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Edited by Darian Meacham and Nicolas de Warren

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PHILOSOPHICAL HUMANITY . . . *ODER EUROPA*

Philosophy, modern science, and the Europeanization of the world (in light of Husserl's phenomenology)

Emiliano Trizio

1. Introduction

The days in which the fate of humanity seemed to rest in the hands of the Europeans are long gone, as is the time when one could think that Europe was called to show the way forward to all nations on earth. Busy as we are to finally move beyond the legacy of colonialism, and to pave the way toward a world in which Europe can only be a component on a par and with equal rights alongside many others, what lessons can we draw from Edmund Husserl's reflection on the sense and destiny of European civilization? To begin with, we should not make the mistake of relegating his efforts to the long list of European attempts to nourish the myth of the unicity and specialty of European culture. In no way does Husserl propose an identity-based celebration of one part of the world among others. The current reflection on the importance of overcoming the Eurocentric perspective must not make us lose sight of the fact that the real philosophical issue, for him then, as for us today, is not our sense of belonging to this or that culture, but the common destiny awaiting us all *qua* inhabitants of the present. This present is characterized by a form of unification of the world in the context of an intertwining of science, technology, and social organization resulting from the Europeanization of the world. But it is also characterized by a profound disorientation concerning the possibility of human thought to guide the destiny of the world. For the first time, humanity as a whole is confronted with common challenges that require likewise common answers. Thus, what needs to be understood is the specificity of the present as such, rather than the specificity of one culture among others. Husserl's reflections are significant in this respect precisely because they provide a way to read the global processes that define our era. For Husserl, Europe is a process that involves humanity as such, and leads it along the path of an ever-increasing theoretical and practical mastery of the world. Yet, it also is a process that has lost its sense and purpose, and has failed to produce the philosophical rationality necessary to assure that this knowledge be a part of a genuine wisdom.

2. The phenomenon “Europe”

To a superficial reader, Husserl’s reflections on Europe may seem rather unsystematic and, furthermore, different in style from the classical technical analyses of transcendental phenomenology. Such a view would be completely erroneous. Both their terminology and their methodological status show that they are firmly rooted in the theoretical framework provided by the eidetic science of pure phenomena. The expression “phenomenon ‘Europe’” that appears at the end of the *Vienna Lecture* (Husserl 1954: 299), is the right starting point to illustrate it. What is Europe for Husserl, and how can Europe become a theme of philosophical reflection? In particular, how can it become a theme of a philosophy based on transcendental phenomenology? Europe, so we read, is a *phenomenon*. This word, though, should not be intended from the outset in the sense of transcendental phenomenology, i.e. as a pure phenomenon in pure subjectivity, resulting from the bracketing of the natural attitude. Europe is, first, a historical phenomenon, an objective cultural phenomenon belonging to the region of cultural formations, to the region *spirit*. It is, thus, a phenomenon in the objective sense, which belongs to the domain of investigation of certain positive sciences; but, as we shall see, it is not only that. However, it is better to postpone until the end of this section the discussion of the way in which Europe as a phenomenon in this ordinary and mundane sense is, ipso facto, also a phenomenon in the transcendental phenomenological sense, and what is its significance when thus conceived.

Now, to consider Europe as a phenomenon in the sense of the objective sciences of spirit, for Husserl, means immediately to evoke the incomplete methodological status of those sciences. As is well known, no existing science for Husserl is genuine [*“echt”*], but this does not mean that some sciences are not further away than others from achieving methodological clarity. The natural sciences of material nature, for Husserl, have – at least to an extent – achieved fundamental insights into the eidetic a priori truths that correspond to their domain of investigation. With the rise of modern physics, natural scientists have understood that the form of their scientific explanation had to be mathematical in character. Accordingly, they have found the way to “rationalize” the phenomena pertaining to material nature. That this progress has not prevented the total misunderstanding of the sense of the mathematization of nature, and that such misunderstanding has in turn determined the crisis of European culture, is a well-known fact about which more will be said later. In contrast with the sciences of material nature, the sciences of spirit (the cultural or social sciences) have not even developed a correct way to rationalize the phenomena they investigate. What is missing, for Husserl, is an eidetic science of cultural formations, i.e. an a priori science of pure possibility of social and cultural phenomena. This fact is certainly difficult to contest. It is rather obvious, still today, that different schools of social scientists would disagree about the very kind of conceptual vocabulary that their discipline requires. It would perhaps not be an exaggeration to say that their disagreement is similar to the one that opposed modern science in its earliest stage with Aristotelian natural philosophy. It is precisely a fundamental demand of the transcendental phenomenological foundation of science that such objective eidetic discipline be developed. The situation is, thus, the following. On the one hand, Europe, as a historical cultural formation, cannot be scientifically understood until the phenomenological theory of science is in place. On the other hand, the failure to develop such a fundamental organon of scientific cognition is precisely what has derailed Europe from the path dictated by its own essence, one could say, to resort to an Aristotelian expression, from its natural motion. Consequently, Husserl is aware that the situation in which we are is not one that allows a preliminary, fully scientific understanding of cultural phenomena in general and of Europe in particular, one that could provide the basis for a project of radical transformation and “renewal” of our civilization. What can be done is to work at a provisional level by rationalizing

the cultural fact of Europe in light of the available insights into the essence of community and culture, and avoiding at all cost any naturalization of the cultural world. Thus, the historical phenomenon “Europe” must find its place within a preliminary eidetics of cultural formations. Only in this way will enough clarity be achieved to guide us amidst the current time, which is marked by the crisis of European humanity, philosophy, and science.

