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Introduction.

Just before the Second World War, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Raymond Aron were enjoying an evening at the Bec de Gaz where they all ordered the specialty of the house, apricot cocktails. Aron, who had studied phenomenology in Berlin, introduced the idea to Sartre by pointing to his glass and saying to him, “You see, my dear fellow, if you are a phenomenologist, you can talk about this cocktail and make philosophy out of it!” Sartre reportedly turned pale with emotion at this. Here was just the thing he had been longing to achieve for years—to describe objects just as he saw and touched them, and extract philosophy from the process.¹ From this moment on, Sartre’s thought was animated by the spirit if not the letter of phenomenology.

So if one can philosophize about cocktail glasses through the use of phenomenology, then why can I not do the same with litter? More to the point, why would anyone *want* to philosophize about litter? There are at least three responses to these questions. The first and somewhat flippant response is: to the extent that litter is just as mundane as cocktail glasses, why not?

Secondly (and more seriously), nothing is beyond phenomenological analysis, and in fact it is the very mundaneness of litter that makes it suitable for analysis before this particular audience. Litter is something we all experience every day, but at the same time, none of us would likely claim expertise or a privileged “knowledge” of it—it simply appears and disappears from our consciousnesses, seemingly unworthy of comment much less philosophical reflection. (I should admit at this point that the topic for this talk occurred to me since arriving in Detroit three and a half years ago. Though it is true that litter is to be found everywhere, one must admit that Detroit is an exceptionally littered place.) But please believe me when I say that I have no intention of “trashing” Detroit today. Instead, I want to divine the meaning and essence of litter itself

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. P. Greene (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 112. Quoted by James Schmidt in *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), pp. 17-18. Also see Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 5, 359.

through phenomenological analysis, which, by extension, might tell us something essential about the meaning of the city of Detroit.

Finally, because litter is something we can all relate to at one level or another, this gives me an opportunity to show you the richness of phenomenological analysis, and to give you a better idea of the style of thinking that informs much of my research, which will in turn allow you to better understand *me*. If I can demonstrate that phenomenology can generate meaningful insight into something as mundane as litter, then I think I can make the case that phenomenology can generate meaningful insight about phenomena that are considered more profound to our everyday experience, much of which is embodied in the various disciplines of this university. Ultimately, then, I seek to justify Sartre's excitement about his apricot cocktail some seventy years ago, and to stimulate excitement among you in regard to the relevance and usefulness of phenomenological analysis to your own projects as scholars.

Having declared my intentions, let me outline the form this talk will take. First, it will be necessary to offer a brief definition and exposition of the method of phenomenology. This somewhat technical but simplified exposition will be followed by an application of this method to the phenomenon of litter. And last, in my conclusion I will outline the philosophical insights derived through this analysis, at it relates to the present meaning of the city of Detroit.

1. What is phenomenology?

The fundamental claim of phenomenology is that there is more to the world than what meets the scientific eye. Phenomenology acknowledges the undeniable progress that the various hard sciences have made in knowing the world. Entirely valid abstractions from experience such as, say, Newtonian physics, have told us much about the world, but phenomenology stresses that such abstractions are *nothing more* than abstractions.² As such, these scientific abstractions can only be considered *derivative* of

² "Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft," *Logos* I (1910-11). Translated by Quentin Lauer and published as "Philosophy as a Rigorous Science" with another, late essay in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 87. We will cite the page numbers of the English translation from this edition.

experience, and not a *primary* description of it. In this phenomenology objects to the reductionistic tendencies of the hard sciences whereby everything is understood in naturalistic terms, including consciousness.³

For phenomenology this naturalizing of consciousness invalidates all of the hard sciences claims to “objectivity,”⁴ and it is on this flaw that phenomenology is built. Phenomenology takes as its field of study a *pretheoretical* realm that is to be found in the relationship between experience and consciousness, which it sees as a rich field of investigation in and of itself.⁵ Whereas the hard sciences express their truths in terms of

Husserl is consistent in granting the positive sciences their due. See, for example, § 1 in his last published work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970) [Originally published in 1936].

³ I.e., strictly as physical objects in nature. This “naturalism” is sometimes referred to by phenomenologists as “scientism.” See David Stewart and Algis Mickunas, *Exploring Phenomenology* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 1974), p. 5.

The “naturalizing” of consciousness leads to a concomitant “naturalizing” of all absolute ideas and norms. This naturalization of reason is known by the name of psychologism, a view holding that logic is only the lawful functioning of certain psychophysical processes within the human brain, thereby denying logic any inner dynamic or authority of its own. Husserl ascribed to this view in his early *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (1891), but later pointedly rejected psychologism in the Prolegomena of his *Logical Investigations* (1900). Having refuted psychologism in the Prolegomena, Husserl concentrates in the *Logos* article on the root of psychologism, naturalism.

