

A grasp from afar: *Überschau* and the givenness of life in Husserlian phenomenology

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Abstract In this paper I explore the issue of how our personal life is given to us in experience as a whole to be actively shaped and determined. I examine in detail Husserl's analysis of the kind of experience responsible for this achievement, which he terms *Überschau* and which thus far has never been addressed by scholars of phenomenology. First, I locate *Überschau* in the context of self-determination and highlight the difference between the unthematic pre-givenness of life in the phenomenon of self-awareness and the actual, i.e. thematic givenness of life in acts of *Überschau*. Second, I contextualize Husserl's discovery of *Überschau* in his analyses of ethical life and the possibility of a universal *epoché*. I argue that for Husserl the very possibility of ethical life and of phenomenology itself rest on the totalizing apprehension of one's life rendered possible by *Überschau*. In the third section I spell out the essential characteristics of *Überschau* by contrasting this peculiar kind of consciousness with reproductive forms of consciousness such as recollection and expectation, which otherwise might be easily conflated with *Überschau*. In section four I reply to a possible objection to the very possibility of *Überschau* based on the consideration of the infinitely open stream of time-consciousness. I argue that the possibility of *Überschau* is tightly connected with the egological nature of consciousness as understood by Husserl. The *ego* does not coincide with its own conscious acts and thus enjoys a special vantage point on the totality of its own life. To conclude, I advance a speculative suggestion about the phenomenological origin of *Überschau* in the structure of self-awareness. This opens up a variety of possible lines of research that would connect Husserl with philosophers such as Augustine or Heidegger who are more immediately associated with the issue of personal life and its unity or lack thereof.

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Keywords Husserl · Phenomenology · Personal life · Ethics · *Epoché*

1 Introduction

One of the seminal insights of modern thought is that to be a rational subject means to be capable of, and even called to, self-determination. On this point, Husserl is consistent with the German tradition of transcendental philosophy, particularly with Kant and Fichte. However, as a phenomenologist, he is not primarily concerned with a *de jure* theory of self-determination (something on which Kant, Fichte and other figures in the transcendental tradition would disagree with one another to a certain extent) but rather with the experiential conditions for possibility of self-determination. Provided that being a subject does mean being called to self-determination, how is this possible? Although this question was tackled by previous transcendental philosophers it assumes for Husserl a quite distinctive meaning. Kant, in answering this question, introduces his postulates of practical reasoning, and Fichte appeals to the necessity of a free resolution of the will. Husserl, on the other hand, if his answer is to be consistent with his phenomenological method, requires a reference to experience and conscious acts. The question must be restated in these terms: How is the experience of myself structured so that self-determination is possible and even necessary?

In this paper I will argue that Husserl, in attempting to answer this question, progressively focuses on a peculiar kind of act that he terms *Überschau*, thereby borrowing a word from ordinary German and giving a technical meaning to it. A possible English translation of *Überschau* could be “panoramic view” or “comprehensive view” but, given the technicality of the term, I prefer to leave it untranslated for most of this paper. *Überschau* is the kind of act in which we *experience our personal life as a whole* and, correlatively, the world as the constant horizon of this whole-of-life. In other words, *Überschau* is a correlative apprehension of totality. Husserl sometimes employs the term *Überschau* in contexts other than those related to the problem of life and the world. For example, when he refers to the overarching act that embraces all examples of a certain region of being while we run through them in the performance of an eidetic variation, he occasionally speaks of *Überschau*. Although also in this case he is describing a certain form of totalizing apprehension, in this paper I will exclusively focus on *Überschau* as the originary mode of access to that peculiar kind of totality that our life is.

I will proceed as follows: First, I will try to elucidate the systematic venue of *Überschau* in a phenomenological account of self-determination. Second, I will consider some passages where Husserl speaks of *Überschau* and attempt to reconstruct its phenomenological structure. Third, I will articulate a sharp distinction between *Überschau* and modes of presentification [*Vergegenwärtigung*] and in doing so discuss the issue of intuitive fulfillment in acts of *Überschau* and its correlational structure. Fourth, I will discuss a possible objection to the very possibility of *Überschau* stemming from a consideration of the structure of time-consciousness. Finally, I will suggest a tentative interpretation of *Überschau* as a special form of actualization of self-awareness.

