

Artificial Intelligence and the Phenomenology of Crisis

comments on David Carr's "Phenomenology of Crisis"

Jacob Rump

This is the lightly revised text of my commentary/response to David Carr's keynote address, "Phenomenology of Crisis," at the 2024 meeting of the Husserl Circle. All quotations without page citations are from the keynote.

I want to begin by thanking David for his keynote address, but also his friendship and mentorship since I was first his student almost two decades ago...

I.

David writes that the idea of crisis in Husserl and other early 20th Century writers "places us in the middle of a fateful drama, at a turning point where the possibility of a reversal of fortune looms large before us. Something must be done." Analyzed phenomenologically, as an *experience*, a crisis is a break between past and future, but it is not simply a now point or the living present. For in crisis, "it is not simply the content of our experience that changes, but our experience itself." To experience a crisis is to confront an unknown future, but also to confront the possibility of unknown future forms of *experiencing*.

This is why, as David notes, not every moment of experience can be a crisis, just as—to add one more entry to his list of overused phrases—not every event of personal or social interest can be "unprecedented." Events and experiences have precedents, most of which are—indeed, must be, if we are to be able to make sense of our experience at all—rather ordinary. On David's phenomenological analysis, "it is the disruption of the ordinary that constitutes the crisis." A crisis is something "extraordinary."

In these brief remarks, I want to put David's phenomenology of crisis to the test through focus on a contemporary example of another contemporary phenomenon often said to be unprecedented, but increasingly normalized and ordinary: the "crisis" of technology in our own age of generative artificial intelligence. Today, news articles, human voices (Scarlett Johansson?), research papers, and even works of art—all ordinarily products of at least some level of human intelligence—can be produced by programs that operate according to complex weighted algorithmic models that even their programmers—or, more aptly, "trainers"—have never fully seen or specified. If history is, as Husserl tells us in the *Origin of Geometry*, "from the start nothing other than the vital movement of the coexistence and the interweaving of original formations and sedimentations of meaning" connected to our "everyday understanding" (371), then artificial intelligence, which is at least sedimenting meaning, if not making it, is indeed making history. But is it making *our* history?

The current, putative crisis raised by artificial intelligence is, in a sense, the culmination of the very calculative rationality that Husserl attributes to mathematized natural science. Recall that Husserl's *Crisis* was written not only in the socio-political context of the last days of the Weimar Republic, but also in the cultural-scientific context of positivism—amidst a growing sense, among the general

public as well as the scientific community, that while science continued its march of progress in terms of capability and efficiency, it was beginning to lose sight of the ultimate *human* meaning of its own accomplishments.

While Husserl saw this socio-political and scientific-cultural situation specifically through the lens of a crisis for Europe, he rightly saw that it was, ultimately, a crisis for the world. David is right then, to remind us that Husserl's diagnosis of a "Crisis of European Sciences" is no simple Eurocentrism, and is, in a sense, not really about Europe at all:

Science has a birthplace in Greece, Husserl thinks, but the idea which is born there is that truth is universal and not limited to any time and place. Scientists and philosophers are "functionaries," says Husserl, not just for European humanity but for humanity as such. European science is thus a kind of *self-cancelling particularity* which is destined to outrun its Greek origin and its European home. (my emphasis)

Can we say the same in the age of contemporary artificial intelligence? Is the human being in general, like Husserl's early twentieth century scientific European, now just a "functionary" of reason and technology in a way that is universal—not limited to any time, space, *or species*? Is human reason itself, in the twenty-first century, like European science in the twentieth, a "self-cancelling particularity?"

I don't think so—or, at least, not necessarily. I think we are at a turning point; it could go either way. I do think that our contemporary situation with regard to AI qualifies as a crisis on David's terms.

II.

So why *isn't* human reason itself just a "self-cancelling particularity" in the broader march of an increasingly technologized reason?

