

# Intentionality and Autonomy in Husserl's Phenomenology: A Comprehensive Analysis of Conscious Decisions and the Transcendental Ego

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**ABSTRACT.** This essay embarks on a thorough exploration of Edmund Husserl's seminal contributions to the philosophical discourse on consciousness, with a particular focus on the dynamics of conscious decisions within the framework of phenomenology. By delving into Husserl's nuanced examination of consciousness—its temporal structure, the nature of self-awareness, and the foundational concept of intentionality—the analysis reveals the intricate ways in which Husserl posits the transcendental ego as the nexus of meaning, judgment, and perception. The discussion illuminates how Husserl's theory of intentionality and the intentional act's matter and quality serve as the cornerstone for understanding the will's engagement with the world. Through a detailed exposition of Husserl's ideas on the phenomenological reduction, the essay articulates the active role of consciousness in constituting reality and the ethical dimensions underpinning the exercise of free will. The paper argues that Husserl's insights into conscious decision-making challenge conventional views by framing free will within the contexts of knowledge, ethical deliberation, and the ego's autonomy. This essay contributes to the ongoing dialogue between phenomenology and contemporary philosophy of mind by highlighting Husserl's profound impact on our understanding of consciousness, agency, and the existential significance of human decisions.

**Keywords:** Edmund Husserl, Phenomenology, Conscious Decisions, Transcendental Ego, Intentionality, Free Will, Consciousness, Epistemology, Temporality, Rationality, Autonomy, Phenomenological Reduction (Epoché), Intersubjectivity, Self-awareness

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## Introduction

Edmund Husserl views the will not just as a capacity to make choices but as fundamentally rooted in reason and knowledge.<sup>1</sup> This perspective frames the will's ability to decide and act as inherently linked to understanding what actions are possible and justifiable. Consequently, the freedom of the will—its ability to choose freely among various actions—is deeply intertwined with the individual's knowledge and rational capacity. This connection between the will and knowledge introduces a nuanced challenge to traditional notions of freedom. If one's ability to choose (the will's "fiat" or declaration to act) is contingent upon knowing what options are available and which of those options are ethically or logically sound, then freedom is not simply the ability to make any choice. Instead, freedom becomes conditional upon the individual's understanding and rational judgment. Therefore, Husserl suggests that for the will to exercise true freedom, it must be based on a foundation of knowledge—both of what actions are possible and of what actions are morally or logically appropriate. This view implies that ethical or rational deliberation is essential for the exercise of genuine freedom, moving the discussion of will and freedom into the realm of epistemology. Husserl's approach to understanding the will is deeply rooted in the study of consciousness.<sup>2</sup> For Husserl, unraveling the essence and structure of consciousness, along with its connections to the external world, is essential. He views consciousness as a domain of pure experience, indicating that our conscious experience is fundamental to comprehending the nature of the will. This perspective suggests that the will's decisions and actions are intricately linked to our inner experiential world, highlighting the importance of conscious experience in shaping human agency and freedom.

To facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced interplay among Husserl's various themes, this introduction will conclude with an outline that underscores how these themes unfold from epistemology to their implications for ethics and the autonomy of consciousness. Firstly, we will explore Husserl's epistemological framework, emphasizing the foundational role of consciousness and its inherent intentionality in the pursuit of knowledge. This sets the stage for understanding the autonomy of consciousness, not just as a passive receptacle of experiences but as an active agent in the constitution of reality. Following this, we delve into the ethical dimensions emergent from this autonomy, wherein the

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<sup>1</sup> Ferrarello, Susi. "On the rationality of will in James and Husserl." *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 2, no. II-1 (2010): 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ferrarello, Susi. "On the rationality of will in James and Husserl." *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 2, no. II-1 (2010): 3-5.

transcendental ego's engagement with the world is inherently moral. The progression from understanding consciousness in its epistemic capacity to recognizing its ethical implications reveals how Husserl's phenomenology bridges the gap between knowing the world and living within it ethically. This outline serves not only to chart the course of our exploration but also to highlight the seamless transition from theoretical considerations to practical, lived experience, thereby underscoring the centrality of consciousness in both realms. Through this journey, we aim to illuminate the complex tapestry of Husserl's thought, showcasing the intricate connections between the autonomy of consciousness, the pursuit of knowledge, and the foundation of ethical life.