2 Self-determination and the givenness of life

The first important consideration to introduce Husserl's discovery of *Überschau* is that when we talk about self-determination [*Selbstbestimmung*] we are nonetheless talking about a special case of determination [*Bestimmung*]. From a phenomenological point of view, the determination of something as something—say of an apple as red—is a quite sophisticated kind of accomplishment that is best studied when we explicitly bring it to expression in a judgment. When we judge that “this apple is red” we ascribe a certain property to a certain substrate: the apple. In Husserl's own words: “Every judgment (if it is a simple one) has its own ‘object-about-which’ and this is therein a ‘substrate’ for its ‘determinations’.”¹ This substrate, however, must be first given in experience as a suitable candidate for the ascription of more or less abiding properties such as redness. In this sense, determination refers back phenomenologically to givenness: the substrate must be given in the first place, i.e., it must be the thematic unity of an explicit intentional consciousness in order for me to determine it in any further way. As Husserl points out: “In the self-givenness the substrate is given prior to its determinations and the determinations <are given> only if [...] the substrate is given in advance.”² The givenness of a substrate in experience, however, refers further back to what Husserl calls pre-givenness: If I can explicitly turn my attention toward a certain substrate and thus have it given as ready for further determination, this is because that substrate lied ‘already there’ as a unity within the field of my experience. This pre-given unity, for the Husserl of *Lectures on Passive Synthesis*, is the result of a complex dynamic of temporal and associative synthesis that takes place passively between the rudimentary elements of sensibility. Pre-givenness is thus the general title for that dimension of passive constitution that makes givenness (as explicit, thematic grasp) possible in the first place. Husserl offers a felicitous description of the relationship between givenness and pre-givenness in a recently published manuscript:

I designate as ‘given for me’ what I possess in my apprehending grasp, what I observe, what I explicate, determine, what I busy myself with in emotivity and in resolute and active will. Given for me can only be something pre-given, something that is ready-to-perceive or ready-to-experience for me thanks to a previous constitution, something that can affect me as already being before my taking notice of it.³

Although these steps of constitution stand out most clearly when we describe perceptual objects, their validity extends beyond perception. As we learn from the first section of Husserl's *Ideen I*, notions like ‘substrate’ and ‘determination’ belong in the sphere of formal ontology and therefore apply to any object whatsoever.⁴ Thus we can legitimately apply the threefold pattern of phenomenological explication “pre-givenness/givenness/determination(s)” to the rather unusual

¹ Husserl (1973b, p. 520). Unless specified otherwise, all the translations in this paper are my own.

² Husserl (1973b, p. 524).

³ Husserl (2008, p. 10).

⁴ See Husserl (1982, p. 10).

object, or better, substrate ‘life’. The fact that, prior to all philosophical reflection, we experience our own life as something-to-be-determined is a good reason to articulate the project of a phenomenological clarification of this kind of experience along these lines.

As a glance at recent Husserl scholarship reveals, whereas some significant progress has been made in the investigation of both the pre-given dimension of life—and here I have in mind various insightful studies dedicated to self-awareness and the self-manifestation of the absolute stream of time-consciousness⁵—and the structure of concrete self-determination—developed by Husserl in his lectures on ethics and in his articles on renewal⁶—little or nothing has been accomplished to investigate the middle term of the series, i.e., the *givenness* of life in a genuinely phenomenological fashion. The question to be explored is the following: Granted that I am constantly self-aware and that I do perform acts of self-determination, how do I move from a general sense of myself as enduring self-awareness to the experience of my life as a given, shapeable whole, so that acts of self-determination become open practical possibilities (and even imperatives) in the first place? It is in trying to answer this fascinating question that Husserl discovers *Überschau* as a peculiar mode of totality-consciousness.

3 *Überschau* in the context of ethics and the universal epoché

Husserl’s descriptions of *Überschau* focus around two tightly interrelated issues he starts grappling with from the 1920s onwards: The possibility of a universal *epoché* (explored chiefly in the second part of the lecture course on *Erste Philosophie*) and the structure of ethical life (a topic he covers extensively in the articles written for the Japanese journal *Kaizo*). The two issues are interrelated because in both cases Husserl is facing the same problem: How can an accomplishment of consciousness carried out in a single, temporally identifiable act extend beyond that particular act and become a permanent disposition? How can the accomplishment of a single act become determinant for life in its entirety? And just what is that—life in its entirety?

As for ethical life, some kind of apprehension of life in its entirety is manifestly what is presupposed when we make life-embracing decisions such as choosing our professional career or getting married. No matter what happens with such a decision in the future—eventually its motivational force can diminish and even fade out completely—in the moment in which I seriously make the decision “I want to marry this person” or “I want to become a philosopher,” I am determining my life *as a whole* and committing it to this particular person or to philosophizing. Acts of this kind constitute for Husserl the essence of ethical life, which is not about seeking fulfillment in just a momentary activity but about trying to secure genuine satisfaction for life as a whole.

⁵ See Zahavi (1999), Fasching (2009), DeWarren (2009).

⁶ See Welton (1991), Orth (1993), Steinbock (1994), Staiti (2010b).

