

# Edmund Husserl's Letter to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl

Freiburg i. B., March 11, 1935  
Lorettostr. 40

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Highly esteemed Colleague!

Is it not shameful that I am thanking you so tardily for the great, indeed very special pleasure you have given me by generously sending me your new work on the mythology of the primitives?<sup>1</sup> Yet perhaps I can appease you by sharing with you the fact that it was the burning interest in your book that prevented me from writing. I let my own work sit; I took up the whole series of classic works on the mentality of the primitives you have bestowed on us; and that is what I have been immersed in for several weeks now.<sup>2</sup> I can tell you that this is already the third letter I have drafted—hopefully this one will get finished. For I really wanted to tell you about the problematic that your foundational investigations have set in motion in me and in connection with my long-standing studies on humanity and the environing world [*Umwelt*]. Not for the first time now, but this time with particular intensity. My attempt to articulate it turned out badly, partly because it threatened to degenerate

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Translated by Lukas Steinacher and Dermot Moran. This translation is based on the German text of the letter in Edmund Husserl, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Karl Schuhmann with Elisabeth Schuhmann, *Husserliana Dokumente III*, 10 vols. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), vol. 7: 161–64; henceforth cited as *BW* with volume number and page reference. The pagination of the original German text is indicated in the margins. All notes stem from the translators except for those prefaced by ‘Ed.’, which are from the editors of the *Briefwechsel*, and one marked by an asterisk, which indicates Husserl’s own addition. Translators’ additions are in pointed brackets ‘< . . . >’. The translators and the *Yearbook*’s editors thank Mrs. Elisabeth Schuhmann for permission to publish this translation here.

1. Ed.: Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *La Mythologie primitive. Le Monde mythique des Australiens et de Papous* (Paris: Alcan, 1935). This book is preserved in Husserl’s private library and bears the handwritten dedication: *à mon cher collègue Ed. Husserl, cordial hommage, L. Lévy-Bruhl* (To my dear colleague, Ed. Husserl, cordial respect, L. Lévy-Bruhl).

2. Ed.: Besides *La Mythologie primitive*, Husserl’s library contains the following works by Lévy-Bruhl: *Die geistige Welt des Primitiven*, trans. Margarethe Hamburger (Munich: Bruckmann, 1927); *La Mentalité primitive* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1931); and *Le Surnaturel et la nature dans la mentalité primitive* (Paris: Alcan, 1931).

into a lengthy treatise and partly because, while trying to shorten it, I was distracted by external disturbances . . . (I mention only that I unfortunately have to write many letters to help, with foreign references, as best as I can those who have been legally affected so severely by the <process of> building anew the German nation<sup>3</sup>—among them my own son, who, like yours, as a professor of jurisprudence, has the scientific vocation [*Lebensberuf*], or better, had, but now has to think of building a new future for himself abroad.<sup>4</sup>)

It is beyond doubt that your works on the primitives must be regarded as classic foundational works of a thoroughly rigorous scientific ethnology. Over a large and particularly important domain, the possibility and absolute necessity | of a purely human-scientific [*rein geisteswissenschaftliche*] anthropology has become obvious—thus, as I could also say, of a pure psychology, which treats human beings not as objects belonging to nature [*Naturobjekte*], not psychophysically in the universe of spatio-temporal realities (in the objective spatio-temporality of concern to the natural sciences), but rather views <them> as persons, as conscious subjects [*Bewusstseinssubjekte*], as they concretely find themselves and refer to themselves with personal pronouns. Saying “I” and “we,” they find themselves as members of families, associations, social units [*Sozialitäten*], as living “together,” exerting an influence on and suffering from *their* world—the world that has sense and reality for them, through their intentional life, their experiencing, thinking, <and> valuing. Naturally, we have long known that every human being has a “world-representation,”<sup>5</sup>

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3. Here ‘building anew the German nation’ renders *Neubau der deutschen Nation*. The expression is a disguised reference to the National Socialists’ ideological program and measures, which were soon to be enshrined in the “Nuremberg Laws” (*Nürnberger Gesetze*) of September 15, 1935.

4. Husserl’s son Gerhart (1893–1973) emigrated to the United States after he was dismissed in 1933 from his law professorship in Germany for being a Jew. The official basis for his dismissal was the *Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums* (Law for the Re-institutionalization of the Civil Service with Lifelong Job Security), promulgated on April 7, 1933, which “legalized” the dismissal of so-called “politically unreliable,” as well as “non-Aryan,” civil servants. Gerhart Husserl went on to teach at the National University Law School and was a founding member of *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. He published several articles in English, but his most important work is in German. In the 1950s, he returned to Germany, continued his teaching and research in comparative and Anglo-American law, and also became active in the reform of legal education. See Richard Hudson and Henri R. Pallard, “Gerhart Husserl,” in Christopher B. Gray, ed., *The Philosophy of Law: An Encyclopaedia*, 2 vols. (New York: Garland, 1999), I: 385–86.

