically to the same person. Eventually, I could see that a relationship of fulfillment obtained between my thought of my wife and her as she was presented in my experience. How could this be?

First, Husserl maintains that a relationship of fulfillment obtains between *concrete* experiences. For this to take place, the fulfilling experience must be an experience of the same thing, and even known to be that.⁸⁰ Second, in an intuitive presentation, the process of fulfillment involves

*a varying amount of intuitive fulness This talk of varying amount points . . . to possible gradients of fulfilment: proceeding along these, we come to know the object better and better, by way of a presentative content that resembles it ever more and more closely, and grasps it more and more vividly and fully.*⁸¹

Husserl offers the following example of an intuitive fulfillment-series: "the transition from a rough drawing to a more exact pencil-sketch, then from the latter to the completed picture, and from this to the living finish of the painting, all of which present the same, visibly the same, object."⁸² In order for one act to fulfill another, "the fulfilling act has a *superiority* which the mere intention lacks: *it imparts to the synthesis the fulness of 'self', at least leads more directly to the thing itself.*"⁸³ According to Willard's interpretation, Husserl understands this process of verification, and fulfillment itself, "under the term 'intuition,' and which makes the object intended to be 'itself' present."⁸⁴

In the ideal case, the object is fully and directly present before us in conscious awareness, and we find that every property of the object present in experience matches the corresponding properties of the object as it was thought to be. That is the limit of "intuitiveness." Crucially, however, we must make two qualifications. First, fullness comes about "as the properties of the object intended, whatever they may be, come into intuitive view in the manner appropriate to properties of the type in question."⁸⁵ Second, fulfill-

80. *Ibid.*, 696.

81. *Ibid.*, 745.

82. *Ibid.*, 721.

83. *Ibid.*, 720.

84. Willard, *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge*, 231.

85. *Ibid.*, 229.

ment admits of degrees, and again this likely will tie closely to the kind of objects and their respective properties under consideration.

Husserl considered mainly three kind of intentional objects: physical objects in the world, mental acts themselves, and universals. For physical objects, Husserl did not think we could achieve such fullness. Due to the kind of thing these objects are, they do not admit of being fully present in intuition at a single time. Moreover, sense perception is not infallible. So, such knowledge of material objects is *not* infallible or certain.⁸⁶

But for mental acts and universals (for example, the property of intentionality itself; the fulfillment and truth relations themselves; a concept which many people may have in mind at any given time), *in principle* they can be presented in syntheses of fulfillment. As Husserl says, “*only the perception of one’s actual experiences is indubitable and evident.*”⁸⁷ Still, Husserl immediately adds that “not every such percept is evident,” which he illustrates with the percept of a toothache.⁸⁸ A real experience is perceived, but we can be quite mistaken as to how the pain appears to us (for example, as the boring of a sound tooth). So even though for him it is possible for mental acts and universals to be fully present before us, that may not happen in actual experience, for they too can be represented inadequately.

But for all this talk of intuition of universals and essences (the *categorical intuition*), and how an intended object can be directly present before us in conscious awareness in a relationship of fulfillment, could it not be the case after all that the mind has *produced* that objectivity? I do not think so. Minds can produce mental acts, and we can compare experiences of the intended object with each other, to see if a relationship of fulfillment obtains between them. But in a new whole (that is, consisting of the fulfillment relationship between the intended object and the fulfilling act), the object’s character as a part of *that* whole is not that of something “added to that thing by an act perceiving it as a part of the whole.”⁸⁹ Thus, the mental act directed upon some object *does not do something to that object.*⁹⁰

Still, how can a distinction *within* experience guarantee a transcendent *reach* beyond experience? Having a thought with its fulfilling intuition is a mental act; so, its mere existence does not guarantee a reach beyond the “circle of ideas.”

Here we come to perhaps one of Husserl’s most significant distinctions. *Generally speaking*, there is not a *necessary* connection between mental acts

86. This might be a good place to mention that Husserl does *not* contend that in fulfillment we will have exhaustive, pristine, and blind-to-nothing knowledge. We can be directly acquainted with an object as it is intended, but that does not mean we will know everything about it (or someone); only God could know that. It seems misguided to level that charge at his earlier views.

87. Husserl, *LI*, 866.

88. *Ibid.*

89. Willard, *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge*, 236.

90. See also Husserl, *LI*, 788.

of an object and the object itself. A mental act's mere intentionality will not suffice for this, for we can think about many things without them having to obtain. Conversely, the existence of an object does not entail that there would be any thoughts or experiences of it. Their connection, therefore, is *not* an *existential* one. Instead, if an act is of the *appropriate kind*, then the objectivity of the object *is* knowable. For instance, to examine an argument's validity we would not smell it, nor would we tune a violin by tasting the strings. Rather, there are constraints of an essential kind that determine which acts and objects can come together in a relationship of fulfillment, and wholes can enter into that relationship due to the kind of properties they have. Thus, the connection between a mental act and its object is one of *essences*, *not existence*.

