



Edmund Husserl on Position-Taking (*Stellungnahme*) as the Essence of Human Life

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Abstract

In “Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft,” Edmund Husserl states that “all life is position-taking [*Stellungnehmen*]” and “all position-taking is subject to an ought” (1987: 56). The aim of this paper is to examine Husserl’s multifaceted concept of *Stellungnahme* and show how it informs his understanding of human life. I start by studying this notion as initially developed by Reinach – where position-taking is a stance towards an object or state of affairs, either positive (e.g., belief) or negative (disbelief) – and by von Hildebrand – for whom a *Stellungnahme* is a subject’s spontaneous response to a known fact or value. Then, turning to Husserl’s reappropriation of his Munich students’ work, I demonstrate that he first interprets position-taking, building on Reinach, as a positional intention (in contrast to neutral consciousness), which explains why *Stellungnahme* is subject to the “ought” of reason. However, this definition overlooks the agency inherent in *Stellungnahme*, in which the ego actively ‘takes’ a position. Husserl thus advances an enhanced view, drawing on von Hildebrand, whereby position-taking designates a free decision of a person who thereby self-constitutes her individuality. Yet, this emphasis on freedom cannot account for the rational normativity of *Stellungnahme*. To address this, Husserl ultimately offers a deeper approach to position-taking as a critical procedure assessing the validity of a thesis, which articulates the first two interpretations. This procedure, culminating in the enduring, personal acknowledgment of a belief, illuminates the specificity of human beings as essentially capable of actively reshaping their theoretical and axiological convictions.

Keywords Edmund Husserl · Phenomenology · Reason · Position-taking · Normativity · Freedom

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Introduction. Agency and normativity: The ambivalence of ‘position-taking’ in Husserl’s thought

In his 1911 article “Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft,”¹ Husserl famously opposes three philosophical rivals. The first two are naturalism, which holds that “all beings are of a psychophysical nature” (Husserl, 1987: 9; 2002: 254), thus repudiating the ideal character of logical and ethical norms, and historicism, which reduces sciences to mere contingent “cultural formations” and therefore refuses them any absolute validity (1987: 43; 2002: 280). Husserl vehemently rejects these two approaches:² insofar as they – explicitly or implicitly – prevent the possibility of objective knowledge, they inevitably lead to skepticism and relativism (1987: 41; 2002: 278).

The third adversary is the conception of philosophy as “worldview” (*Weltanschauung*). Husserl defines it as an endeavor to provide “the relatively most perfect answer to the riddles of life and the world” and to achieve “in the best way possible the solution and satisfactory clarification of the theoretical, axiological, practical inconsistencies of life” (1987: 50; 2002: 285). Ultimately, for Husserl, this approach must likewise be dismissed, as the harmony that a worldview reaches merely mimics genuine rationality: other *Weltanschauungen* can “quarrel” with it (1987: 57; 2002: 291), so the view of the world that it defends is likely to soon be overthrown. In contrast, science “bears the stamp of eternity” (1987: 57; 2002: 291), which is why the conception of philosophy as a rigorous science must be firmly preferred and defended.

Importantly, however, Husserl also emphasizes that, notwithstanding its limitations, the *Weltanschauung* approach contains “much truth” (1987: 57; 2002: 290). On the one hand, worldview philosophy rightly signals the emergence of an existential crisis at the turn of the twentieth century, a “spiritual distress” (*geistige Not*) that has become “unbearable” (1987: 56; 2002: 290),³ on the other hand, it correctly identifies the origin of this distress in naturalism and historicism, which “both work from different sides to reinterpret ideas as facts and to transform all actuality, all life, into an incomprehensible idea-less jumble of ‘facts’” (1987: 56; 2002: 290).

But why should the destruction of ideas lead to such spiritual misery? Husserl replies:

It is instead the most radical *vital* distress from which we suffer, a distress that leaves no part of our lives untouched. All life is position-taking and all position-taking is subject to an ought [*Alles Leben ist Stellungnehmen, alles Stellungnehmen steht unter einem Sollen*], to a verdict concerning validity or invalidity according to claimed norms that have absolute validity. As long as these norms were not disputed, were not threatened and ridiculed by any skepticism, there was only *one* vital question: how best to satisfy the norms in practice. What are

¹ Originally published in the journal *Logos* (Husserl, 1911) and reprinted in *Husserliana* XXV (Husserl, 1987: 3–62). I use Brainard’s translation (Husserl, 2002).

² On naturalism, see Staiti (2012); on historicism, see Tillman (1976).

³ This idea anticipates Husserl’s extensive investigations of the modern “crisis” as presented in the *Kaizo* (1989a: 3–124) and in the *Krisis* itself (1954).

we to do now, however, when any and every norm is contested or empirically falsified and robbed of its ideal validity? (1987: 56; 2002: 290)

One can summarize Husserl's argument here – shared by the worldview philosopher – as follows:

1. “All life is position-taking”: position-takings are needed for conducting our lives as human beings.⁴
2. Rational normativity in the form of a rational “ought” (*Sollen*) is a prerequisite for performing position-takings.
3. The skepticism of naturalism and historicism has undermined such rational normativity, by treating it as a mere “fact”.
4. The contemporary individual is thus at a loss regarding how to take a position and experiences vital distress.

This argument reveals a fundamental feature of human life according to Husserl, namely the capacity to perform “position-takings,” themselves understood in terms of a rational “ought”. At the same time, further clarification is needed here, as Husserl's characterization of *Stellungnahme* – which is not explicitly defined in “Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft” – is particularly elusive and multifaceted (Drummond, 2007: 165–166; Jacobs, 2016b: 324). As he admits in an unpublished 1928 manuscript: “it is not so easy [to] fix the concept of *position-taking*” (Ms. A VI 31, 42a; emphasis his).