David helps us toward the answer when he emphasizes, following Husserl, that we should look at putative moments of crisis from the "inside," from the perspective of "our history." The ideal here is *rational humanity*, not the march of *reason as such* (one way of framing the problem with the Hegelian conception of crisis David mentions). Reason divorced from human purposes becomes, as the Frankfurt School reminds us, *instrumental reason*. What prevents reason from becoming merely calculative or instrumental is thus its tie to *meaning*. This is, of course, precisely the tie that Husserl thinks risks being severed when, through the exceptionally effective techniques of the mathematization of nature, we "take for true being what is actually a method" (*Crisis* 51/ Hua VI, 52).

David notes this connection to meaning in quoting an important passage from the *Crisis*: only with the achievement of a reason

fully conscious of itself in its own essential form, i.e., the form of a universal philosophy... could it be decided whether the spectacle of the Europeanization of all other civilizations bears witness to the rule of an absolute meaning, one which is proper to the sense rather than to a

historical non-sense of the world [*zum Sinn der Welt gehorig, und nicht zu einem historischen Unsinn*]
(*Crisis* 16/ Hua VI, 14).

The section of the *Crisis* where the passage appears is titled “*Die Geschichte der Neuzeitlichen Philosophie als Kampf um den Sinn des Menschen*.” The word “Sinn,” in both the passage and the section title, suggests not only meaning, but also sense, or direction. The question is where we are headed, which is, in a time of crisis, not fully separable from the question of what meaning we will make of whatever comes next. To struggle with one of these questions is to also to struggle with the other.

It is, in my view, (and I suspect David would agree) an underappreciated aspect of Husserl’s *Crisis* that it recognizes the necessity of bringing together two important senses of meaning—meaning in the semantic or content-sense (what our experience is *about*) and meaning in the value or meaning-of-life sense (what our experience, or our living and striving, is ultimately *for*). It is no accident that teleological and axiological themes get intermingled with Husserl’s usual epistemological, logical and meaning-theoretic considerations more explicitly in his later works, written in times of crisis. If there is a crisis of *philosophy* in our own day, I suspect that it has much to do with our continuing to hold these two senses of meaning far apart, in separate silos, one as an ethical project belonging to practical philosophy, and the other as a semantic project reserved for an ever-more-technical philosophy of language. (The need for better communication and interchange between these philosophical projects is on full display in the recent philosophical literature attempting to make sense of contemporary artificial intelligence.)

Husserl insists in the same passage from §6 that we *cannot yet* say the movement of modern philosophy toward an ultimate meaning has been fully realized—There is no predestined march of reason; it *could go either way*. He attributes this incomplete realization of ultimate meaning to the “naïve rationalism” of the 18th century. Following David, we might think of Kant as the paradigm of this naïve rationalism, given what looks, from our current historical vantage point, like a naïve faith in the future of the enlightenment project.

Husserl distinguishes naïve from genuine rationalism in §6 via a contrast with “irrationalism,” which evades the struggle to clarify the “ultimate data [*letzte Vorgegebenheiten*].” (David’s translation, over fifty years ago, of Husserl’s *letzte Vorgegebenheiten* as “ultimate data” was prescient, given the sense in which it is often (digital) data itself that is of issue in the crises of our own age.) A genuine rationalism would not be characterized by such evasion; it would instead undertake the struggle to *clarify* the “ultimate data”—“the ultimate pregivennesses (*Vorgegebenheiten*), and the goals and directions which they alone can rationally and truthfully prescribe” (*Crisis* 16/ Hua VI, 14). While Kant was certainly no irrationalist in Husserl’s eyes, he is still guilty of not giving these pregivennesses their due.

For Husserl, Kant missed these pregivennesses in that he missed the lifeworld—he failed to look to the pregiven origins of the structures of reason and meaning. While Kant’s bringing together of rationalism and empiricism overcame *one* naïveté of rationalism—that of pre-Critical rationalists who did not make room for experience—for Husserl, Kant did not go far *enough*, and remained guilty of his own version of this naïveté: his own appeals to the tribunal of experience allowed it only to provide us with a kind of raw data, and missed the ultimate *structures*, beyond just the intuitional *content*, *pre-given* in experience. (Cf. Husserl’s calls for an expansion of the Transcendental Aesthetic...)