5. Here Husserl uses not the more common term *Weltanschauung* (worldview) but the less usual *Weltvorstellung* (world-representation). See also Edmund Husserl, “Die Krisis des europäischen Menschentums und die Philosophie,” in *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, ed. Walter Biemel, Husserliana VI (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1976), 314–48, here 317; English translation: “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity” [= Vienna

that every nation, every supranational [*übernationale*] cultural grouping lives, so to speak, in a distinct world as its own environing world [*in einer anderen Welt als seiner Umwelt lebt*], and so again every historical time in its <world ■>. Yet, in contrast to this empty generalization, your work and your exceptional theme has made us sensitive to something overwhelmingly new: namely, that it is a possible and highly important and great task to “empathize” with a humanity<sup>6</sup> living self-contained in living generative sociality [*lebendiger generativer Sozialität*]<sup>7</sup> and to understand this humanity as having, in and through its socially unified life, the world, which for it is not a “world-representation” but rather the world that actually exists *for it* [*die für sie wirklich seiende Welt*]. Thereby we learn to understand its <i.e. that humanity’s> ways of apperceiving, identifying, <and> thinking, thus its logic and its ontology, that of its environing world with the respective categories. The primitives’ “lack of history”<sup>8</sup> keeps us from foundering in a sea of historical cultural tra-

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lecture], in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, 1970), 269–99, here 272; henceforth cited as *Crisis* with German and English page references, respectively. There he writes: “the historical surrounding world of the Greeks is not the objective world in our sense but rather their ‘world-representation,’ that is, their own subjective validity with all the actualities that are valid for them within it, including, for example, gods, demons, etc.” The term ‘worldview’ has a somewhat negative connotation for Husserl given his documented stance against the *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* of Dilthey and others. In his “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science,” the term is used to refer to an individual’s approach to the world. Husserl writes: “Worldview is also an ‘idea,’ of course, but that of a goal lying in the finite, to be actualized principally in an individual lifetime after the manner of steady approach, just like morality, which would certainly lose its sense if it were the idea of a principally transfinite infinite. The ‘idea’ of worldview is accordingly for each age a different one.” See Edmund Husserl, “Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft,” *Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur* 1 (1910–11), 289–341, here 332; English translation: “Philosophy as Rigorous Science,” trans. Marcus Brainard, *New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* II (2002), 249–95, here 287. In his correspondence in the 1930s (see *BW* 4, 313), Husserl calls the new outlook in Germany since the advent of National Socialism a “new worldview.”

6. As in the *Crisis*, Husserl uses the term *Menschheit* here to mean both particular (cultural) groups of humans and humanity in general. David Carr suggests rendering the term *Menschheit* as ‘civilization’ in contexts such as the above, see Carr’s note at *Crisis*, 15 n. 2. We have retained the word ‘humanity’ throughout for consistency.

7. This context in particular suggests that Husserl, when using the term, has more in mind than just the form, the kind of organization in which a group or society manifests itself. For him, the expression appears also to refer to the never-ending processes of organizing and forming, the dynamics in and through which a society lives and realises itself. To indicate both meanings, the plural *Sozialitäten* is translated as “social units,” while the singular *Sozialität*, as in context mainly conveying the second meaning just presented, is constantly referred to as “sociality.”

8. *Geschichtslosigkeit*—literally ‘historylessness’—is rendered here as ‘lack of history’. The term suggests both the lack of factual historical development and recording of his-

ditions, documents, wars, politics, and so on, and, consequently, from overlooking the concrete correlation between pure spiritual life and the environing world as its <i.e. spiritual life's> validity-formation [*Geltungsgebilde*], and thus also from not making it a central scientific theme. It is obvious that the same task has to emerge now for all humanities accessible to us that are living in self-contained seclusion [*in Abgeschlossenheit*]<sup>9</sup>—and indeed now also for those humanities whose self-enclosed community life [*deren abgeschlossenes Gemeinschaftsleben*] consists not in stagnation due to a lack of history (as a life that is nothing but flowing present) but in a truly historical life, which as such a national <life> has future and incessantly wants future. Accordingly, such a sociality does not have, so to speak, a static environing world | but a world that has partly a realized future (national “past”) and partly a future that has still to be realized, as that which has to be formed according to national goals. This thus leads us to the general problematic of history—to the psychology of the historical spirit [*geschichtlicher Geist*] in all its possible forms and relativities<sup>9</sup> (<on the one hand,> nation and inner construction of the nation out of particular social communities; on the other hand, the type of supranation [*Übernation*] as a sociality [*Gesellschaftlichkeit*] of nations, etc.). For a historical community, we would thus have the problem, as in the case of the primitives, as a correlative problem [*als Korrelativproblem*]: the unity of a cohesive national life and in it the world—which for the nation is full of life, concrete, and real—with its set of structural types [*Strukturtypik*]. Likewise, a connection [*Konnex*] of nations and the higher unity “supranation” (Europe or, e.g., China), as well as, so to speak, the logic, the ontology of the respective humanities and environing worlds. Initially, these tasks are historically concrete regarding the factually known nations and supranations, but then they are also universal psychological tasks—in the sense of a pure inner psychology [*Innenpsychologie*] of concretions, for which a methodology still has to be devised. However, I see a first beginning that has been opened up by your foundational works.