## Consciousness

The concept of consciousness has fascinated thinkers across various disciplines, bridging the interests of the philosophical and scientific communities alike. It occupies a central place in psychology<sup>3</sup> and neuroscience<sup>4</sup>, where it is studied from the perspectives of mental processes and brain functions.<sup>5</sup> Within philosophy, consciousness is a pivotal theme across multiple branches, including phenomenology<sup>6</sup>, epistemology<sup>7</sup>, and metaphysics<sup>8</sup>. This wide-ranging intrigue underscores the complexity and multifaceted nature of consciousness, highlighting its significance in understanding human experience, cognition, and the essence of existence itself. Current research endeavors to explain how the brain and body give rise to consciousness and to elucidate the connections between conscious experience and cognitive processes.<sup>9</sup> A pivotal challenge for neuroscience is to decode not only how the brain facilitates our experiences and perceptions of the world but also how

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<sup>3</sup> Turcotte, J., Lakatos, L., & Oddson, B. (2021). *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice*.

<sup>4</sup> Dehaene, Stanislas, and Lionel Naccache. "Towards a cognitive neuroscience of consciousness: basic evidence and a workspace framework." *Cognition* 79, no. 1-2 (2001): 1-37.

<sup>5</sup> Seth, Anil K., Zoltán Dienes, Axel Cleeremans, Morten Overgaard, and Luiz Pessoa. "Measuring consciousness: relating behavioural and neurophysiological approaches." *Trends in cognitive sciences* 12, no. 8 (2008): 314-321.

<sup>6</sup> Pekala, Ronald J., Jack Steinberg, and V. K. Kumar. "Measurement of phenomenological experience: Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory." *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 63, no. 2 (1986): 983-989.

<sup>7</sup> Velmans, Max. "An epistemology for the study of consciousness." *The Blackwell companion to consciousness* (2017): 769-784.

<sup>8</sup> Prentner, Robert. "Process metaphysics of consciousness." *Open Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2018): 3-13.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, Evan, and Dan Zahavi. "Philosophical issues: Phenomenology." (2007).

it fosters a sense of self in the act of knowing.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary perspectives on consciousness, either wholly or in part, are deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, introduced by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century. Husserl was profoundly interested in the foundation of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> He aspired to establish a rigorous philosophical and scientific understanding of knowledge. To this end, he believed that consciousness must serve as the primary starting point, considering that without its thorough comprehension, no genuine knowledge can be attained.<sup>12</sup>

Both phenomenology and analytic philosophy have made profound contributions to our understanding of consciousness, yet they approach the subject in distinctively different manners<sup>13</sup>. Phenomenology, introduced by Edmund Husserl, emphasizes the primacy of lived experience.

In the fifth of his “Logical Investigations,” Husserl delves into the complexities of consciousness by distinguishing among three definitions, each highlighting the relationship between various acts and consciousness itself.<sup>14</sup> First, Husserl describes consciousness as the entirety of what is experienced. This definition encompasses all acts and the full extent of its knowledge, portraying consciousness as a comprehensive system of acts alongside our perception of this system. Husserl argued that to truly grasp the concept of consciousness, we must turn our attention to the immediate presentation of reality as we experience it. He believed that reality is best understood not through abstract theorizations or detached observations, but through how it manifests itself to us, from the nuanced standpoint of phenomena.<sup>15</sup> This approach doesn’t necessarily negate the existence of an objective reality. Instead, it underscores that our primary access to such reality is mediated through our experiences. By adopting a phenomenological stance, we are urged to bracket out our preconceptions and immediate judgments. In doing so, we move away from seeking the intrinsic, mind-independent nature of things, focusing instead on the richness of their appearance in our consciousness and the meanings they inherently possess for us. This shift in perspective, as advocated by Husserl, prompts a deeper exploration into how we relate to the world strictly based on its appearance and

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<sup>10</sup> Damasio, Antonio R. *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, (1999): 104-105.

<sup>11</sup> Giorgi, Amedeo. “Concerning the phenomenological methods of Husserl and Heidegger and their application in psychology.” *Collection du cirp* 1, no. 1 (2007): 63-68.

<sup>12</sup> Giorgi, Amedeo. “Concerning the phenomenological methods of Husserl and Heidegger and their application in psychology.” *Collection du cirp* 1, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Giorgi, Amedeo. “Concerning the phenomenological methods of Husserl and Heidegger and their application in psychology.” *Collection du cirp* 1, no. 1 (2007): 69-71.

