

From Phenomenology to Existential Philosophy in Costa Rica: Constantino Láscaris and Teodoro Olarte

Jethro Masis¹
University of Costa Rica

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the presence of phenomenology and existentialism in Costa Rica during the first decades of the Costa Rican philosophical community. The attempt is just a first exploration of the presence of phenomenology and its contemporary trends in Costa Rican philosophy. Reasons will be offered to defend the claim that both phenomenology and existentialism had difficult beginnings in Costa Rica, which resemble in a way the very difficulties of phenomenological philosophy in its worldwide contemporary reception.

Introduction

This study offers for the first time in English² a historical account of the early reception of phenomenology in the beginnings of the philosophical community in Costa Rica. The specific timeframe of these beginnings are those of the Philosophy Department at the University of Costa Rica, whose organizational structure gave way to the School of Philosophy in 1974. The School of Philosophy as such constitutes the strongest philosophical tradition in the Central American region and was founded by two Spanish philosophers, who I shall forthwith introduce.

Constantino Láscaris Comneno (Zaragoza, 1923-San José, 1979) was the founder of the institutionalization of philosophy in Costa Rica, on account of his role in organizing the Humanities Department philosophical chair and the philosophy curriculum of the university as a whole. He was instrumental during the university's educational reform in the mid 1950s and can arguably be considered to be the single most important philosopher ever in Central America. Author of two major works on the history of philosophical ideas³ (among many others), Láscaris established philosophy journals and associations, created the first philosophy doctoral program in Central America, extended philosophical education to high schools in the country, published readers and

¹ Dr. phil. from the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, Germany, and Associate Professor at the University of Costa Rica. He is president and founding member of the Costa Rican Circle for Phenomenology and member of the Latin American Circle for Phenomenology (CLAFEN).

· ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9887-2269>

· Contact: jethro.masis@ucr.ac.cr

² See Jethro Masis, "Anotaciones iniciales para una historia de la fenomenología y sus derivas contemporáneas en Costa Rica", in *Eikasia*, 94, 2020, 125-144.

³ See Constantino Láscaris, *Desarrollo de las ideas filosóficas en Costa Rica*, San José, Editorial Costa Rica, 1964; and Constantino Láscaris, *Historia de las ideas en Centroamérica*, San José, Editorial Centroamericana, 1970.

anthologies, translated classical texts, and delivered public lectures on and off campus. Besides Láscaris, the Basque philosopher Teodoro Olarte Sáenz del Castillo (Amárta, 1908-San José, 1980) also helped shape the early philosophical landscape in Costa Rica with his introduction of existential philosophy drawing inspiration mostly from Heidegger.

For the purpose of this study to be clearly understood, two things must be taken into account. First, the extension of the expression ‘phenomenological philosophy’ is broader enough as to include both Husserl and Heidegger. Second, Costa Rica is selected among the countries of the Central American isthmus not only because I belong to the very philosophical community this study is about, but mostly because Costa Rica is the only country in the region where philosophy has been institutionalized academically in the strict sense of the word, so that it does not get conflated with sociological issues or theological ones. The reasons for this development of philosophical ideas in the region go well beyond the limits and scope of this paper.

Finally, the negative tone that shall be pervasive throughout my narrative is justified inasmuch as phenomenology tends to be misunderstood almost all too often in contemporary philosophical discourse. So the exposition will allow for a constant to and fro between the immediate Costa Rican context and the broader one of contemporary philosophy.

Husserl in Costa Rica

Edmund Husserl made a rather early appearance in Costa Rica. In its second issue from 1957, the *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica* (the oldest philosophy journal in the Central American Region and one of the oldest overall in Latin America) published for the first time ever in Spanish a substantive excerpt of the correspondence between Dilthey and Husserl.⁴ In 1962, Guillermo Malavassi rendered an account⁵ of Husserl’s presence in Costa Rica spanning a decade (1952-1962) and reached the conclusion that “Husserl has not yet been a thinker received by many, particularly due to the serious and difficult nature of his thought.”⁶ In Costa Rica, as a matter of fact, other philosophical schools were much more fruitful in their development of a unifying approach than that of Husserl and his phenomenological philosophy. Malavassi’s judgement regarding the scanty presence of phenomenology is true even today, although some phenomenological ideas lived on disseminated mostly in existentialist doctrines which were all the rage in the 1950s through the early 1970s. However, the Husserlian origins of the existentialist approaches developed in Central American universities remained hidden away, or were not clarified in detail. The received view of phenomenology was that of a group of philosophers who gravitated around Husserl’s breakthrough

⁴ Wilhelm Dilthey W. & Edmund Husserl, “Inéditos y documentos” (trans. J. Wender & J. Heise), in *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 1(2), 1957, 103-124.