This is, in outline, the method that Husserl follows in the texts more directly concerned with the theme of Europe – namely, the *Kaizo* articles and the *Vienna Lecture*. Admittedly, the former are more methodologically explicit than the latter. However, the underlying method is, at bottom, the same and revolves around an eidetic analysis. Readers of Husserl have often been captivated by that fact that historical narratives play an increasingly important role in Husserl’s later production; but one should not fail to notice that historicity, for Husserl, is also an eidetic trait of certain cultural formations and that different morphological types of historicity can be discerned. Indeed, the *Vienna Lecture* ends with the claim that the essential nucleus of the phenomenon Europe has been grasped, and, the majority of the actual content of the lecture is a historical narrative that starts with ancient Greece, stretches through the modern era, and culminates in the current sorry state of our civilization. In sum, the essence of the phenomenon Europe is discerned in the specific mode of historical development that belongs to it.

The elements of Husserl’s eidetic, a priori doctrine of the “spiritual” world that play a prominent role in Husserl’s reflection on Europe are 1) humanity/civilization (“*Menschheit*”), 2) culture (“*Kultur*”), 3) attitude, 4) philosophy/science, 5) teleology, and 6) genuineness (“*Echtheit*”). In what follows, I will try to outline Husserl’s rationalization of the historical phenomenon Europe by drawing both from the *Kaizo* articles and from the later *Vienna Lecture*. Husserl calls “*Menschheit*” a specific type of community “*Gemeinschaft*”, i.e. a “universal community” that “stretches as far as the unity of a culture” (Husserl 1989: 21). Europe or the West, which Husserl identifies at once, is a universal community or, one would say, civilization, in this sense. The relation that a community thus characterized entertains with geographical space is complex. On the one hand, Husserl speaks of a birthplace of European humanity, Ancient Greece (Husserl 1954: 276), and, on the other, he includes in it the United States of America and what at that time were the overseas European dominions. All nations and territories in the world whose cultural life belongs to the unity of European culture are, in this sense, so many parts of “Europe”. As we shall see, this dynamic concept of Europe allows Husserl to develop a form of universalism that goes well beyond the boundaries, not only of the Old Continent, but even of what we call the West. Now, in contrast with other traditional attempts to circumscribe the identity of a culture, which are often based on singling out some descriptive static features actually possessed by it, and distinguishing it from other cultures, Husserl provides a characterization of European humanity that is *teleological*. This means that European culture is characterized by a tension towards an end, and therefore by a guiding ideal. The relation between teleology and culture is here of fundamental importance. Teleology is an essential component of personal life in general, since no personal life exists without actions towards goals motivated by values. A personal life, furthermore, can be informed by an overarching teleology that subordinates all other aspects of life to itself. The same holds true for a community and, in particular, for a civilization. European humanity is here seen as a collective life-form, as a spiritual reality that possesses an “innate” tendency. It is the tendency towards a free cultural life based on autonomous reason (Husserl 1989: 68), the tendency to realize what Husserl sees as the highest possible form of humanity. It is a humanity that shapes itself and its environment under the guidance of a purely autonomous reason (Husserl 1989: 73). Why is Greece the birthplace of this cultural formation? Because, in Greece, for the first time, (and Husserl would also add, only time), a completely new kind of task has emerged, that of a purely theoretical cognition of the world. The concept

able to capture this novelty is that of “attitude”. Human life, individual and personal alike, displays for Husserl a variety of fundamentally different orientations of its intentional activities, i.e. an attitude. What emerges in Greece in the 6th century BC is a new attitude that is based on the suspension of all practical interests dominating ordinary life, and whose correlate is “*Theoria*”, i.e. the objective determination of what is. In a word, the birth of European humanity coincides with the birth of philosophy conceived as a purely theoretical activity aimed at the objective determination of being. The teleological character of this definition is manifest. The new humanity is defined by an attitude to which a new *task* corresponds – one, furthermore that, in contrast with all practical goals of extra- and pre-scientific life, is *infinite*. Now, let us stress that, if historicity by itself does not belong to any human culture whatever (Moran 2011: 490), the birth of European humanity does not only bring about a new form of historicity among others, but establishes, for the first time, the historicity of infinite tasks that potentially embraces the whole of humanity.