<sup>14</sup> Husserl, E. (2000). *Logical investigations*. London: Routledge Press.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, Evan, and Dan Zahavi. “Philosophical issues: Phenomenology.” (2007): 71-72.

how these appearances shape our understanding of consciousness. Thus, when we adopt the phenomenological stance, we step back from making immediate judgments about the world. Instead of concerning ourselves with the intrinsic nature of things in a detached, mind-independent or theory-independent manner, we become keenly interested in how these things present themselves in our consciousness, in the richness of their appearance, and in the meanings they hold for us. Transcendental phenomenology focuses on how things are experienced or presented to us, rather than their intrinsic nature. This perspective emphasizes the process of experiencing and the conditions under which objects are perceived, highlighting the subjective aspect of perception and consciousness<sup>16</sup>. In "Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy" Husserl introduces the concept of phenomenological reduction, or epoché, which involves suspending or bracketing natural assumptions about the existence of the external world to focus purely on the phenomena of consciousness. This method allows Husserl to investigate the structures of consciousness and how objects are constituted in subjective experience.

Therefore the second definition builds on the first by introducing the concept that the immanent (inherent) components of consciousness are fully perceived by what he calls an 'inner consciousness' (Gewahrwerden). This suggests that every piece of data or information is part of a lived experience (Erlebnis) within consciousness, emphasizing the direct and immediate perception of these experiences.<sup>17</sup> He distinguishes between the natural attitude, in which we take the existence of the world for granted, and the phenomenological attitude, which examines how the world appears to us through consciousness. Husserl further developed these ideas in later works, including "Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology"<sup>18</sup> and "The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology,"<sup>19</sup> where he deepens his exploration of the relationship between the life-world (Lebenswelt) and the phenomenological perspective. These texts collectively lay out Husserl's argument that the essence of phenomenology is to study the ways in which things present themselves to consciousness, rather than assuming an objective reality independent of our experience.

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<sup>16</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: First book: General introduction to a pure phenomenology*. Vol. 2. Springer Science & Business Media, (2012): 27-32

<sup>17</sup> Husserl, E. (2000). *Logical investigations*. London: Routledge Press.

<sup>18</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology*. Springer Science & Business Media, (2013): 7-17.

<sup>19</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology: An introduction to phenomenological philosophy*. Northwestern University Press (1970).

Husserl's third definition expands further by presenting consciousness as a universal comprehension of pure lived experience. This involves an additional layer of experience, necessitating a "new percept" to accompany every perception. Husserl is pointing to a deeper level of awareness that underlies and enriches our direct experiences, suggesting that consciousness also includes a reflective aspect that recognizes and interprets every experience. Husserl's third definition of consciousness delves deeper into an aspect he initially described as 'objectifying interpretation,' which he later refers to as 'act-matter.'<sup>20</sup> This concept stands in contrast to another component named 'act-quality.' Together, the matter and quality of an act constitute its intentional essence, integral to understanding consciousness's functionality. In Husserl's framework, both matter and quality are innate components of the intentional act itself, contributing to its comprehensive structure. Specifically, the 'matter' of an act is crucial because it establishes the act's 'reference' to an object. This reference is not vague or general; instead, it's remarkably precise, defining not only the object of focus but also the exact manner in which the object is perceived or thought about. Thus, the matter element is essentially what directs consciousness towards an object, embodying the act of 'intending' or aiming at the object in the realm of intentionality. Through this nuanced analysis, Husserl illuminates how consciousness is inherently 'directed' towards things in the world, a characteristic known as 'intentionality.' The 'matter' within an act of consciousness plays a pivotal role in how an object is specifically and uniquely targeted by our mental faculties, detailing both the object and the mode of engagement with it. This concept helps explain the intricate workings of consciousness, showcasing its active engagement with the world through intentionality. Multiple acts of consciousness can target the same object, yet each act might interpret or "mean" the object in a unique manner. This is because every act could be focusing on a distinct attribute or property of the object. The concept of 'matter' within an act represents this focus or directedness towards the object, more precisely, towards a particular property of that object. Essentially, the matter aspect of an act specifies the target of consciousness—what the act is aware of. Contrasting with 'matter,' the 'quality' of an act refers to how consciousness engages with the object. While 'matter' points to the 'what'—the specific property or aspect of the object being directed at—'quality' addresses the 'how'—the manner or mode in which the act apprehends or experiences the object. Together, these aspects of matter and quality delineate not only the focus of an act of consciousness but also the nature of its engagement with that focus, illuminating the multifaceted relationship between consciousness and the objects of its attention.