In Husserl's view, Kant misses the "lower strata" of aesthetic synthesis revealed in the lifeworld because his account of the origination of meaningful experience in space and time as the a priori forms of intuition is explanatory only at the level of an empirical science concerned with physical objects. It thereby neglects the constitution of experience itself:

[Kant's] question is only this: What kinds of syntheses must be carried out subjectively in order for the things of nature to be able to appear, and thus a nature in general. But lying deeper and essentially *preceding* this is the problem of the inner, the purely immanent objectlike formation and the constitution, as it were, of the inner-world, that is, precisely the constitution of the subject's stream of lived-experience as being for itself, as the field of all being proper to it as its very own. (*Passive Synthesis* 171/ Hua XI, 125)

It is these ultimately passive pregivennesses—including the passive syntheses ultimately constitutive of experience itself, revealed when we turn our attention to the sedimentations of meaning in the lifeworld, that keep alive the connection between reason and meaning and contain the possibility (but not necessity) of curing meaning from its earlier naïveté. The cure is possible only via "a universal philosophy"—for Husserl, of course, only via phenomenology.

III.

But keeping this connection alive is—I think David would agree—an infinite task. There is no "end of history." The possibility of crisis, David notes, is connected to "the temporality of our experience, the nature of our expectations, and the sense of our place in the development of our social circumstances." These structures, of course, will not go away, though they may change. For David, however, the making of these necessary structures of human experiencing into elements of *crisis* is connected to "the lingering effect of the humanistic-enlightenment belief that we are masters of our own destiny and future," and especially, today, quite paradoxically, in the manifestation of that mastery in our technology and the false sense of control it brings.

Indeed, if we have reached the point where we have lost control, or if we are approaching *the singularity*, it is our technological advancements *themselves* that have led to this. We proudly proclaim what our machines can do *for* us, and neglect the question of what they are thereby doing *to* us. This suggests a related sense of crisis (one which is reflected in many of the crises of the 20th century that David mentions): crises are often of our own (collective) making. This notion is certainly there in the *Crisis* text, in Husserl's consideration of the loss of the connection between meaning and science. The antidote, as suggested above, must be to seek a kind of universal meaning through attention to the form of human experience.

But David warns us that we must reject the naïve idea that such meaning, such antidotes, can be *timeless*. Structuralists and post-structuralists such as Foucault and Lyotard are right about this—about the "naïveté" of timeless answers. To echo another teacher of mine and friend of David's, the late Tom Flynn, there is in these figures a *critique of historical reason*. Though they weren't always keen to admit it, the influence of Husserl looms large in both.

But what these figures were *wrong* about, from an Husserlian (and, it seems, Carr-ian?) perspective, is the rejection of teleology outright, and connected with it, the rejection of the human (or at least the

experiencer). Despite Foucault's wager, the human being has not—has not yet—been “erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”

This, I want to suggest, marks the limitation but also the threat of contemporary artificial intelligence: it doesn't ultimately have intentionality, or at least “underived” intentionality. *Ipsa facto*, it doesn't have experience. And in light of this, it doesn't have an underived teleology either. Its only goals are the ones that we (or its “trainers”) have given it, and these goals, in our contemporary era of digital, late-stage capitalism, where social media addiction has replaced embodied sociality and the push for endless growth has led to *truly* unprecedented environmental crisis, seem to have lost any deeper connection with human meaning.

If this is right, then much like the crisis of European sciences in the waning days of the Weimar Republic, our current crisis of artificial intelligence is yet one another crisis of human making, in light of which not only the content of our experience, but also our experience itself—our temporality, sociality, and ways of valuing and meaning-making, will once again change. And they will change as a result of our own imperfect science and reason.

We are, as David notes, citing the current Weimar-inspired musical program at Carnegie Hall, “dancing on the precipice,” but our crises need not and cannot be perpetual. “Something must be done.” If human meaning-making is not to become a “self-cancelling particularity” in an unstoppable march of autonomous technical and instrumental reason, we would do well to heed the phenomenological call that David has made tirelessly throughout his career: *back to experience!* and to recognize, as he has done in his own personal and cultural life, the value of art—above all music—for informing that experience.

This moment is not just another crisis in the march of history, to which we are spectators. It's a crisis in *our* history. The music may be changing, but we must keep dancing, and maybe even learn some new steps.