So, when an object is fully present, "the object is not merely meant, but in the strictest sense *given*, and given as it is meant, and made one with our meaning-reference."⁹¹ By this Husserl means that the specific act, with its matter and quality, and its intended object enter into a necessary relationship. That is, "given *this* specifically qualified experience indwelt by a certain meaning, the corresponding object must exist, and must be *as* it is thought to be."⁹² Moreover, when an act transcendently "reaches" beyond itself to its object (that is, enters into the transcending relationship), it has two features that might seem at first glance to be paradoxical. That is, the object is immanent in the sense of being *in* the whole formed by that relationship between act and object. But the object still retains its own essential qualities apart from that whole; thus it is transcendent to that whole.

Husserl in Dialogue with Westphal and Smith

Having thus sketched the early Husserl's philosophical views of how a mental act has a natural affinity for, can be together with, and "select," its object, let us first see what insights these might afford us into Westphal's and Smith's many claims. Then I will pose some difficulties for their views.

As a preliminary point, there seems to be no reason why Husserl's early views should be impugned by the hubris in his later ones. These are distinct and separable, for the early ones are able to stand on their own, had his later attitudes never even developed. Moreover, his later hubris seems to be found in his attempt to develop the good insights of his earlier, basic work in phenomenology further than they should (or could) be pushed—into that modernist dream of a rigorous science. His basic, earlier work therefore seems separable from his later, misguided development. The more significant question now is whether his earlier views are cogent.

91. *Ibid.*, 765.

92. Willard, *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge*, 242.

Perhaps the most frequently stated objection to Husserl is that he mistakenly advocates that we abandon the *natural standpoint*, so that we can achieve a naked, immaculate, even apodictic gaze directly into reality. But this is *anything but* the Husserl just surveyed. The natural standpoint is the belief in the existence of the natural world, and Husserl's phenomenology is eminently practical, for his concern is what it is like to be naturally directed upon the world in which we live.⁹³ He focuses our attention on *concrete* (even mundane) cases and experiences and what is present in consciousness through them. Indeed, much of his attention is on how our mental acts can be together with everyday, *material* objects. Moreover, in the process of coming closer epistemically to some intended object, we would do this in the way appropriate to that kind of thing. So, for material objects, to be able to have a series of fulfilling experiences and find that an object is as it was thought to be requires that I am an embodied person, even to be able to go about this process. I do not know what it would be like to try to know some material object if I were to become disembodied.

Similarly, if I see some artifact, I would be foolish to ignore my own cultural and historical context. For instance, if I were to see a Coke bottle in the desert, I would be foolish to ignore my American, twentieth-century background, for I am able to see it *as* a Coke bottle because of that, unlike the main Kalahari bushman in *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. So, quite emphatically to the contrary of Westphal and Smith, *to practice his phenomenological methodology is to embrace, rather than flee from, our embodiment, particularity, and context.*

Moreover, it is *erroneous* to charge Husserl with believing we should expect to have certainty in our beliefs, or in our knowledge of our mind's connection with its objects. We have seen many examples where this simply is not the case, especially so with material objects. It is true that in our knowledge of universals and mental acts themselves, he thought that we *could* be infallible. But, *even in those cases*, we still can misrepresent them.

Finally, let me address the crucial charge that Husserl is wrong that we can have immediate access to things in themselves. Consider Smith's approving use of Caputo, who claims that for Husserl, to intuit the given is to know how to interpret what presents itself, failing which there is only the flux. There is an important truth embedded in the first part of this claim, for Husserl held that to experience either fulfillment or disappointment requires *concepts*, as well as experience(s). There is an important, indeed, crucial role for interpretation, to see something which is given *as* some kind of thing (for example, a Coke bottle). To find something in experience *to be as I have thought it to be* does require concepts, and so Caputo and Smith are quite right on this point.

93. For instance, see his *Ideas*, secs. 27–30.

But the latter claim, that failing to know how to interpret what is given there is only the flux, seems radically mistaken. First, this is not Husserl's own claim. According to him, intended objects present themselves as wholes, although we can focus upon the parts of objects as presented in experience. Second, while we may have difficulty or even be unable to identify (or classify) something given as such and such (for instance, we may not have any prior experiences of such a thing, like the Bushman with the Coke bottle), what ordinarily is given in experience is not accurately described as a flux. To pick a case that Smith has offered, when he looks outside his window and sees the tree that is transcendent to him, it presents itself for interpretation as an empirical transcendental. Neither Smith, myself, nor the Bushman would see a flux of discrete greenish and brownish color patches (which would be more like what we would expect on Hume's theory), unless perhaps we are experiencing a narcotic-induced hallucination. But that is anything but an example of typical experience.