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<sup>20</sup> Husserl, E. (2000). *Logical investigations*. London: Routledge Press.

Husserl views consciousness as a domain characterized by pristine and complete rationality.<sup>21</sup> Within this realm, consciousness doesn't just float in a vacuum; it actively engages with the external world. The tools for this engagement are rooted in rationality itself. In other words, consciousness interacts with, understands, and makes sense of the world around it through rational processes. These processes, or tools, enable consciousness to analyze, interpret, and respond to various aspects of the external world, establishing a bridge between the inner realm of thought and the outer reality. This conception positions rationality not only as the essence of consciousness but also as the means through which consciousness connects and interacts with the world beyond itself. The will is portrayed as one of the various facets or areas within consciousness, functioning as a crucial instrument through which consciousness comprehends and interacts with the external world. Essentially, the will allows an individual to direct attention, make decisions, and take actions based on their understanding and experiences of their surroundings. This suggests that the will plays a significant role in shaping how we perceive, interpret, and engage with the world beyond ourselves, acting as a bridge between our inner mental processes and the external reality.

Therefore Husserl's quest is to articulate a precise understanding of consciousness's domain. In his "Logical Investigations," he centers his analysis on consciousness and its unadulterated contents, positing it as the wellspring of fundamental logical principles.<sup>22</sup> Phenomenology, for Husserl, serves as a method dedicated to elucidating the contents of consciousness with the goal of establishing a foundation for pure logic. This endeavor leads him to conceptualize consciousness as an uninterrupted stream of meanings, framing it within an epistemological context.<sup>23</sup> This perspective highlights consciousness not merely as a repository of thoughts and experiences but as the origin of a structured system of logic, underscoring its role in the genesis and organization of knowledge.

### **The inherently intentional consciousness**

Husserl posited that the crux of understanding lies in focusing on the phenomenon, or the appearance, and discerning the manifold meanings it holds for us.

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<sup>21</sup> Ferrarello, Susi. "On the rationality of will in James and Husserl." *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 2, no. II-1 (2010): 7.

<sup>22</sup> Husserl, E. (2000). *Logical investigations*. London: Routledge Press.

<sup>23</sup> Ferrarello, Susi. "On the rationality of will in James and Husserl." *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 2, no. II-1 (2010): 5-7.

He delved into questions regarding how these significant phenomena are constructed, specifically inquiring about the processes that shape these conscious appearances<sup>24</sup>. In essence, objects present themselves in our experience in certain ways due to the inherent structure of consciousness. In Husserl's phenomenology, consciousness possesses a unique characteristic: it is inherently intentional<sup>25</sup>. This means that consciousness consistently directs itself toward something external, reaching or pointing beyond its own bounds. However, this concept of intentionality differs from the more common understanding of the term, which implies having a purpose or a deliberate aim during an action<sup>26</sup>. It's essential to differentiate between these two nuances of intentionality in the phenomenological context. Intentionality is the manner in which an object presents itself, a phenomenon that is pertinent to experience but not confined by it<sup>27</sup>. In the realm of contemporary philosophy of mind, 'phenomenological consciousness' designates those mental states imbued with a subjective, experiential nature. In essence, for a mental state to be considered conscious, a subject must actively inhabit that state<sup>28</sup>. Husserl extends this understanding beyond the confines of mere sensory or emotional states. He posits that even conscious thought is enveloped by this phenomenological quality of experience<sup>29</sup>. In his work, "Logische Untersuchungen II/2", Husserl further asserts that conscious thoughts aren't merely cognitive entities, rather they carry experiential nuances<sup>30</sup>. Each conscious state, be it a perception, emotion, memory, or even an abstract thought, possesses a unique subjective texture — a distinct phenomenological quality that defines the very sensation of undergoing that state.

## Self-awareness

Husserl explores the idea that our perception of the world is not limited to what is immediately before us but includes a broader horizon of potential

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<sup>24</sup> Thompson, Evan, and Dan Zahavi. "Philosophical issues: Phenomenology." (2007): 74.

<sup>25</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: First book: General introduction to a pure phenomenology*. Vol. 2. Springer Science & Business Media (2012).

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, Evan, and Dan Zahavi. "Philosophical issues: Phenomenology." (2007): 74-75.

<sup>27</sup> Giorgi, Amedeo. "Concerning the phenomenological methods of Husserl and Heidegger and their application in psychology." *Collection du cirp* 1, no. 1 (2007): 69-71.