Is it not paradoxical to identify the essence of European civilization with such a specific cultural fact, i.e. one that, after all, seems to concern only a limited number of people, and, thus, may be seen as one of the many threads that jointly make up European cultural history? Husserl’s eidetic analysis of the essence of philosophical humanity helps us dispel such doubts. At this stage, also the normative notion of “*Echtheit*” will play its role. As we have just seen, the theoretical attitude is the one at work in a subject that only values objective truth. Now, at this stage, philosophy and science are synonyms and they amount to the totality of cognition concerning the world. In our factual history, this earliest stage corresponds to that of pre-Socratic cosmology (Husserl 1989: 186). As a result of the Sophists’ sceptical critique of its scientificity, this early form of theoretical activity was plunged into a crisis, which led to what Claudio Majolino has called the “second birth of philosophy” (Majolino 2018: 172), the one due to Plato. With Plato, philosophy ceases to be a theoretical activity naïvely directed at objective truth. Plato is the inventor of the idea of genuine philosophy (“*echte Philosophie*”) (Majolino 2018: 168), based on the doctrine of principles, one in which the quest for a scientific cognition of all possible domains of investigation takes place under the guidance of the *doctrine of science* (“*Wissenschaftslehre*”). This idea is going to guide and dominate the entire vicissitudes of Western philosophy, without ever finding a complete actualization. The idea of genuine philosophy is the idea of a system of scientific disciplines that span all spheres of cognition corresponding to theoretical, practical, and axiological reason. Such a system is organized around the doctrine of science that grounds and elucidates all other forms of knowledge, including itself. This doctrine of science, ultimately, corresponds to the role that transcendental phenomenology was called to fulfil. The crowning accomplishment of such system coincides with a metaphysics that investigates the ultimate sense of human existence, human history, and the world itself. In the section entitled “*Die höhere Wertform einer humanen Menschheit*” (Husserl 1989: 54–59) contained in the unpublished *Kaizo* article “*Erneuerung und Wissenschaft*”, Husserl is explicit about the supreme value of a culture guided by genuine philosophy:

Let us now consider the higher value-form of a genuinely humane humanity [*einer echt humanen Menschheit*] that lives and develops by shaping itself towards genuine humanity [*zu echter Humanität*]. It is the one in which philosophy has assumed as world-wisdom the form of philosophy as rigorous and universal science, in which reason has shaped and objectified itself in the form of the “*Logos*.”

(Husserl 1989: 54–55)

This passage should be read in conjunction with the parts of the *Vienna Lecture* that detail how the initial theoretical attitude has, so to speak, retroacted on the preexisting practical attitude giving rise to two forms of synthesis with it (Husserl 1954: 284). In the first place, the theoretical attitude has made possible a technology (in all of its forms), i.e. the systematic effort to shape the surrounding world under the guidance of the theoretical insights produced by science. In the second place, the theoretical attitude has made possible the rational critique of all social, political, and cultural norms, aims, and values. These brief indications show the repercussions of the emergence of the theoretical attitude outside the circle of professional philosophers. The autonomy of theoretical reason is bound to promote a rationalization of practical life, as well as the critical foundation of a society based on an autonomous practical reason. Philosophy is called to exert the “archontic function” over the entire civilization to which it belongs (Husserl 1954: 289). In sum, as Husserl concludes:

True – universal philosophy, together with all the special sciences, makes up only a partial manifestation of European culture. Inherent in the sense of my whole presentation, however, is that this part is the functioning brain, so to speak, in whose normal function the genuine, healthy European spiritual life depends.

(Husserl 1954: 290–291)

I would like to insist that, in spite of the narrative overtone of Husserl’s analyses about Europe, what is really at stake is working out from the facts of European history their essential kernel. The determination of the essence of the phenomenon “Europe”, once more, has to be understood as a task of the a priori morphology of cultural formations. Thus, the factual history of Europe, and its current state of crisis, will be illuminated by the eidetic/morphological notions just obtained. Seen in this way, Europe, for Husserl, becomes an essential type of culture that in principle could have been instantiated in empirically different, but essentially equivalent, ways. It would be, for instance, quite tempting to envisage an alternative historical trajectory in which the modern revival of the ancient ideal of philosophy occurs in the Arabic world, which, during the Middle Ages, had preserved and developed the Greek philosophical legacy more consistently and originally than the Europeans. For that to happen, following the letter of Husserl’s reading of history, Galileo and Descartes – the fathers of modern European science and philosophy, respectively – would have had to be Arabic. Alternatively, in keeping with scenarios involving imaginary Islamic “European” humanities, Europe (in Husserl’s sense) could have grown eastward, following Alexander’s conquests, as to some extent it did, and then reemerge in Persian philosophy and science and, perhaps, from there, flourish in India at the time of the Mughals. To be sure, the historical plausibility of such alternate histories is not in question here, and assessing it would amount to an immense task, which would have to take into account the interplay all of historical factors involved, starting from the religious and political structures of the cultures in question.¹ What Husserl’s pure morphological insights can provide is not an explanation, but a conceptual framework in which empirical researches can be situated. The right meaningful empirical questions that only historians, sociologists, and cultural anthropologists can answer must be formulated with the conceptual vocabulary provided by the morphology of cultural formations. It is, for instance, a meaningful empirical question to ask why the theoretical attitude emerged in Ancient Greece and not among the Sumerians. It is a question that concerns the empirical conditions under which the *eidōs* “philosophical humanity” could instantiate itself. But such question presupposes the insight into the very idea of theoretical attitude and its hierarchical relations with other components of cultural life. The fundamental

result of this discussion, though, remains the following, trivial one: the essence of “European humanity” in Husserl’s sense does not depend in any way on the existence of the historical formation that we call Europe; it has nothing to do with a supposedly unique, unrepeatable, and ineffable soul of a nation.