So, descriptively, it is a mistake to maintain that apart from interpretation, there is only the flux in experience. Rather, objects present themselves, and they seem to do so as wholes, whether we are experiencing rocks, fish, people, houses, CPU chips, and so forth. Of course, this claim is contrary to Derrida's, that beings have presence by naming or predication (which, of course, is done in language), yet they always have traces of their other. For him, even "things in themselves" are signs and essentially point beyond themselves. Perhaps his position is abetted by his interpretation of Husserl, that the objects of consciousness are *noemata*, such as appearances and experiences, not things like cats and trees (or essences).⁹⁴ But as we have seen, that is not Husserl's position. Moreover, descriptively, his claim seems mistaken. Suppose I am having an experience of a cat. If I focus upon that experience, I can become aware that it does point beyond itself to the cat, and this seems due precisely to its having intentionality. But if I focus my attention upon the cat, I can readily discover that it does *not* have any such property. As with this case, so it is with the usual cases of perception; the object of our mental act is *not* a noema, and therefore an epistemic progression can terminate in the thing itself.

Additionally, a series of interpretations has to start with something other than an interpretation to be interpreted, or else we have an infinite regress of interpretations without a way to start. An interpretation is of something, and the descriptions and arguments that Westphal and Smith offer (such as the case of seeing the tree) all seem to want to claim that we are interpreting the external, real world. Moreover, interpretations require concepts and their use, but concepts themselves must be acquired and formed. But how we are able even to start to develop concepts on their kind of view begs for an

94. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 135.

explanation, since, *ex hypothesi*, our access to *all* our intended objects (material ones, mental acts, and so forth) requires interpretation. Frankly, I do not think there will be an explanation forthcoming, for it seems it must require appeal to access to things in themselves.

Still, I think their likely rebuttal will be that Heidegger has shown conclusively that all experience has an *as*-structure. For him, we encounter the world of our everyday activity *as* “involved,” or organized already for possibilities for action toward meeting practical purposes and human concerns. For instance, a tree can get its significance by its usefulness for providing shade or wood for housing. A shovel can be significant in light of a need to dig a hole to plant a citrus tree, in order to grow and later eat its fruit. As Heidegger puts it, “In terms of the significance which is disclosed in understanding the world, concerned Being-alongside the ready-to-hand gives itself to understand whatever involvement that which is encountered can have.”⁹⁵ Moreover, “Any mere *pre-predicative* seeing of the ready-to-hand is, in itself, something which already understands and interprets.”⁹⁶ The “world” is a dynamic set of meaning-giving relations and possibilities, and in that context things get their significance, such as being *useful to*, *needed for*, *helpful as*, and so on.

By attempting to categorize all particular beings under concepts and thereby tending to ignore individuals’ uniquenesses as historically-embedded, beings-in-a-situation, we tend to conceal important features of our lives as individuals. More fundamental than theorizing or reflection (or an abstract essence), we are beings in everyday contexts, and we always must conduct inquiry from our limited perspectives. We are beings in “thrown” situations, and we do not understand entities fully or immediately, or in their essence, but only in their significance in a situation.

There is much to appreciate about these points. Heidegger is right in that we learn many things by doing. Also, my daughter was born in early twenty-first century southern California, where surely we use a vast number of tools and devices to meet human concerns. We use electricity with machines to cool or heat homes. Builders use wood, hammers, nails, concrete, saws, and more to build houses. We use cars for transportation and mostly go to grocery stores to buy food, which is mostly done with credit or debit cards. So, there is no doubt my daughter was born into a vast, complex network of interrelated “worlds” (that of the grocers, construction workers, automakers, and so forth), in which she could find any number of “tools” ready-to-hand for her to explore and work with as she learns more about how we “do” life here.

95. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1962), 189. What is “ready-to-hand” is equipment or a tool, whereas what is “present-to-hand” is “part of” the conceptually articulated world.

96. *Ibid.* Notice my emphasis, by which I mean to point out the “*as*” structure of the tool encountered even apart from linguistic articulations.

I do not have much, if any, problem with his views about our learning by doing for practical purposes. Even so, though Heidegger assumes our thoughts and experiences can be together with their entities (various tools, people, and so forth), *how* can he make good on that (valid) assumption? We already have seen how Husserl can do that—by drawing upon universals (such as in intentionality, and the intensional properties of the intended objects, if they obtain) and how they can be before the mind in conscious awareness. But for Heidegger, bringing universals into his account seems off limits, for in a life-world being is temporal and finite, and we have no access to what transcends (metaphysically at least) our life-situation.