⁵ Guillermo Malavassi, “Presencia de Husserl en Costa Rica”, in *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 3(11), 1962, 275-277.

⁶ Guillermo Malavassi, “Presencia de Husserl...”, p. 275. From now on, all translations from Spanish and German texts—that have not been translated into English—are mine.

works at the beginning of the century, but who ended up forsaking the master in search for new philosophical paths and ventures.

According to Malavassi's account, the real phenomenological pioneer in Costa Rica was Ligia Herrera, professor at the Humanities Department in charge of history of philosophy and epistemology courses. Herrera held in 1952 a phenomenology seminar for advanced students, and she is to be thanked for the inclusion of phenomenological—mostly Husserlian—literature in the philosophical readers that were in use back then for the introductory courses to philosophy. In 1958 the philosophy section of the Humanities Department organized a series of public talks about philosophical methodology in which the phenomenological method was exposed and discussed about in depth. Professor Claudio Gutiérrez at that period of time concerned himself with phenomenology in connection with existentialism, which is surprising given that he would later become the founder of the analytic tradition in the country after being awarded a PhD in philosophy of science from the University of Chicago in the mid 1960s. Malavassi's account ends with the following words: "It took a while for Husserl's work to be studied and received in Costa Rica, but in recent years... it has become more and more a field of interest."⁷

However, further historical analysis reveals that the reception of Husserlian phenomenology in Costa Rica has not been complete nor systematic. As a matter of fact, courses and seminars on phenomenology were not offered in Costa Rican institutions of higher education until the twentieth-first century, when advanced seminars on Husserl and phenomenology were taught and a seminar on Heidegger was reinstated at the University of Costa Rica's School of Philosophy. From 1970 onwards, there was a selected group of Costa Ricans who completed doctorates at European universities with dissertations under the guidance of eminent phenomenologists (Gerhard Funke, Bernhard Waldenfels, and Karl-Heinz Lembeck being the most important). But a strong phenomenological tradition in the country was not established for the most part.

The Traditional Interpretation of Phenomenology

The pitfalls of the reception of Husserl's phenomenology are not exclusive to Costa Rica. It is a known fact that Husserl published very little during his lifetime leaving behind a great amount of manuscripts for his *Nachlass*, which have steadily come to light in recent decades. Husserl's image cemented during his lifetime was that of a sort of transcendental idealist whose abstract theory of consciousness had collapsed to the ground in view of the far more concrete approaches of his rebellious existentialist disciples. Today, however, a renewed image of Husserl has emerged.⁸ According to San Martín, it was not just "a Husserl that has been discovered in this decade, but one that had always been there and that at last has come to light as the 'new' Husserl, thanks to the book

⁷ Guillermo Malavassi, "Presencia de Husserl...", p. 277.

⁸ See Don Welton, *The New Husserl. A Critical Reader*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2003.

by Welton and its felicitous title”⁹ This is the straightforward case of a philosopher with true historical and existential depth, thus at odds with the critical, traditional image. Common opinion has it that critical thinkers such as Heidegger, Scheler, and Merleau-Ponty had a knack for landing to the world and the lived body Husserlian ideas that were deprived, in its original form, of existential underpinnings. From the very beginning, Husserl’s own disciples started to doubt whether the founder of the phenomenological movement himself was faithful to the motto to return to the *Sachen selbst*. The story goes that the phenomenological circle at Göttingen dissolved in its entirety when its members realized that Husserl had taken a virulent—idealist—turn in his great work *Ideas* from 1913. Hedwig Conrad-Martius, for example, could not relate to Husserl’s relapse into subjectivism: “we were so awestruck at Husserl’s breaking with pure objectivity and with the return to the things themselves, that our joined seminars back then consisted almost only in the opposition on our behalf to the great master”.¹⁰ Besides Conrad-Martius, other phenomenological talents such as Alexander Pfänder, Adolf Reinach, Moritz Geiger, and Roman Ingarden were estranged from Husserl and continued to prefer the phenomenological realism that characterized the original movement.

To the vehement opposition of the *Göttingerkreis* followed the difficulties that Husserl was to encounter in Freiburg, where Heidegger mounted a concealed but unrelenting countermovement to Husserl’s influence. In a few years, Husserl was left alone, and at the end of his career he found himself in the dilemma of having to respond to the charges made against him, which he always found misleading. It was as though Husserl had taken upon himself to save his philosophical legacy. If we were to be left unaware of the lessons and studies about the existential depth of logic, which Husserl carried out during the 1920s and even before that, the publication of *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*¹¹ in the 1930s would surely come as a rather surprising theoretical endeavor. Or one could alternatively adhere to Gadamer’s account of the alleged change of direction that Husserl’s philosophy had to undergo at the behest of Heidegger’s challenge to the original doctrines of phenomenology. On Gadamer’s opinion, what Husserl realized in response to the confrontation with Heidegger was that the life-world had to be thematized.¹² A staunch Heideggerian, Gadamer sees a similar undertaking in Schelling’s critique of the philosophy of reflection *à la* Fichte—according to which transcendental idealism was ineffective and naïve due to its lack of real grounding in life—and the existentialist critique of Husserlian phenomenology. Take Scheler, for example, who early on objected that Husserl’s transcendental ego was blind to the vital impulse and the unconscious forces that preceded it. This turns out to be similar to the Heideggerian allegation against