⁴ Furthermore, Husserl sees a larger danger in the positive sciences determining “the material content of the idea of culture, wisdom, *Weltanschauung*, as well as of *Weltanschauung* philosophy.” Husserl, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science,” pp. 134-5. This theme is a constant throughout Husserl’s thought; he returns to treat it in more detail his last work, the *Crisis*.

⁵ The following commonplace experience should help demonstrate the existence of such a pretheoretical realm. When we fly in a commercial airliner, our body is traveling through space at a speed of five or six hundred miles an hour. Yet, except during takeoff and landing, it can be said that we do not experience speed. At cruising speed and altitude, the sensation of speed is insulated from our consciousness in various ways. In contrast, when we are traveling down a freeway on-ramp in an automobile, accelerating to join a flow of traffic moving at seventy miles an hour, our body is moving at only a fraction of the speed—yet, paradoxically, we are much more conscious of the experience of speed.

Now of course it is objectively true that our body in the cruising airliner is moving much faster than our body in the car. In fact, this can be proven in various ways. Complicated theorems of thrust and force and moving bodies can be brought to bear, timepieces and radar can measure the speed, empirical observation confirms it; there is no doubt—our body in the plane is traveling at a *much* higher rate of speed. This application of physics allows us to *know* at an abstract level that commercial air travel is several times faster than freeway automobile travel. *This is true*. Yet physics cannot say what it means to experience speed—to *live* it. The fact that we experience speed to a much greater extent in the car, despite the *objective* fact that we are moving faster in the plane, suggests the existence of *two* truths: the different objective speeds of the aircraft and the car, and the different subjective experiences of speed in each vehicle. The positive sciences can only account for the first truth, not the second. Phenomenology seeks to account for the second truth by saying what it means to *experience* speed, outside of the explanatory realm of physics and the other positive sciences.

I have borrowed this example from Mark Kingwell’s essay, “Fast Forward: Our High-Speed Chase to Nowhere,” *Harper’s Magazine*, May 1998, pp. 37-48.

facts, the truths of phenomenology are expressed in terms of *essences*.⁶ From a phenomenological perspective, the problem with facts is that they are inherently contingent to the extent that they are particular, and always appear to a particular individual in a particular way. As such, facts, by themselves, are unintelligible and cannot form the basis of rigorous knowledge.⁷ Phenomenology claims that what gives a fundamental intelligibility to our lived world [*Lebenswelt*] is that each contingent fact is always accompanied by a lurking essence [*Wesen*]. This essence allows us to recognize a fact as a particular manifestation of that essence. Phenomenological essences are not accumulations of facts or the products of induction, but are by necessity present in each particular fact as that fact's *eidos*—its “guiding principle,” if you will. In other words, an object's essence is just as much a part of an object as an object's sensory qualities (i.e., its facts).⁸ When we intuit an object empirically we see both its particularity and its essence, we see it “in fact,” and in light of its “principle.” On this line, an essence is capable of being seen to a lesser or greater degree of clarity, as is anything that is given in experience. And because the essence is what *typically* appears, it can in principle form the basis of rigorous knowledge. In other words, experience can be *intelligibly understood*, at a primordial level, *without* recourse to the various theories (scientific, metaphysical or otherwise) that purport to “explain” it.⁹ Defined in this way,

⁶ Husserl, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science,” p. 110.

⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas on a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy, Book One*, Chapter 1, trans. F. Kersten (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1982). We will use the Kersten translation unless otherwise noted, but hold to the convention of citing *Ideas I* by Husserl's original section numbers.

⁸ Kohák, *Idea and Experience*, p. 9.

⁹ It is important to stress at this point that Husserl does not oppose explanation *per se*. His complaint is that the theories of positive science never truly achieve explanation due to their inclusion of consciousness in the physical world. They are also not rigorous to the extent that they are not apodictic, i.e., they are founded on contingencies, not necessities. Hence the need for a complimentary—and more importantly, *grounding*—“science of essences”: phenomenology. Phenomenological investigations will have the effect of “deepening” the explanations of the positive sciences, thereby grounding them more firmly.