As I argued above, for Husserl, thoughts are intrinsically about their intended objects, even if these do not obtain. So, why a given thought “selects” its intended object cannot be existential, but rather essential. For if the connection were existential, then any time I have a thought about something, it would seem that “thing” must exist. But that is false, as we have seen already.

Thus Heidegger seems to have no basis for his many thoughts and claims *about* real life, how entities gain their significance by their usefulness to us, and even that all experience already has an “as” structure built into it. It does not seem that he has a way to account for how his thoughts or experiences could be about all that he discusses. Despite his good points about how we find tools as being useful to us in everyday life to achieve certain goals, and how we often learn the significance of a tool by using it, he still seems to lack a basis for making good on his many claims.

Now I will apply this issue to the views of Westphal and Smith. While they do agree with Husserl *that* there can be connections between our mental acts and objects in the real world, nonetheless they part company with Husserl in terms of *how* that can happen. But what kinds of relations can obtain depend upon the properties of both those acts and their objects.⁹⁷

So, what kinds of properties would be involved for Westphal and Smith so that a relation could obtain between a mental act and its intended object? Evidently, a thought would have its specific intentionality and its quality (some “propositional” attitude). As far as the intended object is concerned, while logically it must have properties or else it seems it would not exist, it seems that to specify any of these would require interpretation.

But if so, our question presses once again with more firmness, for *why* would a thought or some other mental act be together with, or select, its intended object? If they follow Derrida’s view, according to which our usual objects of consciousness (trees, subjects, apples, and so forth) have presence because of an act of naming or predication (that is, a linguistic act), then it

97. This is not some notion limited in application just to Husserl’s philosophy. For instance, the causal relationships that can obtain between two physical objects depend upon their respective physical properties. A dog cannot have the virtue of justice since it is not appropriate to its kind. And, from a physicalist’s standpoint, it is hard to accept how the human soul could exist, since there does not seem to be a way for it to interact with a material body.

seems the best way to explain how our thoughts could be together with their intended objects is that the thought of the object can enter into a relationship with the *object-as-interpreted*. I think this because neither author wants to say that we enter into a relationship with our interpretations *per se*; instead, we think about (and interpret) the *objects*, with which I agree.

Now, perhaps they might make a Wittgensteinian move and claim that the reason thoughts are together with their objects is due to how the people in a form of life use their language, according to their grammar. Generally, however, this move will not work, for the mere existence of a thought with its specific intentionality will not guarantee that its intended object obtains. Likewise, the existence of the object would not guarantee there would be thoughts about it. It is just as we saw above—connections between mental acts and their intended objects are due to their essences, not their existence.

But now we have come to a crucial point, one which I believe stems from confusion over the nature of the object when it is intended in a thought. Surely Westphal and Smith would agree that thinking about a material object does not change its being, for concepts do not enter into its ontological make-up. The object-as-interpreted *is* a conceptualization, but that act does not change the object itself. On their view, objects (as interpreted) are what they are to us in terms of how they have been interpreted; thus, they seem to be internally related to their interpretations, which in turn are tied to language. But Husserl's clarity in defining the properties of mental acts in distinction from those of their intended objects shows that they are externally related to each other; each one is what it is apart from any whole of act-plus-object.

Thus, despite their claims that we are interpreting the real world as it presents itself to us, it seems that for Westphal and Smith, when we think, we actually engage with just our interpretations, and not the objects in the real world. Indeed, it seems impossible that we could do otherwise. But if so, they have lost any ability to hold onto knowledge of reality.

Conclusion

A major attraction of Westphal's and Smith's views is that they rightly recognize the significance of our own self-deceptiveness and how we can tend easily to elevate our own hearts and minds above the Lord. But is that problem unique to Husserl's views and his claims to knowledge by direct acquaintance? I do not think so; rather, such pride is an equal-opportunity afflicter, regardless of one's preferred epistemology. Surely there is hubris and modern arrogance in the later Husserl's writings, and there surely can be among those who think they can know reality as it is, especially if they teach

with an air of invincible certainty in their interpretations. This attitude gives traction to many emergents' good critiques of so-called modern Christians.⁹⁸

But for Westphal and Smith, where does this leave us in terms of knowledge of Christian truth claims, such as that God has revealed Himself through creation and special revelation? It seems that the prospects for our knowledge of God's intended meanings are dim indeed, for we could know "truths" only insofar as we have interpreted them. We cannot access the meaning the Spirit had in mind in giving revelation, nor what He has in mind today as He wants to lead and guide His church. As an ironic implication, I am afraid that on their views we cannot avoid elevating our own interpretations over the Lord's voice, all the while under the cloak of "humility."

98. For instance, Brian McLaren pointedly drives home this point when referring to the "bomb proof" kind of certainty Christians are supposed to have according to modernity's influence upon Christianity. See, for instance, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 16–18.