More precisely, this concept appears to be fraught with ambivalence. On the one hand, the term ‘position’ focuses on the outcome of *Stellungnahme*, in the form of a positional act, e.g., a belief. In this regard, position-taking denotes the various forms of “positional experiences” (*positionale Erlebnisse*) in all spheres – doxic, affective, volitive (Husserl, 1980: 462). Importantly, as opposed to neutral intentions, such positional experiences are subject to the rational norm or “ought” at work in their specific domain (e.g., perceptual, logical, axiological, practical norms).

On the other hand, the ‘taking’ part refers to the process of *Stellungnahme*, as an active performance of the ego, in contrast to passively acquiring a conviction, through unreflective perception or tradition. Husserl often uses the concept of ‘freedom’ to convey this idea: “I freely perform ‘ego-acts,’ ‘position-takings’ which believe, value, will, freely performed from the ego” (*Studien* III: 138).⁵

However, these two dimensions of *Stellungnahme* are not straightforwardly reconciled: how can the spontaneity involved in the ‘taking’ be consistent with submission to the ‘ought’ inherent in the ‘position’? Although the literature has investigated these standpoints separately, it has not yet fully appreciated their deep tension.⁶ In this con-

⁴As Husserl also states: all individuals are “faced with the exigencies of life, with the practical necessity of taking a position” (1987: 54; 2002: 289).

⁵Throughout the paper, the three volumes of Husserl's *Studien zur Struktur des Bewußtseins* (2020a, 2020b, 2020c) are abbreviated as *Studien* I, II, and III, respectively.

⁶On *Stellungnahme* in relation to rationality, see Jacobs (2016a; 2021); Delamare (2025a); on *Stellungnahme* in relation to an active person, see Arango (2014); De Monticelli (2011); Hahn (2012); Hart (1992); Jacobs (2016b); Loidolt (2021); Magri (2022).

text, the aim of the paper is to unveil the fundamental role played by ‘position-taking’ in Husserl’s conception of human life by demonstrating how this concept articulates personal agency and the rational normativity governing human existence.

The article is divided into five sections. I start with a reconstruction of the history of *Stellungnahme* within early phenomenology, focusing on the two main figures of Adolf Reinach and Dietrich von Hildebrand. Reinach interprets *Stellungnahme* as a positive or negative stance taken *vis-à-vis* an object or state of affairs (e.g., belief/disbelief, striving for/striving against). Von Hildebrand, for his part, defines position-taking as a personal response, involving egoic spontaneity, to a presented fact or value. Husserl takes up both of these conceptions. In the third section, I analyze his first,⁷ Reinach-inspired approach to *Stellungnahme* as positional experience, such as a belief in the existence of the conscious object. This proposal informs the relationship between *Stellungnahme* and reason to the extent that, unlike mere representations, beliefs are subject to the distinction between validity and invalidity; however, it fails to elucidate the activity inherent in the concept of *Stellungnahme*. The fourth section thus develops Husserl’s improved definition – based on von Hildebrand – according to which a position-taking is a free decision of an agent who thereby constitutes her unique personality. This emphasis on freedom, however, carries the risk of marginalizing the rational normativity also inherent in the notion of *Stellungnahme*. A final approach is therefore advanced in the fifth section, whereby position-taking is identified as a critical process assessing the validity of a thesis. This interpretation combines the insights of the first two – it results in the active and personal endorsement of a belief – yet goes further by illuminating the specificity of human subjectivity as essentially capable of accomplishing a rational examination of its theoretical, axiological, and practical decisions.

Adolf Reinach: *Stellungnahme* as positive or negative stance

To understand Husserl’s use of the term *Stellungnahme*, it is first necessary to shed light on its historical origin. Within early phenomenology, this term is first employed in a published writing by Adolf Reinach in “Zur Theorie des negativen Urteils” (1911, translated in Reinach (1982)):

From those acts, such as acts of representation and meaning, in which we *lay hold of* something objectual (either by having it as our object or by being directed towards it), we have to distinguish experiences which, as in the case of conviction or belief, involve our *taking a position* with respect to something. Other examples of the latter with which we are acquainted include striving after something, expecting something, and so on. There is an opposition [*Gegensatz*]

⁷By designating Husserl’s interpretations of *Stellungnahme* as “first,” “second,” and “third,” I do not imply a strict linear order. Manuscripts often employ multiple senses of the term within a few lines; and later texts may even revert to a sense earlier writings had apparently abandoned, making it virtually impossible to assign each interpretation to a precise period. The proposed sequence is therefore logical (or phenomenological) rather than rigorously chronological: each definition addresses a limitation of its predecessor, progressively yielding a more robust account.

running through this second class of acts – but not through the first – between positivity and negativity. (1982; 332; trans. modified)

Reinach is here manifestly inspired by Brentano's⁸ classification of mental experiences into representation (*Vorstellung*), judgment (*Urteil*), and emotion (*Gemütsbewegung*) – which includes feelings and volitions (Brentano, 1971: 33). According to Brentano, “the last two but not the first involve an opposition of intentional relation” (2009: 10): namely, judgments exhibit an opposition between acceptance and rejection, and emotions between love and hate. Reinach takes up this idea of an inherent polarity in belief and striving (Müller, 2020: 115; Mulligan, 2013: 102). In the doxic case, taking a position thus essentially amounts to agreeing or disagreeing with the subsistence of a certain state of affairs. For instance, if I approach a supposedly red flower and see that it is yellow, my disbelief that it is red is a (negative) position-taking (Reinach, 1982: 332).