⁹ Javier San Martín, *La nueva imagen de Husserl. Lecciones de Guanajuato*, Madrid, Trotta, 2015, p. 42.

¹⁰ Hedwig Conrad Martius, “Die transzendente und die ontologische Phänomenologie”, in *Edmund Husserl 1859-1959. Recueil commémoratif publié à l’occasion de centenaire de la naissance du philosophe*, Den Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1959, p. 177.

¹¹ Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, Husserliana Bd. VI (Ed. W. Biemel), Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954.

¹² See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Die phänomenologische Bewegung”, in *Neuere Philosophie I, Hegel · Husserl · Heidegger* (Gesammelte Werke 3), Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1987.

Neokantianism, that it had started from above, that is to say, without being able to cope with the subterranean currents undergirding transcendental life as its true factic foundation.

So this is the context in which Constantino Láscaris introduces Husserl's phenomenology for the first time ever to a Costa Rican audience in the late 1950s. Paul Ricoeur's often quoted *dictum* asserts that "phenomenology is to a large extent the history of Husserlian heresies".¹³ It might as well be said that it is also the history of the systematic misunderstanding of Husserl's philosophy. For this very reason, Láscaris was not alone when he characterized phenomenology as a sort of a priori undertaking rooted in a transcendentalism of typical form. Rather, he found support for his own interpretation in a series of ideas critical of Husserl that back then were being circulated around. Perhaps Eugen Fink is right in that, for the most part, the reception of Husserl's phenomenology has not been based on real comprehension, but on mere peripheral thoughts deprived of its true meaning.¹⁴

It is now time to take stock of Láscaris's idea of Husserlian phenomenology which exhibits a series of misunderstandings with regard to the then available works by Husserl. It will be shown that his assessment of Husserl's philosophy was a typical attempt to set down phenomenology in the chronicle of philosophical defeats.

From Psychologism to Transcendental Philosophy

A paper penned by Constantino Láscaris in 1958, 'Husserl y la fenomenología',¹⁵ appeared some years later in his book *Estudios de filosofía moderna*¹⁶ and intends to be a general presentation of Husserl's thought from *The Philosophy of Arithmetic* (1891)¹⁷ to the *Cartesian Meditations* (1932).¹⁸ It was first delivered as a talk on September 4, 1957; a little more than a month later than Abelardo Bonilla's public lecture on Martin Heidegger's philosophy (August 14). Although Ligia Herrera was in charge of a phenomenology seminar five years prior to this occasion, this is surely the time when Husserl's philosophy was presented to a broader audience in Costa Rica.

Láscaris was a professor endowed with a vast knowledge of the history of Western philosophy in general, but especially of modern philosophical systems. Before his arrival in the Central American country, he had published in Spain a short monograph on the history of philosophical systems¹⁹ and an introduction and translation of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*.²⁰ This might be the reason leading

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, "Sur la phénoménologie", in *Esprit*, 21(12), 1958, p. 836.

¹⁴ See Eugen Fink, "Was will die Phänomenologie Edmund Husserls? (Die phänomenologische Grundlegungs-idee)", in *Studien zur Phänomenologie 1930-1939*, Den Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1966, p. 157.

¹⁵ Constantino Láscaris, "Husserl y la fenomenología", in *Revista de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 16(1), 1958, 5-20.

¹⁶ Constantino Láscaris, *Estudios de filosofía moderna*, San Salvador, Dirección General de Publicaciones, 1966.

¹⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Philosophie der Arithmetik*, Husserliana Bd. XII (Ed. L. Eley), Den Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1979.

¹⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, Husserliana Bd. I (Ed. S. Strasser), Den Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1991.

¹⁹ Constantino Láscaris, *Prontuario de la historia de la filosofía y de los sistemas filosóficos*, Madrid, Koel, 1954.