<sup>28</sup> Nagel, Thomas. "What is it like to be a bat?." In *The Language and Thought Series*. Harvard University Press, (1980): 159-168.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, Evan, and Dan Zahavi. "Philosophical issues: Phenomenology." (2007): 76.

<sup>30</sup> Husserl, Edmund. "Logische Untersuchungen II/2," (1901).



perceptions<sup>31</sup>. This horizon is composed of all the perceptions we could experience if we chose to engage with our environment differently. For instance, if we shifted our gaze or moved our position, we would encounter different aspects of our surroundings. This capacity for varied perception underscores the active role we play in shaping our perceptual experience. This concept extends into memory as well. When we recall an experience, we're aware that our past perceptions could have been different had we directed our attention elsewhere. This awareness forms a horizon of alternative perceptions that could have been realized under different conditions. Furthermore, Husserl suggests that every act of perception is linked to a 'horizon of the past'—a realm of potential memories that can be revived or activated based on our initiative. This horizon encompasses a chain of possible memories leading up to the present moment, highlighting a continuous thread of intentionality that connects past recollections to current perceptions. Central to this discussion is the idea of freedom and choice in how we engage with our perceptual field. The phrase "I can and do, but I can also do otherwise than I am doing" illustrates this flexibility in perception and memory. It suggests that while we have the freedom to direct our perceptual and recollective focus, this freedom operates within a context of possible constraints. Thus, our engagement with the world is a dynamic interplay of choice, potential perceptions, and the ever-present horizons of past experiences and future possibilities.

Further underscoring his view on the subjectivity of consciousness, Husserl posits that the very essence of being a subject is rooted in self-awareness. To exist as a subject means to be deeply aware of one's own self, to be intrinsically cognizant of one's own existence.<sup>32</sup> In the realm of self-awareness, being conscious of one's own experience doesn't equate to an external perception of oneself distinct from the experience. Rather, it entails immersing in and living the experience in an intimately personal manner. The subject, or the individual, isn't an external observer, but is intrinsically woven into the fabric of the experience itself<sup>33</sup>. Reinforcing this perspective, a multitude of studies in cognitive science underline the core idea that self-awareness isn't an isolated cognitive act<sup>34</sup>. Instead, it's deeply intertwined with bodily self-regulation, emotions, and affect. This suggests that cognition and deliberate

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<sup>31</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology*. Springer Science & Business Media, (2013): 44-45.

<sup>32</sup> Zahavi, Dan. "Inner time-consciousness and pre-reflective self-awareness," (2003): 160.

<sup>33</sup> Zahavi, Dan. *Subjectivity and selfhood: Investigating the first-person perspective*. MIT press (2008).

<sup>34</sup> Mograbi, Daniel C., Simon Hall, Beatriz Arantes, and Jonathan Huntley. "The cognitive neuroscience of self-awareness: Current framework, clinical implications, and future research directions." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science* 15, no. 2 (2024): 1670.

actions aren't standalone processes; they are intricately reliant on our emotional states<sup>35</sup>. Experiences don't exist as isolated events. Instead, they're intertwined in the tapestry of consciousness, which is characterized by a unity of experiences. This unity is observed in two dimensions: synchronically, where experiences are interconnected at a single moment, and diachronically, where they link across the continuum of time. Given this dual nature of unity, it's crucial to delve into the temporal coherence and continuity inherent in our conscious experiences. In doing so, we can better understand the framework of consciousness, illuminating how it manages to maintain a sense of coherence and identity across time.<sup>36</sup>

### Consciousness and time

In the realm of phenomenology, 'temporality' doesn't merely signify the objective passage of time, as marked by a clock, or even our subjective sense of time's progression. Instead, for phenomenologists like Husserl, temporality — or the internal consciousness of time — represents a foundational structure that underpins consciousness itself.<sup>37</sup> Husserl embarked on a nuanced exploration of this intricate structure with two primary objectives. Firstly, he sought to elucidate how we perceive objects within the temporal framework, as well as how we become aware of our sequential experiences over time.<sup>38</sup> In essence, Husserl's phenomenological inquiry aims to shed light on our awareness of extended temporal units and the manner in which consciousness achieves its own temporal unity. He posited that humans intrinsically possess a direct consciousness of both the transformation and continuity of objects and processes as they perceive them across brief time spans.