This example illustrates that, in order to take a stance, one typically investigates the state of affairs in question before reaching a judicative decision. Reinach further develops this line of thinking in his essay on “reflection” (*Überlegung*) (1912–1913, translated in Reinach (2017: 56–163)). In this text, he emphasizes that intellectual reflection is a teleological process, “characterized by the reaching of a definite endpoint (the taking of a position) from a definite starting-point (the questioning stance), which is at the same time the leading and unifying viewpoint” (2017: 81).

Reflection thus begins with the subject experiencing a “bewilderment” (*Fassungslosigkeit*) regarding a state of affairs *S* (2017: 64–65). It then unfolds through a “questioning stance” (*Fragehaltung*) towards *S* (2017: 62–63). Ultimately, if successful, reflection establishes a “position-taking” – typically, a “conviction relying on insightful knowledge” (2017: 61)⁹ – about *S* (DuBois, 2002: 333). The same scheme applies to the volitional sphere: there, reflection also aims at establishing a position-taking, namely a “resolution” (*Vorsatz*) (2017: 94–95).

In short, for Reinach, a position-taking denotes a stance adopted by the subject towards an object or state of affairs, which can be either positive (belief) or negative (disbelief), as opposed to a state of uncertainty – whereby “I don't know” (2017: 61). This stance may be immediately accepted – e.g., I see a dog in the street and straightforwardly embrace the corresponding judgment, ‘there is a dog in the street’ – or it may be the result of a reflective procedure including a phase of questioning and culminating in an “insight” (*Einsicht*) (2017: 67) into the state of affairs under consideration.

⁸Brentano, however, does not use the term *Stellungnahme* in his *Psychologie*, nor in *Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis*. In this regard, Hugo Münsterberg's *Grundzüge der Psychologie* (1900) likely served as an intermediary influence on Reinach (Mulligan, 2013: 130). Criticizing Brentano's tripartition, Münsterberg writes: “the second subject-function, judgment, cannot in principle be separated from volition or emotion. Judgment is also an act of position-taking [*ein Akt der Stellungnahme*], a yes or no, an acceptance or rejection, and because of this necessary inner opposition [*Gegensetzung*], it is really an act of the subject, and only the nature of the object determines whether the act of the subject is affirmation or love, negation or hatred” (1900: 20).

⁹Other types of position-taking include negative conviction as well as “suspicion, critical indifference and doubt” (2017: 61), the latter differing significantly from the “uncertainty” of the prior questioning attitude (2017: 65).

Importantly, in Reinach's picture, while the process of intellectual reflection involves an "inner doing [*Tun*] of the subject" (2017: 68–69), the resulting intellectual¹⁰ position-taking such as conviction or suspicion is "no doing, but rather a state which *develops* in the subject but is not *performed* [*vollzogen*] by him" (2017: 106–107; see also 1982: 320). Hence, in using the terminology of *Stellungnahme*, Reinach focuses on the 'position' reached by the subject through insight rather than on the 'taking' from which this position issues.

Dietrich von Hildebrand: *Stellungnahme* as Spontaneous Response

This stands in vivid contrast to Dietrich von Hildebrand's approach.¹¹ In his 1916 *Die Idee der sittlichen Handlung*,¹² he offers an account of *Stellungnahme* highlighting the *active* dimension of this experience. To do so, he construes a cardinal distinction between *Stellungnahme* and *Kenntnisnahme*, or "knowledge-taking":

If we consider, for example, joy about something, enthusiasm, longing [*Sehnsucht*], love for something, all these experiences [...] represent *position-takings* of my ego [*Stellungnahmen meines Ich*] vis-à-vis the objective world. The moment of joy or the moment of enthusiasm are tenors [*Gehalte*] that are embedded on the *subjective* side in the experience and *apply* to a content [*Inhalt*] that is facing me.

As a characteristic counterpart to these types of experiences, we must mention, for example, the perception of a color, an experience in which our ego is, as it were, empty and in which only a *content* on the objective side can be found. The whole experience here is a pure having [*Haben*] of something that stands *opposite* us. We want to oppose this type, as knowledge-taking [*Kenntnisnahme*], to the position-taking. (1916: 134)

Kenntnisnahme and *Stellungnahme* thus designate two specific forms of intentionality (1916: 135), that is, two ways of relating to an object, state of affairs, or value. On the one hand, in knowledge-taking, the entire experience is exhausted by the "content" (*Inhalt*) that is "given" or "stands before me" on the objective side (1916: 136). In this context, the subjective side is completely "empty" (1916: 136): knowledge-taking is fully passive.

On the other hand, position-taking involves a subjective component or egoic "tenor" (*Gehalt*). The example of a judgment on a state of affairs is paradigmatic

¹⁰ In contrast, the "practical position-taking" of "resolve-reaching" is "an inner *performing*, an inner doing of the subject, an *act* in the precise sense of the word" (2017: 107).

¹¹ Von Hildebrand met Reinach in 1907 in Munich (A. von Hildebrand, 2000: 67). As his wife Alice von Hildebrand later writes, "it was to this man that he owed his philosophical formation" (2012: 11). In particular, von Hildebrand attended Reinach's courses in Göttingen between 1909 and 1911 (Schuhmann, 1992; A. von Hildebrand, 2012: 12). Influence was reciprocal, as Reinach acknowledged a debt to his student regarding the ethical distinction between value and interest (Reinach, 2017: 118–119; Smith, 2013: 123).