²⁰ Constantino Láscaris, *Análisis del Discurso del método*, Madrid, Instituto Luis Vives, 1955.

to his idea that Husserl's philosophy should be best understood in connection with Descartes and Kant. Actually, it was Husserl himself who regarded his phenomenology as the secret aspiration of all modern philosophy.²¹ On Láscaris's understanding, this *desideratum* of phenomenology can be couched in terms of the parent-offspring relationship between philosophy and the sciences, according to which philosophy lost its autonomy ever since the sciences took hold of themes and problems that once exclusively belonged to the playground of the philosophers. On Láscaris's view, "now we have a series of daughters of philosophy that start gaining confidence and universal value, which the mother is now lacking".²² Therefore, it would be this expulsion of philosophy from the epistemological modern landscape what might have motivated Husserl's founding of a new direction for thinking. Husserl's phenomenological project would be the last-ditch effort to reinstate the lost dignity of philosophy in an era where technoscience alone is lord and master.

As a matter of fact, Husserl himself commenced his philosophical project by launching a genetic investigation on the origins of logic. But Láscaris adheres to the psychologistic interpretation of the *Logical Investigations*, according to which Husserl could not achieve the original goal of overcoming psychologism in logic. Láscaris is right when he notes that Husserl was entirely psychologistic in *The Philosophy of Arithmetic*, but still cannot grapple with the fact that, right after the first logical investigation—'Prolegomena to Pure Logic'—Husserl carries out a series of investigations mostly dedicated to epistemology and the theory of perception. On his view, the subsequent investigations are cut off from each other and deal exclusively with phenomena that are to be found in the experience of conscious life.²³ The following question arises, of course: Is it not precisely conscious life the topic investigated by psychology? For Láscaris this can only mean that Husserl's attempts to overcome psychologism are actually doomed to failure, because he seems to be postulating the necessity of a more rigorous psychology, that is, phenomenology.²⁴

Láscaris is not alone in this assessment. As Conrad-Martius stated, the Göttingen disciples harbored suspicion toward the second volume of Husserl's investigations as well.²⁵ In 1901 onwards, when the second volume of the investigations appeared, Husserl's thematization of topics belonging to the theory of knowledge and perception created confusion in the learned public, because, if conscious life is to be dealt with by phenomenology, an overlapping with psychology might turn out to be unavoidable. The new investigations, therefore, seemed to undo everything that had been accomplished so far in the *Prolegomena*. So why does one need analyses of conscious acts if, precisely, the original purpose was the expulsion of psychology from the genesis of all logic? As is widely known, Husserl was educated under Brentano's descriptive psychology school, so he might have been

²¹ See Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. (Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie)*, Husserliana Bd. III, (Ed. K. Schuhmann), Dordrecht/Boston/London, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995, p. 148.

²² Constantino Láscaris, "Husserl y la fenomenología," p. 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁴ See *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁵ See Conrad-Martius, "Die transzendente...", p. 177.

well aware early on of the risks that a confusion between phenomenology and psychology entailed. In fact, the conflation of the thematic field of phenomenology with psychology constitutes a gross misunderstanding of the original goal of founding a philosophical endeavor deemed autonomous in its entirety. Such conflation fatally misses the fundamental difference between fact (*Tatsache*) and essence (*Wesen*), explained in detail in *Ideas*.²⁶ Hence Husserl's attempts at refuting the impasses of the day: if they did not end up conflating phenomenology with some sort of psychologism, they surely did relegate it to the dubious province of introspection in subjective science. Such impasses and confluations undergird the claims inveighing against the existence of a fruitful and fundamental autonomous philosophical reflection. Furthermore, is phenomenology a *Geistes-* or a *Naturwissenschaft* from the methodological viewpoint? To use Neokantian terminology, is it theoretically nomothetic or ideographic? Should it apply empirical or historical methods? The answer to these questions must be: *none of the above*. In a way, however, Husserl's own terminology may have contributed to the prevalent confusion as regards phenomenology's status as a philosophical science. No wonder phenomenology has always been controversial. As Cerbone has argued, there is "a time-honoured tradition—as long as the phenomenological tradition itself—of declaring... [phenomenology] to be, variously, unreliable, irrelevant, hopelessly muddled, or even impossible".²⁷

Láscaris seems to think that, given the increasing obstacles in overcoming psychologism, Husserl ended up embracing a transcendental metaphysical system. Indeed, the confrontation between naturalistic psychologism and transcendental logicism contributed to creating an unbridgeable gap between the empirical experience and the a priori objectivity of scientific knowledge. Nonetheless, neither side of the aisle is completely satisfactory if left on its own. On Husserl's terms, both sides—however contradictory—have their say. Jacques Derrida has handsomely put it this way: "At the level where psychologism runs counter to Kantianism, it could be said that for the first there is a genesis without objectivity, and in the second an objectivity without genesis."²⁸ Thus, Husserl would argue that we actually need both: a historical and empirical genesis of knowledge. However, if logical validity is made dependent on the contingencies of historical existence, objectivity might be relegated to the sphere of mere subjectivism, with all the idiosyncratic implications of the term. We are left with, on the one hand, empirical experience deprived of logical validity. On the other, the original transcendental sphere would be objective but not historical. We find ourselves in the cul-de-sac of having to choose between a genesis without objectivity and an objectivity without genesis. The first leads to relativism; the second to a logical formalism without any footing on historical existence. Common parlance in philosophy has it that the analytic a priori needs to be differentiated from the synthetic a posteriori. But are those boundaries as sharp as supposed?

