ESSAY I

SOME FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF CONSTITUTIVE
PHENOMENOLOGY

We here undertake a survey of some very general and formal principles of constitutive phenomenology, the phenomenological idealism which Husserl introduced in general terms and in a well-developed form with the Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie of 1913,¹ and which thereafter he never ceased to elaborate, deepen, and expand.

One should not regard such phenomenological idealism as a “philosophical system” in the usual sense of the term. The principles we shall attempt to present express nothing less than a sort of “profession of personal, philosophical faith.” They only derive their value from the fact that they open up a vast field for research and inspire quite concrete analyses of particular phenomena, a labor of analysis by which those principles become concrete and are confirmed. Thus phenomenology does not present itself as a philosophy which is complete at the outset, which springs in an accomplished form from the mind of its author, and which only translates his personal manner of conceiving the world,²

This essay was originally written in 1937 under the title “Quelques principes fondamentaux de la phénoménologie constitutive” for the journal Recherches philosophiques (Paris). The proofs were read but the journal unfortunately suspended publication before the essay could appear. This is a revised version of the English translation which was carried out by me and was included under the same title in A. Gurwitsch’s Phenomenology and the Theory of Science, ed. L. Embree (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 190–209.

¹ [As before, we shall be referring to this work by Husserl as Ideen, I.]
in the fashion, say, of the speculative systems of the so-called German idealism.

Phenomenology can be realized only as a collective effort, i.e., by means of the cooperation and coordinated attempts of generations of investigators. Renouncing all ambition for personal originality, phenomenology aspires instead to the character and value of a positive science; it conforms itself to the conditions of scientific progress. Hence any result obtained thereby is, as it were, provisional, since it serves to stimulate further investigations. These investigations do not completely abandon the achieved results, but seek to deepen them and to place them in a more encompassing context, inevitably leading to modifications and completions. But this is what takes place in any positive science.

On this occasion, we cannot enter into the details of such investigations, and even less can we attempt to advance them. We will limit ourselves to outlining the plan to be carried out through them.

§I. The Equivalent of Consciousness

Each object, whatever its nature—a mere reiform thing, object of use, object of value, work of art, historical fact, social institution, etc.—becomes accessible to us only by means of certain acts of consciousness which we are experiencing or can experience. In these acts, which form a group in relation to the one object to which they all refer, the object presents itself now from one side, now from another, now under one aspect, now under a different one; now we are conscious of it in one way, now in another. Progressively engaging in those experiences [and] coming back to those already undergone in order to connect them with present experiences, we successively grasp the moments, attributes, and properties which pertain to the object and make up the unity of its nature. This unity corresponds to and depends on the harmonious agreement among experiences, and it is in virtue of it that all those partial experiences join to form the global experience of the object in question.

An object would be a mere nothing were it not for the experiences through which it displays its nature, presents itself from various sides and under various aspects, constitutes and constructs itself step by step, and discloses the sense of its being, the specific sense of its existence.