¹² This is the published version of his doctoral dissertation, defended in 1912 under Husserl's supervision.

here: while this state of affairs is initially passively given, the conviction that ‘this state of affairs is the case’ constitutes a stance, a subjective “behavior” (*Verhalten*) (1916: 136), which contrasts sharply with a simple “having” (1916: 137). Crucially, von Hildebrand interprets this behavior as involving a form of *spontaneity*¹³ on the part of the ego:

The position-taking belongs to the spontaneous [*spontanen*] experiences, because every position-taking is a position-taking *about* an object and therefore possesses an *intention* towards something objective. The tenor, which is embedded on the subjective side, possesses an *ideal* direction towards the object. The knowledge-taking is passive in every sense of the word. (1916: 138)

In short, while knowledge-taking is characterized as the mere reception of an objective content, position-taking – such as conviction or joy – is essentially defined by its subjective tenor or “quality” (*Qualität*), which constitutes the “actual center of gravity of the experience” (1916: 138).

This insight can also be formulated through the terminology of the “response” (Mulligan, 2017: 230): a *Stellungnahme* “necessarily presupposes a consciousness ‘of’ which provides us with knowledge of the content to which it responds [*antwortet*]” (D. von Hildebrand, 1916: 140).¹⁴ Typically, a conviction is not to be understood as a knowledge (*Erkennen*) of a state of affairs, but rather as a subjective response to such knowledge: “as a position-taking, it can never itself *grasp* a content in any form, but rather responds to a known state of affairs” (1916: 146). The same holds in the axiological-affective sphere:

I see a child being mistreated in the street and a terrible indignation arises in me. I am indignant at the meanness and crudeness of this behavior. The indignation is obviously not a having of the meanness and crudeness, but a response to these qualities of which I already have knowledge [*Kenntnis*] – a position-taking on the object before me. (1916: 137)

By employing the terminology of responsiveness – or “responsive behavior” (*antwortende Verhalten*) (1916: 138) –, von Hildebrand emphasizes that a *Stellungnahme*

¹³ On von Hildebrand’s concept of spontaneity, not to be conflated with Pfänder’s “centrifugal consciousness” (1963: 128–129), see Delamare (2024: 168). Unlike von Hildebrand, Reinach interprets the *Stellungnahme* of conviction as lacking spontaneity: “conviction or belief on the one hand, that which develops in us in the presence of a particular object, always involves some aspects which we may designate if not as feelings, at least as conditions of consciousness [*Bewußtseinslage*], at all events some *state* [*Zuständlichkeit*] of consciousness; but [...] *assertion* on the other hand, which does not ‘develop’ within us but is rather ‘made’ by us, is totally different from any feeling, from every state, and is much rather to be characterized as a *spontaneous* act” (1982: 320, trans. modified; see also 1982: 347). More generally, on spontaneity in Reinach and its relation to freedom, see Smith (2013: 178 ff.).

¹⁴ Although von Hildebrand does not use the term, one may equivalently state that position-taking is ‘motivated’ by knowledge-taking (Müller, 2020: 116). On this terminology, see Stein (1917: 95), Pfänder (1963), and Husserl (1976: 101).

is not mechanically caused by a *Kenntnisnahme*, but rather constitutes a meaningful (*sinnvoll*), personal¹⁵ reaction to the presented object:

It is also very important that every position-taking is *my* response to a given situation. The tenor is experienced as something that lies within me and at the same time as something that relates meaningfully to the objects. It applies to an object as a *meaningful* response to its constitution [*Beschaffenheit*]. (1916: 138)

Husserl's First Definition: *Stellungnahme* as Positional Consciousness

Reinach and von Hildebrand thus present two related yet distinct accounts of *Stellungnahme*. My goal is now to establish that Husserl is influenced by both of these approaches,¹⁶ successfully integrating them into a coherent framework. I will first focus, in the present section, on the 'Reinachian' dimension of his conception, that is, the positional character of 'position-taking'. In the next section, I will investigate the 'Hildebrandian' aspect of his standpoint, namely the activity or agency involved in position-taking. Ultimately, in the fifth section, I will demonstrate how Husserl's third, most profound definition of *Stellungnahme* as 'critical procedure' synthesizes both Reinach's and von Hildebrand's insights into a novel and fruitful perspective, which simultaneously sheds new light on the *eidos* of human life and human person.

In Husserl's framework, position-takings are to be understood primarily within his general theory of intentional experience, as set forth in the *Logical Investigations* and expanded in *Ideas* I. As their name indicates, *Stellungnahmen* are those experiences in which a certain "Stellung," a "position," is taken *vis-à-vis* an intentional object. To take a position, in this sense, is to adopt a certain attitude¹⁷ towards the object in question, to envisage it in a specific manner. These attitudes are reflectively referred to in phrases such as "'I believe,' 'I am convinced,' 'I judge,' 'I predicate,' 'I assume,' 'I conclude,' 'I rejoice about,' 'I feel sadness,' 'I desire that'" (*Studien* I: 352). In the terminology of the *Logical Investigations*, *Stellungnahme* thus relates to the "quality" (*Qualität*) of experiences, as opposed to their "matter" (*Materie*) or intentional content (Husserl, 1901: 386–387; Melle, 2012: 53–54). In this respect, a position-taking is a "qualification" (*Qualifizierung*) of a certain "objective sense" (*gegenständlichen Sinn*) (*Studien* I: 388). As Husserl puts it in a 1909 manuscript:

¹⁵ Von Hildebrand thus asserts that "the position-taking represents the respective response of my person to the objects" (1916: 139). As Salice puts it, position-takings "say something about the subject who generates them" (2015: 272).