In the first of his *Kaizo* articles, Husserl writes that “fulfillment does not flow from single [...] episodes of satisfaction. On the contrary, fulfillment is grounded in the certainty of the highest degree of durable satisfaction in one’s whole life in general.”⁷ Such certainty, in keeping with the high standards of phenomenological rigor, cannot be a vague psychological feeling but must be grounded in some form of intuitive consciousness. This is the kind of intuition that the ‘method’ of *Überschau*, as Husserl calls it in the following manuscript, is intended to provide:

[The human being] does not posit for himself only singular goals and then—in case of failure—try to attain new singular goals. Rather the human being posits for himself ‘life-goals’ and envisages a ‘methodology’ for his practical existence. This methodology rests upon a panoramic view on life up to the present moment in its successes and failures, on satisfaction and dissatisfaction so far. [In other words], it rests upon self-reflection, critique, universal resolution of the will. In this way [the human being] produces a method for life and correlatively a relation to the surrounding world defined by a striving in order to give to this surrounding world a more favorable form.⁸

A ‘life-goal’ is not merely an indefinitely iterated singular goal. I can wake up every morning and make the same decision for the given day: I will devote this day to philosophy. Even if I repeat this decision every single day of my life, ‘doing philosophy’ will not qualify as a life-goal. A life-goal is a goal established in view of my life in its entirety. It is a goal based on a panoramic, as opposed to a partial, gaze upon my life. From an external point of view, the life of a person who simply wakes up every morning and makes a temporary decision to do philosophy for that given day and the life of a person who has chosen philosophy as her life-goal may not differ in the slightest. They would, however, differ greatly from the internal point of view of lived-experience. The first person manifestly lacks the comprehensiveness and stability that would make her case a genuine instance of self-determination. On Husserl’s account, however, the person who has chosen philosophy as her life-goal does not differ from the person who chooses philosophy day after day in that she has a stronger motivation. The difference is not in intensity but in the underlying act on the basis of which the decision to do philosophy is made.⁹ In one case it is a restricted act, as it were, whereas in the other case the decision is built upon an explicit consideration of life as whole or, technically put, an apprehension of life in its entirety. We find a further eloquent passage on this point in another manuscript stemming from the same period as the *Kaizo* article and devoted to the different life-projects that characterize Greek philosophy and Buddhism. In this context Husserl emphasizes the distinction between volitional acts carried out on the basis of sheer particular experiences and volitional acts carried out on the basis of *Überschau*. Husserl writes:

⁷ Husserl (1989, p. 31).

⁸ Husserl (2008, p. 156).

⁹ An full-scale description of the ‘vocation to philosophy’ and its phenomenological structure is offered by Husserl in Husserl (1959, pp. 3–26). For a critical assessment of Husserl’s see Brainard (2001).

Instead of evaluating in the particular, instead of evaluating according to particular generalities human beings are capable to cast a panoramic view [*Überschau*] on their whole world—as a world of multifarious values and disvalues—and evaluate the world *as a whole*, not only with respect to its overall beauty: they can evaluate the world qua world of goods, qua practical world. In a certain sense, correlatively, human beings can evaluate their own ends not only in the particular, but on the basis of a panoramic view [*Überschau*] of their own life and effort; with respect to the surrounding world grasped in their panoramic view [*Überschau*], human beings can ask about the highest end of their lives or about the best type-pattern [*Typik*] for single positings of goals, which would not result into just what is most beautiful and practically valuable in single cases but rather—in their order and consequence—into what is most beautiful and what is best for life in its entirety.¹⁰

Again, we find a significant distinction between goal-positing acts based on single experiences and goal-positing acts based on a panoramic view of life. The difference is not just a matter of degree but of nature, pertaining to the specific kind of generality involved. In the first case we have merely a ‘particular generality’ [*besondere Allgemeinheit*], in the second case a ‘generality overall’ [*Allgemeinheit überhaupt*].

The same issue resurfaces in the *Erste Philosophie* lecture, in which Husserl sets out to determine how the psychological *epoché* carried out on single acts of consciousness can be extended to a universal *epoché*, thereby transforming intentional psychology into transcendental phenomenology.¹¹ Here as well, Husserl’s question is: how can the suspension of being carried out in a single act be generalized into a suspension of worldly being overall? If we approach this question from the point of view of *Überschau* we can understand the reason why Husserl increasingly stressed the ethical nature of the *epoché*. It is not just a matter of rhetorical emphasis, because both universal *epoché* and more ordinary ethical acts like the aforementioned are characterized by an underlying act of *Überschau*.

An adequately radical execution of the *epoché* is critically important in order to bestow on phenomenology the kind of transcendental (non-worldly) scientificity it claims for itself. This is a dire problem that occupied Husserl for several years and merits its own treatment. However, for our current purpose a skeletal analysis of *Überschau* in its function of rendering possible a genuinely universal *epoché* is most appropriate. In a set of notes produced in the 30s, while attempting to elaborate on the *Cartesian Mediations* and flesh out a larger systematic work, Husserl writes:

The *epoché*, I remind you, is not a one-time act, rather, it is a habit (founded through an act in the modality of the ‘overall’) of being in the *epoché* always anew and therein of carrying out exclusively transcendental acts. In this way, a unity of ‘transcendental life in the *epoché*’ beyond what is now actual is universally founded as a universal horizon of possibility.¹²

¹⁰ Husserl (2010, p. 11).

¹¹ On this issue see Drummond (1975) as well as my entry *Cartesianischer Weg/Psychologischer Weg/Lebensweltlicher Weg* in Gander (2010).