²⁶ See Edmund Husserl, *Hua III*, pp. 7-32.

²⁷ David Cerbone, "Phenomenological Method: Reflection, Introspection, and Skepticism", in Dan Zahavi (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 7.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, (trans. by M. Hobson), London/Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 14.

Láscaris appears to have misunderstood the philosophical problem at stake that motivated the launching of the phenomenological movement. For this very reason, Láscaris assumes that Husserl's philosophical efforts are premised on a continuation of Neokantian themes, located—as it were—in the vicinity of Natorp's transcendental anti-psychologism. But again, this is just a poorly conceived interpretation of the true motives underlying Husserlian phenomenology. To the 1957 audience at the University of Costa Rica it may have seemed as though a philosopher imbued with a Platonic mind was being presented to them; a philosopher—just as Láscaris argues—who was not fond of history.²⁹ Widespread textual evidence exists, however, to the contrary. In fact, Husserl's phenomenology was about getting rid of the traditional theoretical opposition between a priori Platonism without genesis and the historical contingencies of human existence. This is particularly evident in the long essay *Philosophy as Rigorous Science* (1911), where Husserl rejects both naturalism and historicism. Dieter Lohmar is right in the assertion that, unlike Plato, the Husserlian essences depend on becoming real in the real world in which we live, because our real world is the only world whose existence Husserl admits.³⁰

It is true that there is in fact a disruption between *The Philosophy of Arithmetic* and the *Logical Investigations*, but Láscaris is of the opinion that a more profound gap is to be found between the latter and *Ideas*. According to Láscaris, the 1913 essences are to be conceived of as stereotypical Platonic forms,³¹ even going so far as to ascribing to Husserl the necessity of a theory of participation (μέτεξις) for the linkage of eternal ideas to the sensible world.³² So cornered by the perils of relativism and skepticism, Husserl therefore must have taken refuge in the traditional eternal necessity of ideal forms to salvage knowledge from the contingencies of historical existence. On Láscaris's interpretation, this is how Husserl ended up giving up his original project laid out in the *Logical Investigations* in favor of transcendental knowledge or a *philosophia perennis*. It is to be noted, however, that the critics of the Husserlian turn in 1913 feared a relapse into a sort of transcendental idealism *à la* Fichte, that is to say, into subjectivism, whereas Láscaris accuses Husserl of Platonism. Now, phenomenological analysis is advantageous in the sense that it allows one to bracket the real character of the objects coming within its scope. But that is not the same as inducing one to degrade the ontological character of those objects due to their *unreality*, as though they were just “sparkles of true reality.”³³

Finally, Láscaris advances the strong claim that existential philosophy is then stuck in a paradox, given that its foundation can be traced back to Husserl's phenomenological philosophy, but it is now forced to use the Husserlian method, “not to describe pure essences, regardless of their existence, but actually the existence of the essences.”³⁴ However critical that may sound, Husserl nor Heidegger—as

²⁹ See Constantino Láscaris, “Husserl y la fenomenología”, p. 19.

³⁰ See Dieter Lohmar, “Die phänomenologische Methode der Wesensschau und ihre Präzisierung als eidetische Variation”, in *Phänomenologische Forschungen*, 2005, 61-91.

³¹ See Constantino Láscaris, “Husserl y la fenomenología”, p. 14.

³² See *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

phenomenologists—were concerned with the mere *ontic* description of *real* objects. Nonetheless, isn't it true that Husserl had reached the conclusion that the phenomenologist does not judge ontologically?³⁵ Of course, but in Husserlian terminology *ontological* means mundane, real in the sense of existing merely in nature. So even if Heidegger ends up rejecting phenomenology as analysis of consciousness for its flagrant Cartesian heritage,³⁶ the phenomenological method devised by Husserl is not repudiated in its entirety, for intentionality can be—and should be—taken in a broader sense. In a very distinctive form, Heidegger is still a phenomenologist, at least in *Being and Time*,³⁷ refraining thereupon from naturalism, psychologism, and historicism.