¹⁶ Historically, Husserl started using the term *Stellungnahme* in his manuscripts in 1909 (*Studien* II: 184), thus prior to the aforementioned publications of Reinach and von Hildebrand. However, it is plausible that the influence in this context flowed from students to teacher (Delamare, 2024: 170–171). 1909 was indeed the year von Hildebrand arrived in Göttingen (Schuhmann, 1992; A. von Hildebrand, 2000: 78). In addition, in these manuscripts, Husserl frequently employs von Hildebrand's paradigmatic examples of emotional position-taking, especially enthusiasm and indignation (*Studien* II: 135). It is thus reasonable to assume that Husserl inherited the terminology of *Stellungnahme* from his informal exchanges with the members of the Munich Circle.

¹⁷ Mulligan proposes this term as a translation of *Stellungnahme* (2017: 229).

All acts¹⁸ – that is their fundamental character – are (intellectual or emotional) position-takings about [*Stellungnahmen zu*] (qualities). But all acts are also consciousness of a content, about which they take a position. (*Studien* II: 335; see also *Studien* I: 331, 334, 399, 427)

Importantly, however, *Stellungnahme* is not merely a synonym for *Qualität*, for it designates only a subset of qualities. According to Husserl, being certain about the appearing object is the most direct form of “position” taken about it, so “certainties” (*Gewissheiten*) are position-takings “par excellence” (*schlechthin*) (*Studien* I: 336). Likewise, in feelings, such as hatred (Husserl, 1976: 263), I take an affective position on the object, by virtue of which I appraise it as positively or negatively valenced. By contrast, a “mere representation” (*bloße Vorstellung*), in Brentanian terms (1971: 43),¹⁹ as a mere “thinking” (*Denken*) of a thing or state of affairs, does not involve a similar stance on the appearing object (*Studien* I: 71). For example, neutrally imagining a magical landscape with elves and dragons is not a *Stellungnahme*. The same applies to the mere comprehension of a proposition, such as ‘6711 is a prime number,’ which I understand without deciding for or against its truth (*Studien* I: 407).²⁰ As a 1912 manuscript asserts:

Wherever an object is “constituted,” I can also <behave>in a purely considering manner [*rein betrachtend*], [I can] regard the object (the mere content) without accomplishing any kind of position-taking about it. (Husserl, 1980: 446–447; see also 1980: 362–363; *Studien* I: 407–409)

From this perspective, only thetic, that is, *positional*, qualities are position-takings. In a 1916 text, Husserl thus identifies the concepts of thesis (*Thesis*), position (*Setzung*), and position-taking (*Stellungnahme*) “in a broad sense” (1976: 613).

Crucially, this first Husserlian approach to *Stellungnahme* illuminates the relationship between position-taking and rational normativity²¹ as depicted in “Philosophy as Rigorous Science,” wherein Husserl asserts that “all position-taking is subject to an ought” (1987: 56; 2002: 290). As *Formal and Transcendental Logic* formulates:

All acts in a preeminent sense of the word, namely all intentional lived experiences that accomplish “positions” (positings, theses, position-takings) [*Setzungen*] (*Positionen, Thesen, Stellungnahmen*), are subject to a critique of “reason”. (1929: 120; 1969: 136; trans. modified)

¹⁸ Here “act” simply means ‘intentional experience’ and contains no reference to activity, as the *Logical Investigations* make clear (Husserl, 1901: 424). It is only after Husserl’s about-face regarding the “pure ego,” around 1911 (*Studien* I: 113; Lavigne, 2005: 697), that an enriched concept of ‘act’ emerges, as I will discuss in the next section.

¹⁹ Husserl explicitly asserts that Brentano’s *Vorstellung*, as a “mere consideration” of an object (*Studien* I: 513–514), corresponds to a “non-position-taking” (*Studien* I: 484).

²⁰ This aligns with Reinach, who also distinguishes position-takings from mere representations and meanings (1982: 332), as previously mentioned.

²¹ Although the question of reason is not central to Reinach’s approach, it is implicit in that reflection aims at an “insight” into the relevant state of affairs (2017: 67), as noted above.

Indeed, every thesis posits its content according to its mode: as being (in a belief), as non-being (in a negation), as valuable (in a liking), and so on. Hence, inherent to every thesis is a certain ‘claim’ to truth, a claim to be ‘valid’ or ‘correct’ (Tugendhat, 1970: 43). For instance, I cannot hold a belief without claiming that the corresponding object really is or is so. In this respect, all positional experiences “are, by their very essence, subject to a ‘jurisdiction of reason’”; on the contrary, the question of reason “makes no sense” for neutral consciousness (Husserl, 1976: 249; 2014: 214; trans. modified).

This “jurisdiction” depends on the particular nature of the experience at play. Typically, a perception, as a positing of a material thing, is subject to a specific perceptual normativity (Doyon, 2018: 183): namely, the unfolding of relevant bodily gestures and movements (the so-called “kinaestheses”) leads, on the correlative side of the perceived objectivity, either to the continuous fulfillment of the initial apprehension and to a “*constantly mounting rational force*” (Husserl, 1976: 320; 2014: 275; trans. modified), or to the appearance of a discordance and thus to a “modalization” of the perceptual intention (Husserl, 1973a: 99). For example, if I perceive something as a velvet carpet, it must be soft to the touch; if it is not, then the initially posited sense is crossed out – it is not velvet, but wool.²²

As a result, all *Stellungnahme* is subject to the “ought” of reason in that it is ‘evaluable’. Here “evaluation” (*Wertung*) (*Studien* I: 352) does not refer to an experience pertaining to the affective domain but rather to the general possibility of examining a positional consciousness according to its specific rational norm:

All intentional position-takings are to be designated as “valuings”; all are subject to ideas of the ought [*stehen unter Ideen des Sollens*]; it is precisely to them all, insofar as they suppose [*vermeinen*], that the question of correctness or incorrectness, thus, if you will, the *question of value*, is posed. (Husserl, 1988: 62)

This is why, around 1912, Husserl introduces the concept of *Axiöse* – based on the Greek term “ἀξίος” (“worthy”) – as a synonym for *Stellungnahme* thus understood. As *thetic*, these experiences are by essence subject to rational assessment: “with regard to the position-taking or its correlate, the *dictum*, the normative judgment, is pronounced” (*Studien* I: 352).