¹² Husserl (1973b, p. 70fn).

As Husserl points out in further remarks, an indefinite iteration of single-act-related *epochés* would not suffice, because this would leave unaffected the horizons of worldly validity implicitly surrounding any given act, thus failing to achieve genuine universality. Either a genuinely universal, all-encompassing *epoché* has to be deemed impossible (and then phenomenology can be nothing more than an idiosyncratic treatment of subjective acts that are bound to remain embedded in the unaffected validity of the existing world) or subjective life must be somehow given as a totality—and not just as the indefinite iteration of momentary experience. This however, requires a specific form of intentionality, in which life in its entirety becomes manifest, thereby offering itself to the universal bracketing of phenomenological *epoché*.

In this context Husserl develops a more detailed description of *Überschau*, as opposed to relying on it without further specification, as he does when he deals with the general problems of ethics. In the *Erste Philosophie* lecture in 1923/24, after giving a presentation of the horizon-like structure of consciousness and pointing out that the horizontal validity of the world represents a difficulty for the method of *epoché* carried out on single intentional acts, Husserl remarks that:

On the other hand, however, there is a radical means *to disconnect at once all validities* that are entailed in the streaming life as constituting. This means is given to us precisely through our above considerations about the constant horizon-consciousness which accompanies every present phase of life and can be penetrated at any time by our thematically grasping regard.¹³

The horizontal structure of consciousness thus turns out to be a resource rather than a menace to transcendental-phenomenological radicalism: Husserl points out that we actually can dominate the whole, doubly-infinite manifold of horizontal validities *because they are a priori entailed in our constituting life and we do have a panoramic, all-embracing view on our life*. In order to provide a phenomenological description of *Überschau*, Husserl begins by contrasting it to other act-classes that have subjectivity rather than objects as their theme. First, we have simple reflections, directed towards already accomplished acts. I perceive a house and subsequently I shift my attention in the appropriate manner and thematize this perception-of-a-house. Acts of simple reflection, Husserl argues, are not exclusively theoretical: there are “also reflective evaluations and volitions,”¹⁴ for example, when I look back and ask myself whether the dismissive answer I gave to my student in class was really the right thing to do. But the reflective, thematic grasp of subjectivity is not limited to that. We can manifestly thematize “entire stretches of life,”¹⁵ past and future included, and, for example, we can decide to devote the upcoming summer to rest or we can bitterly acknowledge that we wasted our last month trying to pursue a project that proved unfeasible. It is important to notice, already in this case, that casting a panoramic view on our past month does not amount to reawakening all or some of the acts that we performed and not even to

¹³ Husserl (1959, pp. 153–154).

¹⁴ Husserl (1959, p. 154).

¹⁵ Husserl (1959, p. 154).

compiling a sort of chart of last month's highlights.¹⁶ We can do that too, but this is not the point when we speak about our past month *as a whole*. The point is rather that we possess it precisely as a whole and we are able to determine and assess it as such. The wholeness of single stretches of life, however, does not embrace the full breadth of my subjectivity: a single stretch of life is always located either in the past, or in the future, sometimes reaching up to or including the present moment. In any case, the wholeness of a stretch of life is but a finite wholeness. This kind of experience, however, can be further extended:

Finally, I can also cast a panoramic, universal view [*universale Überschau*] on my entire life and make decisions regarding my whole life, similar to what I can do for finite stretches of life. Thus, I can carry out a universal critique of my life up to the present moment and *at the same time* be determinate to shape my entire future life: be it from the point of view of a universal value that I accept as valid without questioning it (such as power, success, and the like) or be it in the above sense of ethical self-reflection, self-critique and self-regulation. If we follow this second sense and, so to speak, we look for its ideal-form, we get to a peculiar reflective form of self-regulation connected to a universal panoramic view on life [*universale Überschau des Lebens*].¹⁷

The simultaneous grasp of past and future is the peculiar trait of *Überschau* that distinguishes it from any other form of thematization of subjectivity. In the next section I will expand on this point and distinguish *Überschau* sharply from any form of presentification (recollection or expectation) and from reflection intended as a second-degree look on conscious acts.

4 *Überschau* and reproductive presentifications

The function of *Überschau*, as presented thus far, is that of making our life graspable as a whole and thereby making it available for self-determination. In so doing, *Überschau* makes something (my life) present which strictly speaking is not present. At least, it is not present in the manner of perceptual objects or of the particular thought I am entertaining in this given moment. In spite of being a consciousness of something non-present, *Überschau* must first and foremost be distinguished from any form of presentification [*Vergegenwärtigung*] be it imagination, recollection or expectation.

If we first consider the temporality of presentifications it is quite obvious that *Überschau* cannot be a form of imaginative presentification. Imagination is non-positional consciousness: it lacks completely any reference to a real temporal context [*Zeitzusammenhang*] for the perceptual, practical or evaluative situations it represents. For this reason, if *Überschau* were a form of imagination, it would not be able to offer a grasp of my *real* life as unfolding in *real* and not merely fantasized time. It would offer just imagined life.