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For me, in the present state of the life's work I have incessantly carried out, this perspective is of the highest interest, because many years ago I put to myself the problem of the correlation [*das Korrelationsproblem*] between We<sup>10</sup> and envi-

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tory (with which Husserl is mainly concerned in this passage), as well as a corresponding lack of a *sense of history*.

9. Here the uncommon plural *Relativitäten* (relativities) in Husserl's use probably means both 1) the diverse tangle of relations formed by *Geist* and 2) their relative validity—‘relative’ understood in this context not in a valuing sense but as a neutral description in the literal sense of ‘meaningful in relation to a particular entity’ (a certain structure, etc.).

10. In the original, *Wir* (We) is capitalized to indicate that Husserl intends to invoke a technical concept. See *Crisis*, 270/335–36. Notice also that he often uses *Ego* (ego) and *Ich* (I) interchangeably, as at the end of the present sentence and the note added to it.

roning world as a “transcendental-phenomenological” problem with regard to the possible manifold “we,” and in fact <as a problem that> ultimately refers back to the problem of the absolute ego.\* For it is in its horizon of consciousness that all social units and the enviroing worlds relative to them have constructed sense and validity [*Sinn und Geltung*] and, in changing, continue to build them always anew. I feel certain that on this path of an intentional analysis, which I have already worked out extensively, historical relativism proves to be undoubtedly justified (as an anthropological fact), but also that anthropology, like every positive science and its universality [*Universitas*], though the first, is not the final word of knowledge—scientific knowledge. Positive science is consistently [*konsequent*] objective science; it is science within the taken-for-grantedness [*Selbstverständlichkeit*] of the being of the objective world and of human being as real factual existence [*realen Dasein*] in the world. Transcendental phenomenology is the radical and consistent | science of subjectivity, which ultimately constitutes the world in itself. In other words, it is the science that reveals the *universal taken-for-grantedness* “world and we human beings in the world” to be an *obscurity* [Unverständlichkeit], thus an enigma, a problem, and that makes it scientifically intelligible [*verständlich*] in the solely possible way of radical self-examination. It is a scientificity that is novel by virtue of this radicality; it proceeds as a systematic analysis, which systematically shows the ABCs and the elementary grammar of the formation [*Bildung*] of “objects” as unities of validity [*Geltungseinheiten*], <the formation> of object-manifolds and infinities as valid [*geltende*] “worlds” for sense-bestowing subjects, and thereby, as a philosophy, it ascends from below into the heights.

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Perhaps the new publications I have prepared (which I still hope to bring out, despite the political upheavals that encroach all too much on my personal existence) will give some idea of how promising and concrete the method is by which I intend to found, contrary to feeble mysticism and irrationalism, a kind of super-rationalism [*Überrationalismus*],<sup>11</sup> which supersedes the old rationalism due to its inadequacy while nonetheless justifying its innermost intentions.

Have I taxed your patience for too long? Well, perhaps I have at least given you a general idea—which should please you—of the kind of strong impetuses

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\* namely, the I that I, the philosophizing person, by questioning back after the subject of performance [*Vollzugssubjekt*] according to the method of the phenomenological reduction of all my world- and my self-app<erceptions>, find as my ultimate I.

11. Even though the morphologic principles applied to construct *Überrationalismus* are the same as in the case of *Überrationalismus*, the prefix carries a different semantic import in the present case. *Über-* here conveys that the term is not simply descriptive but indicates a higher state (for Husserl, even the state of fulfilment) so that, as the context makes clear, “superrationalism” is to be understood as sublated rationalism in an—at least terminologically—Hegelian sense.

that can still come from your life's work, far beyond the ethnological impacts of many years standing that have brought you so much admiration. I just think that this is still not enough. There are important principles in your works that will find their entelechies in the future.

May you to retain, for many years to come, your marvelous mental powers, so that, even at a grand old age, you will be able to produce more foundational works.

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