Existential Philosophy

As can be seen, Husserl entered the stage in Costa Rican intellectual life surrounded by a strange aura of misunderstanding. In his lifetime, Husserl himself admitted to refraining on purpose from entering into a discussion with critics of phenomenology on account of his preference for dealing with the demands that emerge from this new science.³⁸ After all, many of these criticisms “miss the basic meaning of my phenomenology to such an extent that it is not in the least affected by them.”³⁹ Láscaris, in this case, might have contributed to the apathy and indifference toward Husserlian philosophy that was all too prevalent during the first two decades of the Philosophy Department. This attitude had historical consequences which need to be stood on its head, for a more favorable reception of existentialist philosophy took hold in Costa Rica.

From the point of view of the historical development of philosophy, the situation in Costa Rica does not seem at all different in comparison with the interpretative tendencies of the time in Latin America. According to Jorge Gracia, “the phenomenology of Scheler and N. Hartmann and the existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre dominated philosophy in Latin America between 1940 and 1960.”⁴⁰ The Costa Rican case is thus similar to other Latin American countries that benefitted to an enormous degree from the arrival of Peninsular philosophers (Xirau, Nicol, García Bacca, Gaos) as a result of the brutal Civil War in Spain. As a consequence, philosophical ideas from Europe were received in Latin American institutions of higher education (mostly from Germany and France), alongside the growing influence of Spanish philosophers such as Ortega y Gasset, Unamuno, and Machado. This is why Constantino Láscaris' mighty presence in Costa Rica does not constitute an isolated exemplary case.

³⁵ See Edmund Husserl, *Hua III*, p. 379.

³⁶ See Martin Heidegger, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*, Gesamtausgabe Bd. 20 (Ed. P. Jäger), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1994, p. 147.

³⁷ See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1979.

³⁸ See Edmund Husserl, “Vorwort von Edmund Husserl”, in Eugen Fink, *Studien zur Phänomenologie 1930-1939*, Den Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1966, p. vii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Jorge Gracia, “Latin American Philosophy”, in Robert Audi (ed.) *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 487.

Láscaris's great influence might have been detrimental to the reception of Husserl in Costa Rican intellectual circles, and that, in turn, contributed to the growing influence of existentialism. Teodoro Olarte's version of existential philosophy has features of its own owing a great deal to the absence of a proper understanding of Husserlian phenomenology. Nonetheless, it may not be exact to attribute his existentialist doctrine solely to Láscaris's Husserl interpretation, if one takes into account that his arrival to Costa Rica took place fifteen years prior to the Aragonian philosopher. However, the younger generation of philosophers, including important figures such as Roberto Murillo (who studied under both Láscaris and Olarte), inherited a certain antipathy towards Husserlian phenomenology. In his major essay on Antonio Machado,⁴¹ Murillo argues that "a Machadian theory of the methods for thinking could not go along well with the ideal of 'philosophy as rigorous science,' nor with the despicable epistemological optimism of the early 1900s".⁴² It is remarkable that Murillo moved freely around the company of modern and contemporary philosophers (such as Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein), while at the same time ignoring Husserl's thought as though it had never existed to begin with. Murillo might have been of the opinion that Husserlian philosophy was lacking in consistency and clarity, perhaps in agreement with Láscaris's somewhat muddled ideas about the place of phenomenology in the contemporary philosophical landscape.

Although Olarte was never as prolific as Láscaris, his two major works⁴³ reveal how strongly his thought had been influenced by Heidegger and Jaspers. However much existential Olarte pretends his ideas to be, his comprehensive view of philosophy is exemplary of a philosophical anthropology notably influenced by metaphysical and religious concerns. In fact, one can find in Olarte many sentences diametrically opposed to Heideggerian views. Take the following sentence: "Being is not already made, but it is being made because it evolves, and evolution is always creative".⁴⁴ Heidegger's thinking, of course, does not allow such *ontic* parlance, which treats being as any other entity whatsoever. For this very reason, Olarte's take on Heidegger turns out to be quite *sui generis*, to say the least.

According to his biographers,⁴⁵ Olarte underwent a transition from Scholasticism to Heideggerian philosophy or, as Láscaris has put it, "to metaphysical existentialism without concessions".⁴⁶ Olarte has confessed his metaphysical creed as follows: "If philosophy is endowed of its own substantial character over against the particular sciences, it is due solely on the basis of its metaphysical

⁴¹ Roberto Murillo, *Antonio Machado. Ensayo sobre su pensamiento filosófico*, San José, Editorial de la Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 1981.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴³ See Teodoro Olarte, *Filosofía actual y humanismo*, San José, Editorial Costa Rica, 1966; and Teodoro Olarte, *El ser y el hombre*, San José, Fernández Arce, 1974.

⁴⁴ Teodoro Olarte, *El ser y el hombre*, p. 10.

⁴⁵ See María Luisa San Miguel, José Ángel Ascunce & Alexander Jiménez, *Teodoro Olarte Sáenz del Castillo: Antropología filosófica y cultura personal*, Vitoria, Ayuntamiento de Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2008.