The composition of consciousness, according to a dynamic tripartite view, consists of three interrelated components: primary impressions, retentions (sometimes termed primary memories), and protentions.<sup>39</sup> 'Primary impressions' represent immediate, real-time experiences that inhabit the present moment. However, the ephemeral nature of these impressions means that as swiftly as they emerge, they

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<sup>35</sup> Freeman, Walter J. "Emotion is essential to all intentional behaviors." *Emotion, development, and self-organization: Dynamic systems approaches to emotional development*, (2000): 209-235.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, Evan, and Dan Zahavi. "Philosophical issues: Phenomenology." (2007) 78.

<sup>37</sup> Husserl, E. (1991). *On the phenomenology of the consciousness of internal time*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

<sup>38</sup> Thompson, Evan, and Dan Zahavi. "Philosophical issues: Phenomenology." (2007): 78.

<sup>39</sup> Dainton, Barry. "Temporal Consciousness." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2010).

recede into the past. Intriguingly, while they move away from the 'present', they don't vanish from consciousness. Instead, they morph into 'retentions', which stand as representations of the past within our conscious realm. Husserl clarified that retentions aren't mere replicas of ordinary memories; they are a unique form of consciousness, distinctive in their nature and function. Completing the triad is 'protentions'. These are future-facing elements within consciousness, encapsulating our anticipations and expectations of what's yet to unfold.<sup>40</sup>

In his exploration of consciousness, Husserl identifies three distinct facets: firstly, the way consciousness manifests within the temporal framework; secondly, the essence of self-consciousness; and thirdly, the inherent nature of intentionality.<sup>41</sup>

## Free will

In the context of Husserl's philosophy, discussions of free will would be framed around the autonomy and activity of the transcendental ego<sup>42</sup>. The ego is the source of all meaning, judgment, and perception, actively constituting the world in consciousness. Husserl's focus on intentionality—the directedness of consciousness towards objects—further emphasizes the active role of the subject in engaging with and interpreting the world. Freedom might be understood in terms of the transcendental ego's capacity to constitute meaning and engage in intentional acts. Free will, from this perspective, is not a simple binary of determinism versus indeterminism but is related to the depth and richness of subjective experience and the intentional structures that underlie consciousness. Husserl's phenomenology, with its emphasis on the first-person perspective and the structures of experience, offers a unique lens through which to examine questions of free will. It invites a reconsideration of autonomy and agency that is grounded in the immediacy of lived experience and the constitutive powers of the transcendental ego, rather than in external causal determinants.

Moreover, Husserl's phenomenological method, especially the epoché or phenomenological reduction, further illuminates the role of the ego in constituting reality. By suspending natural assumptions about the world's existence, the phenomenologist uncovers the transcendental ego's foundational role in giving

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<sup>40</sup> Dainton, Barry. "Temporal Consciousness." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010).

<sup>41</sup> Zahavi, Dan. "The three concepts of consciousness in *Logische Untersuchungen*." *Husserl Studies* 18, no. 1 (2002): 51-64.

<sup>42</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology*. Springer Science & Business Media, (2013): 40-55.

meaning to the world. This act of suspension and the subsequent focus on the ego's constitutive functions highlight the ego's freedom to shape its experience of reality.

Husserl's work on intersubjectivity, particularly in the *Cartesian Meditations*<sup>43</sup>, where he investigates the constitution of the Other in the ego's consciousness, contributes indirectly to the conversation around free will by highlighting the complexity of consciousness and the intersubjective dimensions of our lived experience. These investigations into how subjects relate to one another and the world can be seen as foundational to any phenomenological account of agency and freedom.

In "*Cartesian Meditations*"<sup>44</sup>, Husserl offers a profound understanding of free will and decision-making that underscores the significance of subjective experience and the reflective capacity of the ego. He posits that our undeniable, lived experiences serve as the foundational bedrock for any judgments or decisions we make about reality, highlighting how the exercise of free will is intricately woven into the fabric of our experiential reality. The capacity for reflection, which enables the ego to evaluate its stream of consciousness critically, to abstain from immediate judgments, and to deliberate on the nature of the world, is central to the notion of free will. This reflective engagement allows for informed choices, grounded in the authenticity and immediacy of experiences that are given to consciousness with "the most originary originality." Such authenticity ensures that decisions are based on genuine experiences of the present and the past, thereby enabling a more nuanced and informed exercise of free will. Furthermore, Husserl illuminates the ego's active role in constituting its reality through this reflective process, underscoring the individual's agency and autonomy in perceiving, interpreting, and engaging with the world. This active, intentional engagement with experiences not only shapes our understanding of reality but also illustrates the profound autonomy at the heart of free will, where decisions are made based on a grounded, reflective interaction with the lived world. Thus, Husserl's philosophy offers a rich, phenomenological perspective on free will, emphasizing it as a dynamic interplay between the individual's subjective experiences and their capacity for reflective, intentional action in constituting reality and making decisions.