It is now time to go back to what was promised at the beginning of this section, i.e. to the sense in which Europe becomes a phenomenon belonging to the domain of investigation of transcendental phenomenology. As such, its irreducible facticity will instead play a decisive role. As Husserl explicitly says, all natural and social phenomena become, out of necessity, also phenomena in the sense of transcendental phenomenology (Husserl 1976: 22). After the transcendental reduction, their empirical being is suspended, but they remain within the sphere of transcendental subjectivity *qua* pure bracketed realities. In other words, the phenomenologist, the radical philosopher pursuing the goal of a radical philosophical reflection, does not make any use of the historical existence of Europe, to which the philosopher, likewise suspended *qua* human being, belongs. And yet, the ideal of “genuine philosophy” must necessarily be derived from the scientific culture as a “noematic phenomenon”, as Husserl says at the beginning of the *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl 1950: §4). The ideal of scientificity at work in the factually existing sciences, albeit suspended in turn *qua* valid ideal, remains within the transcendental sphere as the tentative goal of the meditations. Now, although Husserl does not say it, the “noematic phenomenon” of scientists’ “*streben*”, from which the phenomenologist derives the tentative scientific ideal of the philosophical meditation, is precisely the fundamental aspect of the phenomenon “Europe”. This fundamental aspect of the phenomenon “Europe”, conceived, this time, as a transcendental facticity, and not as an objective cultural formation, guides the phenomenologist as a tentative ideal.

Philosophizing about Europe, thus, involves a fundamental reflexivity. On the one hand, the essence of Europe can only be understood philosophically, and, on the other hand, philosophers, by reflecting on the idea of Europe, question the identity and possibility of their own activity. It is impossible to reflect on the essence of Europe without reflecting on the essence of philosophy, and likewise impossible to reflect on the essence of philosophy without reflecting on the essence of Europe. The project “Europe” cannot be dissociated from the philosopher’s own theoretical task; it belongs to the absolute situation of philosophy. In transcendental terms: the transcendental reduction can be performed only by a subject that self-objectifies as a member of a European humanity. The latter, as a reduced phenomenon, as reduced phenomenon “Europe”, belongs to the transcendental sphere as a sort of historical and cultural embodiment of the philosophizing subject.²

3. The specificity of Husserl’s reflections on Europe

The preceding discussion highlights to what extent Husserl’s reflections on Europe differ from the analyses that we normally encounter in the historical and sociological literature. They are also fundamentally different from those developed by more recent philosophers who heavily draw on such literature. At a time in which purely empirical investigations enjoy a virtual monopoly in matters of good scientific reputation, it is important to be reminded that such investigations could learn a lot from Husserl’s philosophical approach. To be sure, Husserl had preoccupations that differed from those of the historians who have tried to characterize the idea of Europe. However, it would be wrong to think that Husserl’s Europe has nothing to do with their empirical research. Let us see why.

Husserl is interested in defining what one could call a “universal historical vector”, rather than a specific civilization among others. This already marks a difference with respect to the

countless authors who have tried to circumscribe European civilization on the basis of specific traits that can be found within more or less fluid temporal and geographical boundaries.³ As is obvious, historians have tried not only to identify geographical borders of Europe, but also temporal borders, and the two investigations cannot be carried out independently from one another. Often the creation and the identification of a specific European space has been seen as a preliminary to the formation of a self-conscious European identity. Following this line of thought, for instance, the birth of the European space has been judged to be a consequence of the end of the Roman-Mediterranean world and the breaking up of the Mediterranean unity brought about by the Arabic conquest, famously described by Henri Pirenne. Interestingly, the “Carolingian” accounts of European identity stress the discontinuity between the Ancient Greco-Roman era and the Christian, and tend to locate European history proper in the latter, consciously underplaying the well-known Greek origin of the geographical partition of the world into Asia, Europe, and Africa.⁴ Whatever their historical plausibility, such accounts – which deprive Greek philosophy and culture of its founding, essential role – are unable to give rise not only to a broad characterization of Western civilization (which may well lie outside their scope), but also to a correct description of the internal factors determining the development of European history *narrowly conceived*. This development, to be sure, is unconceivable without the role that philosophy and science play in it.⁵

The same character of “universal historical vector” explains why Husserl does not have the problem of demarcating the specificity of Europe with respect to the West in general, and the United States in particular, as instead Habermas and Derrida attempted to do (Habermas and Derrida 2003). In this case, the very focus of the analysis is sharply different. By the same token, Husserl did not investigate the possibility to situate Europe’s different national and cultural identities in a common narrative, as so many of his contemporaries did.⁶ Nothing illustrates more this open, dynamic nature of his analysis than the fact that, in the early 20s, right after the Westernization of the Meiji era, he had no hesitation to see the Japanese nation as a “young, freshly verdant brunch of the ‘European’ culture” (Husserl 1989: 95).⁷ Europe stretches so far as philosophical humanity does.