⁴⁶ Constantino Láscaris, *Desarrollo de las ideas filosóficas en Costa Rica*, p. 400.

character”.⁴⁷ On Olarte’s view, Heidegger is to be thanked for the renewed interest in metaphysics in contemporary philosophy. So philosophy should not be cut off from its metaphysical underpinnings, not even epistemology, because “there should not be a gap between being and the phenomena that are apprehended”.⁴⁸ It is to be noted that, prior to his exile in the Americas—before Costa Rica, Olarte had shorter stays in Mexico, the United States, and Cuba—, he was an ordained Catholic priest in the Basque Country. He left the Franciscan Order from Havana in 1939; the same year he arrived in the Central American republic as a layman.⁴⁹ In spite of Olarte’s secularization, a certain religious tone can still be detected in his writings: “It is not possible to prove that God does not exist”.⁵⁰ Moreover, “a proven God is not God. And this is why only the who calls upon God can find him”.⁵¹ Thus, it is not uncommon to find Olartian passages plagued with pious overtones: “Resorting to the world of culture as the final source for an ethical universal ideal is nothing but its very negation. That would be evidence of moral relativism”⁵².

In the 1970s, Olarte’s doctrine found staunch opposition from a new generation of philosophers leaning towards Marxism and analytic philosophy. Helio Gallardo, a Chilean exile, famously characterized Olarte’s thought as a *metaphysics of the sole individual*: “[in Olarte] the ontological structure of human being is personal existence; the metaphysical, the real, is the personal, the intransferable, the unity. *The real is the sole individual*.”⁵³ It is not at all strange for Gallardo to identify a sort of ideological stratagem in this individualistic anarchism, because, however much individual actions shape the world, every action is “concrete within a framework of also concrete social relations.”⁵⁴

An attack on Olarte from another flank comes from analytic philosopher Luis Camacho, who objects to the idea that “there is, above the sciences, some totalizing discipline capable of establishing a series of characteristics of reality that the sciences do not see.”⁵⁵ On Camacho’s terms, the burden of proof continues to be on Olarte himself, who would be responsible of presenting the themes and problems which purportedly fall outside the sphere of the sciences. Moreover, what is the ontology of human being? What is a metaphysics of sex? As it turns out, “the considerations regarding sexuality and other similar topics dealt with by Olarte in his work have nothing to do with metaphysics. They all fall under the domain of the sciences without exception”.⁵⁶ Olarte, of course, found himself in the

⁴⁷ Teodoro Olarte, “Crónica internacional: *Sein und Zeit* (en su trigésimo aniversario)”, in *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 1(1), 1957, p. 76.

⁴⁸ Teodoro Olarte, “El universo según Pierre Teilhard de Chardin”, in *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 1(2), 1957, p. 147.

⁴⁹ See San Miguel, Ascunce & Jiménez, *Teodoro Olarte...*, p. 39 ff.

⁵⁰ Teodoro Olarte, *El ser y el hombre*, p. 183.

⁵¹ Teodoro Olarte, “El pensamiento de Karl Jaspers”, in *Revista de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 16, 1958, p. 33.

⁵² Teodoro Olarte, *El ser y el hombre*, p. 189.

⁵³ Helio Gallardo, “Teodoro Olarte, filósofo”, in *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 13(37), 1975, p. 200.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁵⁵ Luis Camacho, “El ser y el hombre: la metafísica al acecho”, in *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 13(37), 1975, p. 194.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

predicament of having to respond, although his retorts may not have produced the expected results in restoring the place of metaphysics. Against Camacho's allegation that a clear definition of 'being' is nowhere to be found in *El ser y el hombre*, Olarte responds that logicism ignores the ontological difference. However, Olarte's own definition of such differentiation leaves the reader rather confused: "Being is identical with entities, on the one hand. On the other, being should be understood as the *energy* that allows entities to be, that make them present and exist".⁵⁷ And if that were not enough, in his defense Olarte reveals himself to be a psychologistic thinker: "For me, the psychological is the surface of the ontological dimension, which in the end prevents us from making a radical distinction between the two. Whatever Husserl and his disciples may claim about this".⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly, Camacho was unable to capture the gist of the ontological difference from Olarte's account: "A critique of metaphysics is called for due to the confusion between being and entities. I must confess that I am unable to see any difference whatsoever".⁵⁹ In the same vein, it is all the more understandable that Gallardo finds no theoretical use in Olarte's philosophical anthropology for the purposes of rendering a more profound explanation of human life. For Gallardo, the contributions of the social sciences such as history, political science, and sociology should suffice. In the final analysis, Olarte's own muddled conception of Heidegger's philosophy may have contributed to its gradual demise in the Costa Rican philosophical community.