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<sup>43</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology*. Springer Science & Business Media, (2013): 18-38.

<sup>44</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology*. Springer Science & Business Media, (2013): 19-20.

## Decisions

In Husserl's phenomenology, practical philosophy is articulated through explicit ethics, the phenomenology of religion and culture, value theory, the analysis of practical acts, and the methodological considerations of phenomenological reduction and epoché.<sup>45</sup> His Freiburger lectures<sup>46</sup> and Kaizo articles<sup>47</sup> elaborate on ethics and the cultural aspects of phenomenology, while his early Göttingen lectures<sup>48</sup> lay out a value theory. Husserl's manuscripts further dissect practical acts, such as decisions and actions with purposes, differentiating them from theoretical contemplations. Notably, he probes the foundational nature of phenomenology itself, contemplating whether the act of phenomenological reduction is a practical act of radical decision by the philosopher, as posited in his "First Philosophy"<sup>49</sup> and "Cartesian Meditations"<sup>50</sup>. This consideration extends to whether practical acts constitute a distinct realm warranting their own analysis, leading to a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes a 'practical act'. Husserl's approach raises the question of whether the commitment to phenomenology is an act of will or a mere wish, challenging us to reflect on the very basis of phenomenological practice as an action-oriented pursuit. This intricate weaving of ethics, values, practical action, and methodological introspection underscores Husserl's view of wishing and willing as essential components of intentionality, shaping not only our conscious decisions but also the philosophical endeavor itself.

The phenomenological reduction is a method used to gain insights into the essential structures of consciousness by setting aside, or "bracketing," our assumptions and preconceptions about the world. Husserl acknowledges that the motivation to engage in this form of reduction does not arise naturally within the "natural attitude," which is the default mode of consciousness wherein we are absorbed in the world and its affairs. The natural attitude does not question the

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<sup>45</sup> Lotz, Christian. "Action: Phenomenology of wishing and willing in Husserl and Heidegger." *Husserl Studies* 22, no. 2 (2006): 122.

<sup>46</sup> Sandmeyer, Bob. "JN Mohanty: Edmund Husserl's Freiburg Years, 1916–1938: Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2011, 512 pp, \$85.00, Hardcover, ISBN 978-0-300-15221-0." *Husserl Studies* 30 (2014): 71-76.

<sup>47</sup> Welton, Donn. "Husserl and the Japanese." *The Review of Metaphysics* (1991): 575-606.

<sup>48</sup> Baltzer-Jaray, Kimberly, and Jeff Mitscherling. "The Phenomenological Spring: Husserl and the Göttingen Circle." In *Symposium*, vol. 16, no. 2, (2012): 1-19.

<sup>49</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *First philosophy: Lectures 1923/24 and related texts from the manuscripts (1920-1925)*. Vol. 14. Springer (2019).

<sup>50</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology*. Springer Science & Business Media (2013).

existence or properties of things; it simply accepts them as given. However, the transition to the transcendental attitude, which is necessary for phenomenological investigation, requires a radical decision. This decision is not merely an intellectual or theoretical resolution but a practical act that commits the philosopher to a rigorous pursuit of truth. This pursuit is not passive but demands active responsibility for each step taken toward the goal of absolute clarification of our world. It's a commitment to a form of living in which strategic deception, including lying, becomes incompatible with the life of a phenomenologist.<sup>51</sup> In essence, this decision to perform phenomenological reduction is deeply ethical, binding one's life to a quest for pure understanding. It's a self-determined act that roots the philosopher's life in "absolute responsibility," raising the question of whether phenomenology, as such, should be reconceptualized as an ethical project with profound implications for humanity's ultimate destiny. Husserl suggests that by making this decision, the philosopher embarks on a path that has the potential to make one's life blessed, pure, and in alignment with the true essence of being human.<sup>52</sup>

This radical decision transforms the philosopher's life, as it becomes an act not just of the mind but of the whole self, requiring an authentic commitment to living out the implications of the philosophical inquiry one undertakes. It elevates phenomenology from a theoretical exercise to a practical, ethical, and transformative way of life<sup>53</sup>.