This being said, the most important methodological lesson that can be drawn from Husserl’s philosophical reflections on Europe concerns the aforementioned use of a priori, morphological notions. The implications of such use for the properly historical and sociological analysis is too complex a problem to be treated in passing. I limit myself to pointing out that historians have often listed different decisive factors characterizing the rise and development of European culture (typically, Christianity, capitalism, modern science and technology, rationalism in general, civil and human rights, separation of political and religious power, etc.) without providing a method to establish clear hierarchical relations among them. For instance, while historians acknowledge the relation between modern scientific worldview and technology (a relation, to be sure, extremely multifaceted and complex, as well as requiring a complex periodization), they often fail to correctly frame the internal nexus unifying the rise of modern European science with Greek philosophy. When discussing modern Europe and its world hegemony, Braudel⁸ speaks about the importance of European “rationalism” and of the advantage that modern science and technology gave to the European armies and fleets, but he does not even mention philosophy as a relevant factor, let alone as the fundamental original source of the rationalism that modern Europeans have displayed in science, technology, politics, and economics. His conclusion that Christianity has been even more important than rationalism in shaping the European civilization seems to be based on a kind of “quantitative” empirical assessment. Now, if Husserl’s analysis can contribute to this kind of empirical investigation, it is precisely by providing a conceptual framework (in Husserl’s terms, an eidetic doctrine) for the intrinsic, mutual relations among cultural phenomena.⁹

However, as I anticipated at the beginning of this chapter, even more important than any methodological considerations is the way in which Husserl's conception of Europe enables us to render thematic the identity of our historical present and of its intrinsic mode of development. Understanding Europe *with* Husserl means understanding the transformative forces that are at work in today's world. Seen in this way, Husserl's universalism appears more disquieting than optimistic. Rather than the triumphant march of European rationality, what we witness is the illness of European humanity infecting the entire world. As we are about to see, the Europeanization of the world amounts to the globalization of the crisis of European rationalism, i.e. the loss of faith in the possibility of philosophy to guide humanity – the loss of faith of humanity in itself. What has become truly universal is European naturalistic objectivism, fostered by the ubiquitous presence of technology.

4. Modern science and European self-consciousness

In contrast with other approaches, Husserl's analysis allows a precise articulation of the way in which philosophy and modern natural science shape European humanity. What is modern natural science, and what is its place in the philosophical trajectory inaugurated by the Greeks? Modern natural science, and modern physics in particular, bears within itself the sense of being a branch of the universal science of being, i.e. philosophy. The original *telos* of physics is to become the *episteme* of material nature, i.e. of a specific region of being. The fundamental breakthrough that the development of this science required, one that the Ancient world never accomplished, is the *mathematization of nature*. As is well known, this is for Husserl the single most important cultural fact defining modern European humanity. With Galileo, according to Husserl, something yet unheard of happens, something that Plato and his school, for principled philosophical reasons, could not achieve (Husserl 2012: 195) – namely, that material nature is conceived as a being which is mathematical in itself (Husserl 1954: 23). The progressive construction of more and more general and predictively powerful physical theories acquires therefore the sense of a constant approximation toward a true nature in itself. Well-known historical facts confirm the reconstruction outlined by Husserl. Before Galileo, geometry was, of course, applied to the study of nature, but almost exclusively to the study of celestial phenomena. Astronomy had been mathematized since the Ancient world. However, the geometrical notions used to describe the structure of the celestial spheres and the movements of the asters did not affect the fundamentally qualitative ontology of the predominant Aristotelian worldview, according to which geometry was only an abstract science of nature. The superlunary sphere was amenable to a mathematical description because the only change that could occur to objects made out of quintessence was (simple or compounded) circular motion. Below the sphere of the moon, instead, generation and corruption, qualitative and quantitative change could occur, along with local motion. However, it was a pillar of the Aristotelian worldview that that quantitative change (change according to the category of quantity) could not explain the other types of changes. The non-exact, non-mathematical character of such world was, thus, conceived as an essential feature and the attempt to describe it in precise mathematical terms as flawed from the outset.¹⁰ The birth of modern physics, thus, had to be made possible by a complete modification of the ontology of material nature that replaced all qualitative features of both the superlunary and the sublunary spheres with quantitative and geometrical features. Such modification is outlined by Galileo in a rightly famous passage of the *Essayer*, where Galileo proclaims that the sensible properties of objects would be annihilated if the perceiving subject were removed (Galileo 1896: 347–348) and radicalized by Descartes in *The World* (Descartes 2004: 16–21). In both texts, the target is the Aristotelian worldview for which sensible qualities such as cold and

hot have objective reality in material objects themselves. This process, which eventually led to Locke's formulation of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, replaced the ancient qualitative differentiated *cosmos* with the infinite, homogenous, and uniform space of modern physics, on which the same laws of physics hold sway everywhere.