¹⁶ The same goes, with the apt modifications, for the panoramic view on the upcoming summer.

¹⁷ Husserl (1959, p. 154). My Italics.

On the contrary, the other two basic forms of presentification—viz. recollection and expectation—could at first glance seem to be good candidates to explain the kind of consciousness *Überschau* is. Couldn't *Überschau* be a mixed kind of consciousness combining together series of recollections and expectations into an overarching whole? Husserl is very careful in excluding this option and emphasizing how both recollections and expectations are *reproductive* modes of consciousness, whereas *Überschau* is not:

If at this point we reflect upon what kind of accomplishment this universal panoramic view is, provided that we are certainly already familiar with it in other contexts, is it clear that hereby we actually do not have a real act of seeing. [The panoramic view] is not a real reproduction of the past life in a continuity of explicit intuitive recollections, as if I had to relive my past once again and step by step. And even less can the panoramic view be an explicit illustration of the probabilities and possibilities of my future life.¹⁸

When we attempt to bring to givenness our life as a whole, an act of filling in with illustrative-intuitive content some past or future stretches of time (by means of a presentifying reproduction) is not only irrelevant, but also disturbing, for it distracts our attention from the wholeness we intend to grasp and redirects it to some particulars. Moreover—and this is what is really crucial about the distinctive temporal character of *Überschau*—*Überschau* is a *simultaneous grasp of the past and the future from the vantage point of the present*.¹⁹ A recollection, in order to be a recollection, needs to reproduce intuitively its content as unfolded in the past. Likewise an expectation, in order to be an expectation, needs to reproduce intuitively its content as unfolding in the future. This belongs to the essence of, respectively, recollection and expectation and clarifies why a mixture of the two is utterly inconceivable, or better, unexperienceable. On the contrary, the intentional content of *Überschau*, which is our personal life itself, is grasped as 'being located' simultaneously both in the past and in the future. This is why, as Husserl points out: "The representing and grasping-as-being through *Überschau* manifestly has the character of an anticipating and vague grasp from afar and this is necessarily so."²⁰ The only two options in order for an act of presentification to admit of intuitive content are one-sided temporal determinacy (recollection or expectation) or temporal indifference (pure imagination).²¹ By withholding both of these options, *Überschau* withholds at the same time any kind of reproductive, intuitive content. My life as a whole can be fully grasped as such but not articulated within an illustrative-intuitive act. Every intuitive illustration—what Husserl calls *Veranschaulichung*—must be temporally qualified as either past or future or as

¹⁸ Husserl (1959, p. 155).

¹⁹ A discussion of the notion of "living present" would be appropriate here but this would require too long a digression from the main line of inquiry of this paper.

²⁰ Husserl (1959, p. 155).

²¹ Of course, acts of imagination have their own temporality. This, however, is indifferent to the world-time in which our personal life unfolds.

indifferent to real world time. But life as a totality is neither, because it embraces the entirety of the temporal determinations of both objects and acts.²²

The fact that *Überschau* is constitutively a ‘grasp from afar’, as it were, does not imply that it lacks intuitiveness altogether. The possibility of drawing the distinctions presented thus far already testifies that there is a difference between having life in its entirety in grasp (albeit from afar) and being focused on this or that particular experience. The ‘from-afar-ness’ that characterizes *Überschau* does not impede the intentional reference to life as a whole as opposed to just episodes of it. The fact that we cannot visualize life in the same way in which we can visualize a past event (recollection), a future situation (expectation) or a fictional world (imagination) does not entail that the intention directed towards it is bound to remain altogether empty. After all, viewing something from afar in an anticipating and even vague way does not amount to not having this something given. It could be argued that, somewhat paradoxically, precisely the manner of givenness that would be partial and suboptimal for, say, a perceptual object is to be considered the distinctive manner of givenness for the totality of life. In other words, in acts of *Überschau* our total life is indeed given to us but it is not all laid out, its manner of givenness is, so to speak, inherently vague and bound to remain in a certain sense incomplete. The lack of total fulfillment and the withholding of whatever kind of illustrative content (for the reasons specified above) can be considered essential traits of *Überschau*.²³

A further element should be considered at this point, in order to spell out completely the intentional structure of *Überschau*. Husserl points out, as I mentioned above, that *Überschau* is always a correlative kind of consciousness. By casting a panoramic view on our life we cannot help but realize that this life has always already been and will be a “life-in-the-world”—that is to say, a life in which a tacit position of the world has been unceasingly carried out: “Casting a panoramic view on my life means thus at the same time and correlatively casting a panoramic view on the world [...]”²⁴ This realization is crucial for Husserl’s problem of articulating a universal *epoché*: since life embraces constantly the entire horizon of the world, it is possible to bracket the world’s validity at once because we have this life available as a whole in the present. In this context Husserl suggests that the *Überschau* on life is a second-order reflection carried out on the previously accomplished consciousness-of-the-world [*Weltbewusstsein*]. He even suggests a strong affinity between what he terms “single reflection and universal reflection”²⁵

²² More on this point can be found in the so-called C-manuscripts where Husserl speaks of life in the following terms: “My life is an unbroken unity of originarily flowing temporalization in which all the manifold temporalizations are entailed.” Husserl (2006, p. 3).