Husserl’s Second Definition: *Stellungnahme* as Freedom

This first definition of *Stellungnahme* as positional consciousness, inspired by Reinach, thus clarifies the status of the relationship between position-taking and the normativity of reason. However, it fails to address the essential connection between position-taking and “life” as affirmed in “Philosophy as Rigorous Science” (Husserl, 1987: 56; 2002: 290). To understand why, it must first be noted that, in the latter text, the term *Leben* does not refer to biological life in general but specifically to *human*

²²Analogous considerations apply to axiological intentions (Delamare, 2023: 279; 2022: 60).

life. From this perspective, Husserl regularly speaks of the “meaning of life” (*Lebenssinn*) (2013: 390), of a “life task” (*Lebensaufgabe*) inherent in a vocation (2012: 136), or of the mood of depression as resulting from the failure of my “entire life” (*ganzes Leben*) (*Studien* III: 187).

The human *Leben*, in this context, displays two central features. On the one hand, it is a finite totality, a *unitary* existence which extends from birth to death. As Husserl puts it in a 1931 manuscript, “human life” (*menschliche Leben*) possesses “a remarkable relatedness [*Bezogenheit*] to a distant future and, ultimately, for the whole human being [*vollen Menschen*], to the entire life” (*Studien* III: 188).

On the other hand, such a life is endured and sustained by an individual subject, more precisely, by a unique human *person*²³ who ‘lives’ this *Leben*. Decisively, this person is capable of actively shaping her life, as opposed to simply being affected by external stimuli and impulses (Ferrarello, 2016: 172). My life does not merely amount to the sequence of lived experiences I go through; it is also the product of my decisions.

This insight helps uncover the crucial missing element in the definition of *Stellungnahme* as thesis, namely its connection to an active *ego*. For there to be position-taking, a mere position is insufficient: the latter must furthermore be *taken*, that is, performed as an authentic act by the subject as an agent. As Husserl says in a 1911 text, “when we use the expression ‘position-taking,’ it expresses a phenomenological moment of activity” (*Studien* I: 70). Background perception, for example, despite its thematic character, is not position-taking in this stronger sense (*Studien* I: 514).

Husserl specifies the nature of such activity in a 1912 note on von Hildebrand’s doctoral manuscript. He observes that when I read the newspaper and simply “adopt the statements,” then I have an attentive experience, “but not an active ‘I act’ [*Ich handle*], ‘I take a position about,’ ‘I behave and do freely’” (Ms. F I 24, 65, cited by Schuhmann (1992)). Conversely, drawing a conclusion from a set of premises involves egoic spontaneity and is therefore a position-taking in a higher sense (Husserl, 1952: 221; 1989b: 232).

This offers a second, enhanced definition: position-takings are those intentional experiences in which the ego actively assumes a stance towards the appearing object and actively decides for or against its existence – or its value, in affective-volitional experience. On many occasions, Husserl appeals to the concept of “freedom” to emphasize the agency involved (*Studien* III: 138); in particular, in *Ideas* II, he distinguishes receptivity as the lowest level of activity from the “genuine freedom of active position-taking” (*eigentliche Freiheit der tätigen Stellungnahme*) (1952: 213; 1989b: 225).²⁴

This new interpretation significantly illuminates the relation between life and position-taking, for all human life includes such agency. Of course, I am not always active in this sense, for example when my ego “thinks, values, acts, not as itself and on its own,” but “follows the suggestion of the other” (Husserl, 1962: 213; 1977: 163); or when I passively obey the urges arising from external objects, such as when

²³ On Husserl’s concept of person, see Loidolt (2022); Melle (2007); Peucker (2008).

²⁴ Moran and Cohen thus aptly state that “Husserl speaks of position taking as an active, free decision of the ego” (2012: 258).

I mechanically reach for an enticing cookie in front of me. But a life, as *my* personal life, cannot be entirely devoid of agency: whenever I make a decision based on deliberation (whether in the practical or theoretical realm), I am behaving actively and performing a *Stellungnahme* in this higher sense.

Importantly, these *Stellungnahmen* do not vanish altogether once they have been performed; rather, they persist in the form of a *habitus* that can later be reactivated. This emphasizes the ‘genetic’ dimension of position-takings. As Husserl explains in the *Cartesian Meditations*, genetic phenomenology aims at systematically examining the eidetic laws governing the emergence, development and sedimentation of experiences, thereby foregrounding the historical constitution of the ego as a unitary person (1950: §§34, 37). Within this framework, position-takings occupy a central place: they exemplify the “general laws of the consciousness of habituality” (Husserl, 2001: 631), that is, the “precipitation” (*Niederschlag*) of all active experiences into secondary passivity (Husserl, 1952: 333; 1989b: 344–345), as well as the role of this precipitation in the formation of the self. As Husserl already observes in “Philosophy as Rigorous Science”:

Experience as personal habitus is the precipitation of acts of natural, experiential position-taking that have occurred in the course of life. This habitus is essentially conditioned by the way in which the personality, as this particular individuality, motivates itself by acts of its own experience and no less by the way in which it allows foreign and transmitted experiences to affect it through its own assent or rejection. (1987: 48; 2002: 284; trans. modified)²⁵