This conception of nature, which Koyré aptly described as "The world of geometry made real" (Koyré 1943: 404) grounded modern mathematical physics, which thus became the first successful empirical science and the model for all other empirical sciences modernity will try to develop. As already stressed, this is what Husserl interprets as an insight into the essence of material nature. Mathematical physics became a paradigm also for several attempts to establish a scientific psychology, and, beyond that, a scientific study of social and cultural phenomena. The new method and the conception of nature that went with it, however, did not limit their influence to the special sciences, but also exerted a decisive influence on all other philosophical disciplines, as Husserl argues in detail in the second section of the *Krisis*, to the point that modern rationalism acquired the character of a universal mathematics, a philosophy based on a universal demonstrative style designed to intellectually master the totality of being in a deductive unity.

Before outlining the downsides of what up to now appears as one of the greatest successes of modern European culture, and as an at least partial realization of the project guiding it from its Greek origins, let us indulge in a brief analysis of the way in which modern science in general, and astronomy and mathematical physics in particular, contributed to define the self-perception of Europeans both with respect to their own past and with respect to other culture and civilizations of the time.¹¹ It will appear that Husserl's insistence on the historical significance of the mathematization of nature is far from being misplaced. The extraordinary success of the new science, especially after the crowning achievements of Newton and of his school, along with the growing awareness of the unmatched and ever-increasing might of European technology, played a fundamental role in shaping the entire age of Enlightenment, which, let us stress it, was also an epoch marked by the awaking of a strong European cultural consciousness among intellectuals. A number of texts written by the representatives of Enlightenment can illustrate this phenomenon.

The development of modern science soon contributes to one of the fundamental ideas defining European modern culture – namely, that of *progress*. A relatively early example of this fact is provided by Fontenelle's famous 1688 *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes*. In this short text, Fontenelle intervenes in the famous *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, which opposed two French 17th century literary movements. What is noteworthy is how Fontenelle, in contrast with other participants in this dispute, argues in favour of the superiority of modern Europeans on the ground of the more advanced state of their scientific knowledge (Rossi 2007: 79–80). According to Fontenelle, the superiority of the modern is due to the slow accumulation of knowledge that has taken place century after century, but also to the progressive elimination of wrong alternatives and to the improvement in the method of reasoning (Fontenelle 1955: 165–167). As an example of the second type of progress, he mentions the recognition (via the refutation of Plato's, Pythagoras' and Aristotle's views and in accord with the new physics) that "All the game of nature consists in the shapes and movements of the bodies" (Fontenelle 1955: 165). As an example of the third, he mentions the introduction of Descartes' method. In Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, published in 1721, we find in the words of an imaginary Persian traveller the recognition of the present superiority of European science and technology with respect to those of the Islamic world, but what is stressed is their destructive power rather than their beneficial effects.¹² It is in Voltaire's reflections on universal history, instead, that the superiority as well as the specificity of modern European science is highlighted with particular vigour, both in a diachronic and in a synchronic way. Voltaire was an admirer of the new

science, in particular of Galileo. He credited modern European scientists with accomplishing such a breakthrough both at the methodological and at the theoretical level that they showed to humanity the way to the true scientific knowledge of the world. As he proclaims in the *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, published in 1756, the European physics of the past two centuries stands out over whatever has been achieved from the time of the Greeks and the Romans onward or in China during any time (Voltaire 1829: 76). In a text that, let us stress it, was written with the aim to contest the alleged moral superiority of Christian nations (previously asserted, for instance, by Bossuet) and that has famous words of praise for the superior level reached by the moral science in China, Voltaire cannot but observe that geometry, astronomy, and physics, as well as technology, while being cultivated in China long before they were in Europe, have subsequently stagnated and never reached a comparable level (Voltaire 1829: 205–209).¹³ Particularly interesting is Voltaire's claim that Chinese astronomy remains at the stage of a "science of the eyes and fruit of patience" (Voltaire 1829: 208), thus a science without theoretical depth.

But the author who has fully developed these themes in a unitary, progressive, and science-driven view of human history – in which, furthermore, Europe plays the role of the trailblazer for the whole of humanity – is Nicolas de Condorcet. In his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* written in 1794 but published posthumously, Condorcet portrays history as a process that from the time of ancient Greece to the most advanced European nations of the present has been marked by the growth of scientific knowledge (Condorcet 1970: 44). This triumphant march of science has no parallel across the globe, neither in Asia, where the initial (and very ancient) development of science has been halted by superstition (Condorcet 1970: 72), nor in the cultures appearing elsewhere in the world which, before making contact with the Europeans, have always remained at the stage of infancy (Condorcet 1970: 73). Once more, this progress has experienced a turning point with the birth of modern science, whose three greatest founders are Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes (Condorcet 1970: 148), while Newton is celebrated as the discover of the first – and up to now, only – general law of the universe (Condorcet 1970: 172). Mathematical sciences play a fundamental role in the entire vicissitude of modern science, because they have been fruitfully applied to all other sciences (Condorcet 1970: 182), and they are a model of rigour and progressivity that all of them are called to imitate (Condorcet 1970: 216). Modern physical sciences, in particular, are extremely important for the moral and political progress of humanity too, since "All errors in politics and in morality are based on philosophical errors, and the latter are connected to physical errors" (Condorcet 1970: 184). Condorcet concludes his *tableau* of human progress expressing a hope based on a parallel between physical and moral/political sciences. If mathematical and physical sciences improve the techniques needed for the satisfaction of our simplest needs, why shouldn't we expect that "[t]he progress of moral and political sciences exert the same action on the motifs that direct our feelings and our actions?" (Condorcet 1970: 210).¹⁴