²³ In this regard, *Überschau* bears a striking resemblance to empathy. In one of the most complete and convincing accounts of Husserl’s notion of empathy to date, Nick De Warren writes that “the intentionality of the Other is uniquely predicated on the *structural impossibility* of any intuitive fulfillment of its intended object” (2009, p. 242). Therefore, “[t]he Other is given to me as the impossibility of being given as she is given to herself, that is, as itself self-given” (2009, p. 242). In a similar fashion, in the acts of *Überschau* life in its entirety is certainly *given*, even though no intuitive fulfillment can remove its being given ‘from afar’ and in a ‘vague and anticipatory fashion.’

²⁴ Husserl (1959, p. 157).

²⁵ Husserl (1959, p. 157).

and remarks that in the same way in which the straightforward perception of a single object comes first and reflection can only follow simple perception, “so the simple panoramic gaze directed towards my surrounding world is what comes first and is then followed by a reflection upon my life which posited the world.”²⁶ In other words: We are at first tacitly aware of the world *in its entirety* and then realize by means of a panoramic, “backward,” reflection that our intentional life (as the world-positing factor) constantly embraces the world’s entire scope. In this way, we become aware of our life as a whole.

This description, however, seems to need some qualification. As for all forms of phenomenological correlation, it is the equiprimordiality of the two *relata* that should be stressed in the first place. Contrariwise, following Husserl’s letter in *Erste Philosophie*, seems to imply that what gives unity to my life, what literally ‘holds it together’ as a whole, is the ceaseless positing of the world that my life carries out. I am more inclined to think that the very fact that the world can appear to us as a totality is conditioned by the fact that we can grasp our life as a totality. If we take, for example, the notion of ‘surrounding world’ [*Umwelt*] brought up by Husserl in the above quote, the unity of my surrounding world as the *terminus ad quem* of all my actions and the *terminus a quo* of all experienced objects seems to derive its unity from the reference to my life rather than the other way around. It is because I can grasp my life as a whole that the world becomes manifest as a totality that is correlated to this life. Otherwise, why couldn’t we have just an endless and pervasive series of singular positions of being that were merely juxtaposed against each other, rather than a world? Given the heterogeneous character of the objects of our experience and the fact that they are all more or less separate from one another, it is all the more enigmatic that we can experience them as pertaining to an encompassing whole—the world. It seems more convincing to ground this unity in the life that posits and experiences the world, rather than arguing that this life only appears as a unity within a reflective act upon our consciousness of the world. As a matter of fact, there are resources in Husserl’s manuscripts to temper the merely ‘reflective’ account of *Überschau* and more appropriately stress the correlative structure that obtains between *Überschau* and consciousness of the world as a totality. Take, for example, the following remark:

The apodicticity of the existence of the world is relative to me and to my actual present life, in which I can cast a panoramic view on the long stretch of my past life. Therefore [the apodicticity of the existence of the world] is relative to this whole actuality of life.²⁷

Husserl seems here to propose the view that our consciousness of the world as an infinite totality of existing beings is not somehow presupposed by the consciousness of our life as a totality but is relative to it. On the contrary, the consciousness of an unceasingly existing world is embedded, as it were, in the consciousness of our own life as a unitary and indefinitely available totality. As he states in another manuscript from the same collection, the existing world is a unity only “in the panoramic view

²⁶ Husserl (1959, p. 157).

²⁷ Husserl (2008, p. 211).

[*Überschau*] over the unity of life qua world-consciousness [*Weltbewusstseinsleben*].”²⁸ Contrary to the suggestion in *Erste Philosophie*, the world-consciousness is not considered prior to the consciousness of life as a totality. It rather flows from it. The two forms of consciousness are inextricably related to one another in a peculiar form of phenomenological correlation, within which, however, the source of unity has to be placed on the side of life rather than on the side of the world manifested therein.

5 *Überschau* and the infinity of the stream of time-consciousness. Reply to a possible objection

At this point I will discuss an objection that a phenomenologically informed reader of this paper may have long since raised. Is something like *Überschau* really possible, considering the infinite stream-like nature of consciousness? Isn't it rather a sort of transcendental illusion, a Fata Morgana in the realm of immanence that makes appear unitary and coherent what on closer inspection reveals itself to be in a constant, ever-changing flux? Husserl himself seems to suggest the unattainability of the whole flux of experiencing life in a single act in § 83 of the first book of *Ideen*:

When the pure regard of the Ego reaches any lived-experience by reflecting and, more particularly, by seizing upon it perceptually, the possibility then exists of the regard turning toward other lived-experiences *as far as* this concatenation reaches. But by essential necessity this whole concatenation is *never* given or to be given by a single pure regard. In spite of this, it also can be seized upon intuitively in a *certain*, albeit essentially different way; <the whole can be seized upon> in the fashion of “*limitlessness in the progression*” of the immanent going from the fixed lived-experience to new lived-experiences pertaining to its horizons of lived-experiences, from its fixing to those of horizons; etc.²⁹

Husserl goes on to suggest that the stream of experience can be only seized upon as a unity “in the manner of an *idea in the Kantian sense*,”³⁰ i.e., asymptotically and approximately. Commenting on this paragraph of *Ideen*, Marcus Brainard states that “[t]o grasp the stream in its infinity is to grasp the promise of continuous movement [...]”³¹ Furthermore, “[t]he ego cannot seize upon the unity of the stream immediately, as it does a lived experience, but only mediately, and in fact by moving through the stream, from one concrete lived experience to another.”³² The continuous movement evoked in these lines is that of time-consciousness, which Husserl mentions, albeit briefly, in the paragraphs of *Ideen I* where these

²⁸ Husserl (2008, p. 532).

²⁹ Husserl (1982, p. 197). Translation modified.

³⁰ Husserl (1982, p. 197).

³¹ Brainard (2002, p. 130).

³² Brainard (2002, p. 130).

considerations belong. In his insightful study of time-consciousness *Husserl and the Promise of Time*, Nicolas De Warren reinforces the idea of the unattainability of life in its entirety basing it on the ceaseless irruption of the new and unexpected (the upwelling *Urimpression*) and its constant running-off in the endless stream of retention.³³ If we take seriously the constantly open and unfinished movement of time-consciousness, then we have to acknowledge that: “consciousness cannot apprehend itself as a unity; only aspects of phases of its life can be apprehended in reflection, but never life as a unity.”³⁴

What are we to make of these points—that Husserl simply changed his mind? Do the analyses of *Überschau* developed in the 1920s stand in opposition to the views presented in *Ideen I* and seemingly reinforced by a consideration of time-consciousness? I do not think there is any necessary discontinuity here. Even though Brainard’s and De Warren’s remarks are well taken and capture an important feature of Husserl’s analysis of conscious life, I believe that they are incomplete. They downplay another important feature of conscious life, i.e., that conscious life is not only temporal but also *egological*. In transcendental phenomenology “ego—consciousness—object belong essentially together”³⁵ and the very notions of experience and conscious life only make sense by reference to an experiencing ego.³⁶ Whereas in the famous early analyses of time-consciousness from 1904/05 Husserl did not take the ego into account at all, in *Ideen I* the egological nature of transcendental subjectivity is asserted but not brought into connection with the early discoveries about time-consciousness. Notoriously, in *Ideen I* time-consciousness is only mentioned in passing. Husserl revisits his position on the unattainability of life as unity after studying the relationship between temporalization and ego in 1917 in the so-called Bernau manuscripts, where “the issue of the ego’s relation to the stream of experience becomes paramount.”³⁷ In these important investigations Husserl discovers, among other things, that the transcendental ego, although it is related to its own experiences in time, is not itself temporalized, i.e., it does not belong in the same ceaseless stream in which its experiences are constituted. Even though its life unfolds in time, the transcendental ego is itself supra-temporal.³⁸ This means, the transcendental ego enjoys a special vantage point on its own life. It is aware of its constant flowing-off and it can put this endless flow before its own apprehending gaze. Therefore, if it is true that “consciousness cannot apprehend itself as a unity,”³⁹ this is because the ego and not consciousness itself is the ‘apprehender’ of life as a unity. *Überschau* is an egological act that—even though unfolding in time as much as any other act—lets the ego become aware of its own personal life in its entirety. Instead of swimming along in the stream of time with its own experiences and abiding unreflectedly in its own enduring and all-pervasive

³³ See De Warren (2009). For a critical assessment of De Warren’s book see Staiti (2011).

³⁴ De Warren (2009, p. 255).

³⁵ Husserl (1973a, p. 51).

³⁶ See Husserl (1973a, p. 47).

³⁷ Mensch (2010, p. 142).

³⁸ For a more thorough discussion of these issues than I can offer here see Staiti (2010a, pp. 43–48).

³⁹ De Warren (2009, p. 255).

self-awareness, the ego can make a quasi-reflective move and actively occupy the supra-temporal position that pertains to it by nature. We should not think of *Überschau* as a paradoxical act in which consciousness pulls itself up by the bootstraps, as it were, and encompasses its own total breadth. Rather, *Überschau* is an act that involves two factors: the transcendental ego and its own life. For the most part the transcendental ego lives naively immersed in its own life, ‘swimming along’ and moving from one action to the next without catching hold of the totality in which all these actions belong. Occasionally (but nonetheless drawing on a permanent essential possibility) the ego can perform acts of *Überschau* and place the endless, unfinished (and still inexorably finite) stream of its own life before its eye.⁴⁰ This move and all further decisions based on this move assume a life-embracing and solemn character that is otherwise missing from other forms of consciousness. These last considerations are useful in order to articulate, by means of conclusion, a tentative answer to the question about the transcendental source of *Überschau*.