Moreover, Husserl delves into the nature of conscious decisions, emphasizing their lasting impact on the ego, which is the core of self-awareness and personal identity in his phenomenological framework<sup>54</sup>. He points out that when an individual makes a decision—whether it pertains to values, actions, or will—this decision imprints itself on the ego in a way that endures beyond the immediate moment or context in which the decision was made. This means that even after the specific thought process or act that led to the decision has passed, the decision itself continues to influence and shape the ego. This enduring influence is significant because it contributes to the continuity and coherence of the self over time. Husserl

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<sup>51</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology*. Springer Science & Business Media (2013).

<sup>52</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: First book: General introduction to a pure phenomenology*. Vol. 2. Springer Science & Business Media (2012).

<sup>53</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: First book: General introduction to a pure phenomenology*. Vol. 2. Springer Science & Business Media (2012).

<sup>54</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology*. Springer Science & Business Media (2013).

suggests that the decisions we make are not ephemeral; rather, they become a part of who we are, influencing our future thoughts, actions, and decisions. This process occurs regardless of changes in our state of consciousness, such as falling asleep or shifting our attention to different tasks or thoughts. The decision remains with the ego, reaffirmed and carried forward unless it is explicitly reconsidered or reversed. In essence, Husserl is highlighting a profound aspect of human consciousness and identity: our capacity to commit to decisions that shape our ongoing relationship with the world and ourselves. These decisions become a part of our ego's narrative, reflecting our autonomy and agency. They underscore the active role we play in shaping our lives and identities through the choices we make, demonstrating the deep interconnection between consciousness, decision-making, and personal development.

However, the autonomy of consciousness, as delineated in Husserl's phenomenology, is not merely about the freedom of choice in epistemic endeavors but extends fundamentally to the realm of ethics. This autonomy is the bedrock upon which ethical decisions rest, for it enables the individual to engage with the world not just perceptually but evaluatively, making judgments based on a deep, intentional interaction with the fabric of lived experience. Thus, consciousness's autonomy is central to ethics because it underpins the ability to discern, deliberate, and act upon ethical considerations, which are inherently subjective and bound to the individual's unique perspective and experiences. Furthermore, the intentional structure of consciousness—its directedness towards objects and situations—is imbued with ethical significance, as each act of intentionality involves an evaluative stance, implicitly or explicitly. Therefore, to establish the centrality of consciousness for ethics, one must recognize that the ethical dimensions of our lives are fundamentally shaped by the autonomy of our consciousness. This autonomy allows us to navigate the moral landscape with a sense of agency and responsibility, grounding our ethical life in the rich soil of subjective experience and reflective judgment.

## **Conclusion**

This article delves into Edmund Husserl's exploration of consciousness, particularly focusing on how the mechanisms of conscious decision-making and the role of the transcendental ego articulate a profound understanding of human autonomy and ethical living. Husserl, in unraveling the layers of consciousness and its temporal structure, reveals the intricate ways in which the transcendental ego serves as the fulcrum of meaning, judgment, and perception. Through the lens of

phenomenological reduction and the theory of intentionality, Husserl posits that consciousness is not a passive domain but an active participant in constituting reality, emphasizing the ethical dimensions inherent in the exercise of free will. In this light, Husserl's phenomenology presents a novel understanding of free will and decision-making, underscoring the interconnectedness of knowledge, ethical deliberation, and the autonomy of the ego in the enactment of freedom. It challenges conventional views by situating free will within the complex interplay of knowledge acquisition and ethical considerations, thereby reframing the discussion of autonomy beyond mere capacity for choice to include the depth and authenticity of subjective experience and the intentional structure of consciousness. Husserl's insights urge a reconsideration of autonomy and agency, grounded not in abstract notions of determinism or indeterminism, but in the lived experience and the constitutive powers of the ego.

In conclusion, Husserl's phenomenological investigation into conscious decision-making and the transcendental ego elucidates a complex framework wherein autonomy and ethical life are woven into the fabric of consciousness. This framework not only advances our understanding of free will but also enriches the philosophical discourse on ethics, suggesting that the phenomenological method offers profound implications for exploring the essence of moral autonomy. Husserl's work, thus, stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of phenomenology in addressing the fundamental questions of human existence and freedom.

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