Condorcet's influence continued well into the following century, beyond the time of classical Enlightenment. Auguste Comte, while presenting his well-known progressive theory of European history, explicitly refers to Condorcet (Comte 1830: 65), and in many ways takes the scientific aspects of his narrative to their extreme limits. Just like Condorcet, Comte sees the Capitoline triad of Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes as the fathers of the modern scientific outlook, which he characterizes as *positive philosophy* (Comte 1830: 19), and proclaims that European education – still largely theological, metaphysical, and literary – must be replaced by a "positive education" based on science (Comte 1830: 41). Furthermore, according to Comte, the efforts of the fathers of modern science must be brought to completion with the development of new scientific disciplines capable of renewing the success of modern physics. What is missing from the great system of modern sciences is, most of all, a "social physics" and

a political science based on observation. Interestingly, Comte asserts that positive philosophy – completing the effort of Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes – will be able to put an end to the *crisis* that for a long time has affected the most civilized nations (Comte 1830: 48, 52). According to Comte, thus, not only the historical vicissitude of European culture appears intertwined with the development of modern science, but modern science has the resources to heal a civilization that is already in crisis.

5. Modernity, naturalism, and the Europeanization of the world

As we have just seen, the awareness that the fate of European humanity is inseparable from the vicissitudes of modern science and its function for cultural life at large becomes widespread during the Enlightenment. Comte's subsequent recognition that the European nations were in a political and cultural crisis constituted only a foretaste of Husserl's complex diagnosis of the illness of European civilization. For Husserl, it is the very nature of modern rationalism that had to lead to its ultimate failure. Enlightenment itself, which Husserl admired so much (Husserl 1954: 10), was born crippled by the philosophical mistakes surrounding modern science. Both for Comte and for Husserl, a *scientific philosophy* was the only possible remedy to the crisis they were witnessing, but, first, Husserl's notion of scientificity is in contrast with Comte's and with any other positivistic, empiricist, or naturalistic variant thereof; and, second, for Husserl, the modern distortions of the notion of scientificity are precisely the source of our present crisis. A text written in 1934 provides a clear synthesis of this train of thought that complements the well-known narratives of the *Vienna Lecture* and of the *Krisis*. In this text, Husserl characterizes Europe as the intentional synthesis of Greek culture, Judaism, Hellenism, and Christianity, a synthesis which culminates with modernity. Its entire historical trajectory is marked by the contrast between two different forms of teleology, religious teleology and the teleology of reason (Husserl 2013: 228–235). The religious worldview, which itself unfolds in different stages of increasing maturity, points to a world and a human life in it that have a sense determined by religious faith. European rationality has progressively replaced this worldview with a different one, based on the teleology of reason. The world becomes the infinite totality of all truths; being as such is what is disclosed in scientific truth, “ὄν = ὄν ὡς ἀληθές” (Husserl 2013: 229), and humanity is engaged in the infinite process of unveiling such truth about the world, about itself, and about its own place in it. Nothing in principle is excluded from the scope of this gradual extension of the ambit of human reason, even God itself. At bottom, this is the promise of modernity that reaches its apex during the Enlightenment and survives through positivism in a somewhat residual and enfeebled form. However, this form of European life – which we have seen was by itself faithful to the inner teleology defining Europe as such – was crippled from its very beginning by the philosophical misunderstandings surrounding the mathematical science of nature, i.e. the greatest success and constant inspiration of modernity. The *Vienna Lecture* contains a short outline of this process. The philosophical failure of modernity is based on its incapacity to clarify the notions of nature and spirit and their mutual relations. Starting with Galileo, mathematized nature has been wrongly interpreted as an ontologically self-sufficient being that exists beyond subjectivity and independently from it. As a result, the concrete life-world of which nature is only an abstract component has been forgotten, and “spirit” has been interpreted as a fragmented being causally determined by material nature. The upshot of this process is the psycho-physical worldview, a form of objectivistic naturalism according to which subjectivity is but a contingent emergence in a self-sufficient physical world. This worldview precludes any possibility of conceiving subjectivity as *constituting* and, thereby, of developing the theory of science, i.e. the organ of cognition that, as we have seen, from Plato onward was

meant to guide humanity towards its genuine self-realization. Thus, physicalistic naturalism has prevented European humanity from unfolding its inner teleology; it has produced its sickness, its crisis: the loss of faith in reason. Consequently, the European sciences themselves have been condemned to an unphilosophical positivity, to an incomplete, non-genuine positivity, which is questionable, vulnerable to scepticism. But a science whose scientificity is questionable is a science *in crisis*. Such is the crisis of European humanity, of European philosophy, and of the European sciences, which only an anti-naturalistic, anti-objectivistic universal philosophy grounded in phenomenology can overcome.