Hence, in a *Stellungnahme*, I take an active stance (I “motivate myself”) with respect to a presented or communicated object (be it a material thing, a value, or a goal) and I adopt a certain perceptual, axiological, or practical conviction about it, which then enriches my personality in the form of a permanent “habitus”. For example, once I have decided to espouse a certain political side, this decision endures as a lasting political conviction. It is therefore an essential “law of the identity of the same ego [...] that I can retain an inner active position-taking and acknowledge and assume it as mine in repeated acts” (Husserl, 1952: 113; 1989b: 120; trans. modified). In other words, the decisions made by the active ego in her position-takings are incorporated into enduring personal dispositions, thus generating a permanent and stable personal “style” throughout her life (Husserl, 1952: 329; 1989b: 341).²⁶ It is in this way that the ego, initially an empty pole of experiences (Husserl, 1976: 179–180; Zahavi,

²⁵ In another 1911 text, Husserl likewise appeals to genetic concepts such as “secondary sensibility” (*sekundäre Sinnlichkeit*) and “precipitation” (*Studien* II: 74), and even highlights the distinction between a “phenomenological-genetic” (*phänomenologisch-genetisch*) and a “phenomenological-static” (*phänomenologisch-statisch*) standpoint (*Studien* II: 83). This shows that the thematization of genetic phenomenology in the late 1910s and early 1920s does not amount to a sharp ‘turn,’ as is often portrayed (Bernet et al., 1993: 195–196), but rather represents the outcome of a gradual elaboration of analyses already initiated during the Göttingen period, as rightly noted by Brudzińska (2021).

²⁶ See also a 1918/1921 manuscript: “I can only be a person insofar as I [...] have persisting ‘convictions,’ valuations, and volitions; convictions that I have acquired through my own activities, through my own active position-taking” (1973b: 196; cited and translated by Zahavi (2021: 275)).

2021), “self-constitutes” herself as a unique individuality (De Monticelli, 2011: 53). As Husserl points out in a 1920 letter to Gerda Walther:

A person is constituted from the ego-pole of the acts as a personal subject of the acts [...]. Every act of the ego for the ego and for the active stream of consciousness has not the mere significance of a passing event, but in a peculiar sense a lasting significance. (1994; 260)²⁷

Husserl’s Third Definition: *Stellungnahme* as Critical Procedure

This ‘Hildebrandian’ interpretation of *Stellungnahme*, focusing on the personal agency involved in position-taking, nevertheless poses a risk once again. Indeed, deciding “freely” does not ensure that the resulting stance will conform to the norms of validity. In other terms, a free act may well be “blind” (Husserl, 1962: 213; 1977: 163), so that this second definition threatens to undermine the rationality of position-taking affirmed by Husserl in his 1911 *Logos* article. To return to a political illustration:

I take sides [*Ich ergreife Partei*] with a party slogan, “I drown out the voice of reason,” I do not listen to the dark warnings of logical conscience [*Gewissens*]. So, belief in general, driven by heterological motives instead of logical ones, of genuine reasons for belief, being blindly believing instead of believing while seeing [...] – this is not passivity, but a spontaneity, an act of “freedom”. (*Studien* III: 70)

Such irrational freedom is paradigmatically exemplified by Max Stirner. In his 1844 book *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, he famously argues that I should liberate myself from the constraints of religious and political institutions and become the “unique”: “it’s only as this unique I that I take everything as mine to own, as I am active and develop myself only as this” (2017: 377). This radical defense of purely egoic (and indeed egoistic) activity even rejects the rules of reason, also deemed a binding “authority” (2017: 356).

Very interestingly, in his 1920 lectures on ethics, Husserl directly opposes Stirner’s “extreme ethical subjectivism,” maintaining that it is refuted by the rational norms in both the theoretical and affective-practical realms (2004: 87). Yet this raises a pressing question. As Edith Stein rightly notes, a position-taking is “justified” when it is rationally “demanded” by the object – the flower I perceive, for instance, “demands” my belief in its existence (1922: 42). But this seems incompatible with the egoic spontaneity inherent in *Stellungnahme*: if a position-taking is defined as a *free* personal decision, how can it be subject to, and thus *dependent* on, an “ought” – even a rational one?

²⁷ In this perspective, Donohoe has aptly shown that Husserl’s late ethics, as a personalist ethics, fundamentally relies on ‘genetic’ insights (2003: 163; 2016: 128). On this point, see also Delamare (2025b).

To address this paradox, Husserl develops a third approach to *Stellungnahme* by narrowing the previous characterization of position-taking as agency. Free decisions, as mentioned, can be blind or “evident”; but only the latter, as Husserl asserts in a 1922 manuscript, define *Stellungnahmen* “in the most significant sense,” namely, as “free position-takings of reason, as decisions on the basis of a reflection [*Überlegung*]²⁸ that aims at truth” (*Studien* III: 490).