6 Conclusion

If *Überschau* is not understood as a mere reflective modification of world-consciousness, and if it is not rendered impossible by the ever-streaming nature of time-consciousness, is there anything positive that can be said in order to account for its phenomenological origin? My proposal on this point will be tentative and to a certain extent speculative: I think that we can understand *Überschau* as a peculiar form of actualization of self-awareness. Let me briefly explain what I mean.

I already mentioned in the first section of this paper that every explicit grasp and further determination of an object presupposes its pre-givens. The same goes for life. If we can carry out an *Überschau* on our life as a whole, this is because our life is pre-constituted as such. What is the structure of this pre-constitution? One of the merits of Husserl’s approach is that it offers a strong account of this point: The pre-constitution of life as a whole is to be understood in terms of the self-manifestation of the absolute flow of time-consciousness. This self-manifestation constitutes what we commonly refer to as “self-awareness.” Self-awareness is a pervasive phenomenon that can be found at all levels of our subjective life. The origin of self-awareness can be traced in the peculiar structure of retentive consciousness, whereby consciousness does not only retain just-past phases of the object but at the same time retains itself as correlated to these phases. Retention is a form of double-consciousness. The pervasive sense of mineness inherent in our experience is constituted precisely as a result of this double-consciousness that constantly preserves itself as itself thanks to retention. A number of insightful studies have shown convincingly that retentive consciousness *qua* pre-thematic self-awareness must be considered the condition of possibility of both act-intentionality and act-

⁴⁰ The account of the relationship between the flow of time-consciousness and the ego that I defend here fundamentally coincides with the one defended in Brough (2011). I read Brough’s paper after the present paper was already completed and so, unfortunately, I was not able to incorporate a longer discussion of it.

related reflection. Thanks to the constant work of retention, we are able to thematize past objects and return to our acts in reflection. But is this all? I would like to suggest that *Überschau* might be considered as a further way of capitalizing on self-awareness distinct from act-related reflection. Tacit self-awareness is activated and capitalized on every time we perform an act of reflection pertaining to a single intentional object or state of affairs. What comes to manifestation is an object or a complex of objects correlated to a temporally qualified cross-section of our intentional life. But since self-awareness is pervasive, or as Dan Zahavi puts it, “ubiquitous”⁴¹ it is also perfectly plausible that it can be enacted in a way that is not related to a single cross-section of intentional life but, exploiting this pervasiveness, brings the whole of intentional life itself to manifestation. In this case, the tacit self-manifestation of the stream of time-consciousness that accompanies every intentional act (self-awareness) is transformed into an explicit grasp of intentional life in its entirety, as constituted within this stream and phenomenologically prior to every other object or act. The appearance of life as whole is, as I said at the outset, the condition of possibility of all further accomplishments that constitute ethical life and are traditionally known as acts of self-determination. A more extensive study of the passage from mere self-awareness to *Überschau* would be required in order to determine where exactly the motivational sources for self-determination lie. Husserl suggests in different places that a full understanding of this point is crucial to understand the difference between human and animal life.⁴² Moreover, it would be fascinating to spell out the metaphysical-anthropological consequences of this view and show how the notion of *Überschau* intersects the Augustinian-Heideggerian position that understands human life primarily in terms of scatteredness (Augustine) and *Ruinanz* (Heidegger). For both Augustine and Heidegger, the unity of life has to be actively restored in the first place by turning the mind towards God (Augustine) or by the anticipation of death (Heidegger). For Husserl, this unity is an originary feature of life itself that can be appropriated at any time by means of *Überschau*. Whether there is a resonance or an opposition in their respective views of life and its peculiar form of unity is a complex question. These points, however, would require a much more extensive treatment than this paper can offer. My hope is that the above analyses may have offered at least some evidence that *Überschau* is a crucial, yet so far unaddressed topic in Husserlian phenomenology and that a further exploration of it is a desideratum for the phenomenological philosophy of the future.

Acknowledgments Earlier versions of this paper were presented on April, 7th 2010 at Centro Culturale di Milano in Italy and on June, 22nd 2010 at the 40th annual Husserl Circle Meeting at The New School for Social Research in NYC. I would like to thank all the participants for their questions and criticism. I am particularly indebted to Nicolas De Warren, whose insightful comments were critical to the improvement of the first draft. My gratitude also goes to Hanne Jacobs and Dan Zahavi, who kindly accepted to read a later version of my piece. Their comments led to partial rewriting and the addition of various paragraphs. Last but not least, my student Karen Kovaka copyedited the final version of this article and suggested a lot of stylistic improvements. I am obviously the only one responsible for all the mistakes, infelicitous expressions, or obscurities that the reader may still find in the text.

⁴¹ Zahavi (2009, p. 556).

⁴² See Husserl (1973a, p. 218).

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