If this is the upshot of modernity, if this is our situation, the process of Europeanization of the world appears as a pandemic of a naturalistic pseudo-rationalism, of a philosophy in bankruptcy. What Europe has done is not only the integration of the whole of humanity in a common space, in a single interconnected earth, for it has also unified all existing cultures in what is more decisive in defining them, i.e. their way of apprehending the being of the world and of relating to it. Everywhere, the sense of being of world is defined by the naturalistic objectivism based on natural science. The ubiquitous spreading of technology is the force that prepares all existing cultures to apprehend being in a naturalistic way, and, thus, psycho-physical nature becomes the ultimate reality, according to “the modern sense of ‘world’ as nature” (Husserl 2013: 231–233).

The Europeanization of the world is not what Enlightenment hoped it would look like; it is actually quite its opposite: not the triumphant march of reason, but the global hegemony of a mutilated rationality, unable to guide humanity towards its fulfilment. Europeanization ultimately means integration in a *philosophical humanity in crisis*. These considerations, I hope, will finally dispel any doubts concerning Husserl’s alleged naïve Eurocentrism and will help appreciate his contribution to the great philosophical task of understanding the present state of humanity and its destiny.

Notes

- 1 Within a different conceptual and methodological framework, much of Max Weber’s immense empirical research on the sociology of Western and Eastern religions attempted to give an answer to questions of this kind; see Nelson (1976) and Nippel (2002).
- 2 Indeed, one could speak here of a “transcendental deduction of Europe”.
- 3 A classic survey of such attempts up until the 19th century is in Chabod (1995). See also Pocock (2002).
- 4 For a critique of the view that Charlemagne actually was the “father of Europe”, in a self-conscious opposition to the previous age, see Rossi (2007).
- 5 This does not mean that a shared sense of being European did not arise across the continent for the first time during the Middle Ages, as is argued in Lopez (1980).
- 6 For a detailed reconstruction of some of the views of the time, see Cattani (2017).
- 7 On the process of “Europeanisation” in relation to Husserl, see Knies (2018).
- 8 Braudel (1994).
- 9 Along these lines, it would be possible to show what is wrong with over-simplified explanations of European economical, technical, and military supremacy such as the one proposed by Jared Diamond (1997). Diamond’s naturalistic approach is based on the conviction, wonderfully expressed (but not truly endorsed) by Arnold Toynbee that “Technology is, of course, only a long Greek name for a bag of tools” (Toynbee 1953: 11), coupled with the thesis that environmental factors can explain why the part of the world called Europe ended up having a bag of tools bigger and fuller than everyone else. This approach thus situates the different cultures, from the outset, on the same ascending path towards the technical mastery of the world, as if such mastery were a simple matter of degrees and did not imply the emergence of what Husserl characterizes as fundamentally new *attitudes*. Toynbee himself vividly illustrates the falsity of this view by reconstructing how Turkey, after its repeated efforts to update to Western technology, had to finally accept, with Atatürk, to import also a large part of the Western way of thinking

- (Toynbee 1953: 20–29). See also his definition of technology as a “Trojan horse” for Chinese and Japanese cultures in the 19th century (Toynbee 1953: 56). An account of how the Ottoman state had attempted to import Western technology without the mentality and the concepts of Western science is in Ihsanoglu (1996). The Meiji Era in Japan constitutes another fundamental illustration of this process.
- 10 And likewise flawed was deemed the idea that experiments, rather than simple observation, could reveal the real behaviour of physical objects. The experimental setting, if anything, was considered by Aristotelians as a way to hide the “natural tendencies” of objects.
- 11 Galileo’s triumphant words in the opening pages of the *Sidereus Nuncius* remind us that modern European scientists were fully aware, from the beginning, of the extraordinary nature of their accomplishments.
- 12 See Montesquieu 2016, in particular letter XXXV, which ends with the exclamation: “*Heureuse ignorance des enfants de Mahomet*”. Let us however recall that Montesquieu, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, developing a theme that, albeit in a different form, was already present in Machiavelli’s *The Art of War*, characterizes the difference between European and Asian civilizations in terms of their relation to political power rather than to scientific knowledge. To him, Europe is the land of moderate power and liberty, where Asia is the land of despotism and slavery (See Chabod 1995: 48–53, 87–92).
- 13 Voltaire identifies two major causes of this fact, China’s reverence for tradition, and the lack of an alphabetic script (Voltaire 1829).
- 14 Indeed, these considerations by Condorcet highlight the fact that, during the Enlightenment, European sciences had not yet lost what Husserl will call their *significance for life*.

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