However, the interest in existentialism as a whole did not flag after Olarte resumed his teaching career at the University of Costa Rica in 1977, judging from Sartre's influence during the late 1960s and the 1970s. But Heidegger was branded for posterity—as it were—with the apocalyptic mark of the beast. For decades to come his philosophy was considered antiscientific, when not wholly theological. On Rafael Ángel Herra's terms, "even if being is capable of explaining everything, nothing explains being... an immaterial, insubstantial principle, not earthly nor divine, an absolute enigma, about which no one knows what lies behind its *flatus vocis*: Being".⁶⁰ Let us be clear that this rejection of Heidegger can also be conceived as a criticism leveled against Olarte. Herra is critical of Heidegger's ontological transformation of Husserlian consciousness, that is, as a theory rendering an account of all reality based on the obscure principle of being. José Alberto Soto is also influenced by Olarte when he claims that "the purpose of Heidegger's philosophy is building an ontology, a doctrine of being, including all the conditions and determinations which are necessary for its absolute foundation".⁶¹ According to Soto, Heidegger's presence in Costa Rica "could not be epitomized better than by the philosopher Teodoro Olarte".⁶² Finally, on Luis Lara's words, Heideggerian ontology "does not achieve

⁵⁷ Teodoro Olarte, "Contesto y me defiendo, aclarando...", in *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 14(38), 1976, p. 108.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁵⁹ Camacho, "El ser y el hombre...", p. 187.

⁶⁰ Rafael Ángel Herra, "Este Heidegger trivial llamado McLuhan", in *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 18(48), 1980, p. 179.

⁶¹ José Alberto Soto, "Heidegger: el filósofo del Dasein", in *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 14(39), 1976, p. 191.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 193.

its goal of offering a transcendental vision and rather verges continually on the perilous and fragile limits of psychologism and of a naturalistic anthropology.”⁶³

All these flamboyant ideas about Heidegger’s thought have been admittedly denied by the German philosopher himself time and again. Heidegger’s early project of an originary science of pre-theoretical life has little to do with irrationalism, precisely because “the irrational is an idle name that was invented in order to explain that with which one does not know what to do.”⁶⁴ Dasein finds itself already in a world which is meaningful⁶⁵ and that explains why we always find ourselves affected by this or that mood, and why we know what is going on in our daily lives. For phenomenology then the point is not to begin with a distorting reflection of the irrational, but rather to articulate factic-life experience from the motivations that spring from life itself. None of the above allows one to think that Heidegger set out plans for a traditional ontological project, relapsing—without realizing it—into the sinuous paths of psychologism and anthropologism. Heidegger’s paths of *Being and Time* are not comparable to those of Olarte’s *El ser y el hombre*.

Conclusion

Both the methodological hardships found in Husserl’s phenomenology by Láscaris and the open disavowal of Heidegger as a result of Olarte’s account of his philosophy, helped setting down phenomenological philosophy in the common narrative of purported philosophical failures. In a way, phenomenology was presented as a sort of story of a death foretold. Therefore, the new generation of Costa Rican philosophers that emerged in the 1970s found themselves new paths to pursue, cultivating instead analytic approaches or engaging in Marxist political critique. Both directions, however, were the subject of intense criticism by Husserl himself under the rubric of rejecting both naturalism and historicism. Unfortunately, Láscaris’s Husserl interpretation did not contribute to a more appropriate understanding of the major significance of phenomenology for the contemporary philosophical landscape. As Fink has argued, we might not need to look for the causes of the defective reception of phenomenology in an era’s impaired disposition to understand it, but in the essence of phenomenology itself.⁶⁶ In this sense, the stumbling stone of phenomenological philosophy may lie in its very radical nature.

Aside from Rafael Ángel Herra, whose work has been mostly literary, Álvaro Zamora, Olga Estrada, Manuel Triana, and a few other Costa Rican philosophers have cultivated phenomenology in various forms. However, its systematic study is just beginning to take shape with the recent foundation of the Costa Rican Circle for Phenomenology. And this is quite all right, for

⁶³ Luis Lara, “Heidegger: un ayer para la historia,” in *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica*, 14(39), 1976, p. 196.

⁶⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 135.

⁶⁵ See Martin Heidegger, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*, Gesamtausgabe Bd. 20, (Ed. P. Jäger), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1994, p. 352.

⁶⁶ See Eugen Fink, “Die Phänomenologische Philosophie Edmund Husserls in der gegenwärtigen Kritik,” in *Studien zur Phänomenologie 1930-1939*, Den Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1966.

phenomenology remains a promise. As Heidegger has claimed, phenomenology is “the permanent possibility for thinking, to correspond to the requirements of that which must be thought”.⁶⁷ And the possible constitutes the horizon for that which must be set out as the task for thinking.

⁶⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1969, p. 90.