Position-taking, thus understood, can be described as a rational procedure, or *critique*, seeking to secure the validity of a certain position:

We can try to single out the *critical acts*, the decisions that call into question, that cast doubt, and then *answer; resolve the doubt*, [the decisions] that arise from a crisis [*Krisis*], and that would not be all acts in general. A judgment, in which I express “without critique” [*kritiklos*] purely and simply what I see, is not an act that belongs here. In other words: *judgment in the specific* (and ordinary) sense of the word is a *decision*, is a *critical act*, a position-taking. (*Studien* I: 372)

This procedure can be divided into three steps (Delamare, 2025a). The subject begins by questioning one of her positions *P*, be it a theoretical belief, a valuing, or a volition. This may be driven by the emergence of passive discordance or by the desire to strengthen *P*’s robustness. Such doubt brings *P* into a “crisis”: the immediate, naive opinion gives way to a “tension” (*Spannung*) (*Studien* I: 370) experienced as unpleasant (Husserl, 1973a: 308). To relieve this tension, the subject then strives to either confirm or refute *P* by returning “to the thing itself, to its self-giving in ordinary objective self-evidence” (Husserl, 1973a: 312; trans. modified). For example, if I doubt whether an object is a man or a mannequin, I approach it and see whether it moves or stands still, thus obtaining a perceptual fulfillment; analogously, if I doubt whether an apple is good or bad, I taste it to determine whether I feel delight or disgust, thus achieving an emotional fulfillment (*Studien* III: 191; Delamare, 2023: 277–278). In case such fulfillment is attained, the subject can finally “acknowledge” or “approve” *P* as confirmed and justified (*Studien* II: 273, 315; Ms. A VI 31, 44a).

This new interpretation of *Stellungnahme* as a rational procedure is more demanding than previous definitions, since it excludes all acts that have not been verified by critique, that are “*kritiklos*”. At the same time, this third approach decisively combines aspects of the first two: it leads to the formation of a positional belief (in accordance with the first definition) and is characterized by an active ego at each stage (in accordance with the second one) – the ego actively questions her judgment, actively seeks evidence for it, and finally actively adopts it, thus making it a lasting personal “acquisition” (Husserl, 1973a: 290).

It is this final definition of position-taking as a critical procedure that best explains why “all position-taking is subject to an ought” and why “all life is position-taking”. On the one hand, inherent in position-taking as critique is a “striving for reason” oriented towards “insightfulness” and “rightfulness” (Husserl, 1989a: 26). As Husserl

²⁸This third approach to *Stellungnahme* thus closely resembles Reinach’s concept of “reflection” as a teleological process towards “insight” (2017: 67), as discussed above.

states in a 1920/21 manuscript, position-takings, in this “distinguished sense,” are “assessing [*auswertenden*] processes” (*Studien* I: 434). As noted in the third section, this assessment is not an affective evaluation, but a general operation of “normation” (*Normierung*) (Husserl, 2004: 360) which determines whether a thesis abides by the norm of truth:

All verifications [*Bewährungen*] are also position-takings in the narrower sense, all decisions about real being as opposed to the supposedly [*vermeintlich*] true. The expression of valuing [*Werten*] in the sense of assessing [*Auswerten*] is also used for this. (*Studien* I: 516)

On the other hand, such critique is essential for all life as genuine human life. In the third *Kaizo* article, Husserl writes:

We take as our point of departure the ability, belonging to the essence of the human being, of self-consciousness, in the significant sense of personal self-consideration (*inspectio sui*), and the ability, grounded in this, to [perform] position-takings or personal acts reflectively referring back to oneself and one’s life. (1989a: 23)

The capacity to critically engage with one’s beliefs is therefore an eidetic feature of human beings. All personal life is thus position-taking in the sense that, unlike animal life (1989a: 24), it is constantly open to active assessment by the subject who ‘lives’ it. There is therefore no contradiction between rationality and agency in the idea of *Stellungnahme*: we, as autonomous subjects, can freely choose to self-regulate our existence according to the standards of reason, in our theoretical judgments, affective valuing, and practical decisions.

Conclusion

One point remains to be made as the conclusion of this paper. The essential interrelation between human life, rationality, and position-taking as critique is not only descriptive – characterizing an eidetic trait of human nature – but above all prescriptive, demanding that we endeavor to rationalize all aspects of our existence. This is the core idea of what Husserl calls “renewal”:

How far the *practical* possibility extends to “renewing” one’s entire life in this way and thus shaping oneself into a “new,” *truly rational human being*, this may be questionable at first. But from the outset, and for the one who universally evaluates herself and her life, it is clear that there is at least a general possibility [...] of being able to endow one’s active life with truthfulness, rationality, rightness (or with what is evidently true, authentic, right) *to the best of one’s ability*. Such a *best possible* life at all times is characterized, for its subject herself, as what is absolutely required [*Gesollte*]. (1989a: 33)

Importantly, renewal is not only a personal but also a social and historical task. As Husserl already suggests in 1911, and as he elaborates on in the *Kaizo* and the *Krisis*, a universal, rational self-shaping of individuals and communities is the sole escape from the spiritual misery and vital distress of our age. Only through *critique* can the *crisis* of our time be overcome. To this end, philosophers, “the representatives, by vocation, of the spirit of reason” (1989a: 54),²⁹ play a cardinal role: it is up to them to convert mankind (*Menschheit*) to true – that is, free and rational – humanity (*Humanität*) (1989a: 51).

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²⁹Philosophers paradigmatically embody the ideal of rationality through what Husserl terms “absolute self-responsibility” (*Selbstverantwortung*): “the individual personal subject, as a subject of personal life, truly wills to decide freely in all of its life,” such that it can at all times “take responsibility for the rightfulness of its decision before itself” (2019: 446). This underscores, in line with Tugendhat’s insights (1970: 6), the crucial connection between position-taking and truth, understood normatively as a guiding orientation for human existence, exemplified by the philosophical ideal. However, I depart from Tugendhat’s claim that, in Husserl, “the motivation for philosophy ultimately remains unexplained” (1970: 192) and that this motivation is therefore susceptible to Nietzsche’s well-known critique of truth (Nietzsche, 2001: 6). In numerous texts, Husserl indeed justifies the value of truth by returning to its originary givenness in the pleasure we experience upon attaining knowledge. See, e.g., *Studien II*: 283, *Studien III*: 167, and Delamare (2025a: 16–18).

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