In articulating his concern with seeing essences, Husserl seems to embrace a strain of Platonic realism, a charge that is often brought against him. Yet it is important to stress that Husserl is making the very unPlatonic claim that these universal essences are given in experience, that they are to be found, so to speak, suffused immanently among the particularity of facts. Unlike Plato, Husserl makes no claim as to their permanence, immutability, or the superiority of their “reality.” In a sense, Husserl is claiming that there is a experiential continuum from *doxa* to *epistémé*, thereby undermining the spatial metaphor of Plato's famous Divided Line. Thus, when Husserl says these essences are “seen,” this is no inconvenient figure of speech. Unlike Platonic Forms, which are strictly intelligible and reside exclusively above the Divided Line, Husserlian essences are before our eyes every day, suffused throughout the concrete

phenomenology is a science,¹⁰ the goal of which is the clear seeing of essences (or necessary universals) as given in experience, which in turn gives intelligibility to facts (or contingent particularities). This, in turn, grounds all of the rational disciplines that avail themselves of the phenomenological method, which allows them to claim the highest standards of rigor.¹¹

Having defined the goal of phenomenology and its field of inquiry in a rudimentary way, I am now ready to turn to its method. What must we do in order to see these essences clearly? This question presumes that something taints our consciousness, which in turn interferes with the clear seeing of essences. For phenomenology, what primarily retards our ability to see essences clearly are two predominant and habitual modes of consciousness or comportments toward the world, “attitudes,” if you like. The first of these is a naive or “natural attitude” that unreflectively takes the brute “there-ness” of the world for granted in our day-to-day activities. The second is the “theoretical attitude” of scientific naturalism that views the world strictly in terms of physical bodies, forces, quantities, and causal explanations relating to theoretical constructs. But since these attitudes are nothing more than habitual ways of looking at the world, it is in principle possible to “purify” our consciousness by putting aside these habits and approaching experience in a more straightforward fashion. In doing so, we have the possibility of seeing the world with fresh eyes. More precisely, phenomenology seeks to see the world in terms of its essences, and not in terms of its facticity. Generally speaking, this is accomplished through two acts of consciousness, and an act of expression.

particularities of our experience, thereby conveying onto our experience a primordial and pretheoretical intelligibility. See Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, vol. 1 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), p. 106.

¹⁰ Husserl stresses again and again that empirical science is not the only kind of science. See Bernet, et. al., *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*, p. 78.

¹¹ Clearly Husserl sees phenomenology as a “first” philosophy. However, it is important to stress that as a “first” philosophy, Husserlian phenomenology does not in principle stand in conflict with any of what Husserl calls “regional theories.” Rather, phenomenology is “necessarily prior to [regional theories] as the articulation of experience—or awareness—on which all theories build.” Erazim V. Kohák, *Idea and Experience: Edmund Husserl’s Project of Phenomenology in Ideas I* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 167. For Husserl’s more mature view on the goals of phenomenology, see the introduction to his 1927 Encyclopaedia Britannica article in Joseph Kockelmans, *Edmund Husserl’s Phenomenology*, revised trans. E. Palmer (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1994), p. 29.

First, phenomenology clarifies the field of experience by “bracketing” or “putting aside” metaphysical biases and methodological presuppositions. It does this by temporarily suspending the general thesis of belief in the factual existence of the world (which is characteristic of the natural attitude), along with questions pertaining to theories purporting to explain the existence of objects in terms of causality and the like (which is characteristic of the theoretical attitude). What is to be accepted as true will have no reference to a transcendent reality (such as, say, Newtonian physics). Objects are reduced to a strictly *phenomenal* reality, and what is to be accepted as true will be restricted to what is immediately and clearly self-evident to an individual and reflecting consciousness. The world is still there, given in experience, but now liberated from theories. The world is no longer *natural* or *physical* or simply *there*, but is instead *experiential*.¹²

This initial act of “bracketing” amplifies the intentional structure of consciousness. When phenomenology says that consciousness has an intentional structure, it is saying nothing more than consciousness is always consciousness *of something*.¹³ Understood thus, consciousness is neither a thing nor an ego state, but instead expresses a primordial relationship between the self and the world. In amplifying the intentional structure of consciousness, this relationship comes to the fore and opens the door to the possibility of the seeing of essences as they present themselves in a primordial region of experience.¹⁴ Yet this region does not yield “objectively existing” objects that are just “there” for phenomenological inspection; rather, a particular object is *constituted* by the consciousness of the particular individual, which is another way of saying that the particular individual gives the particular object a *meaning* within the lived experience of that particular individual. This act of meaning-giving is referred to as the

¹² Husserl, *Crisis*, pp. 152-53. See also Cunningham’s *Language and the Phenomenological Reductions of Edmund Husserl*, pp. 7-8. At no point does the *epoché* amount to doubting the existence of the world in a Cartesian fashion. The purpose of the *epoché* is to bracket such contingencies as metaphysical biases and methodological presuppositions, so all of the necessary structures or patterns of *pure* experience can be seen more clearly.

¹³ This fundamental insight allows phenomenology to bridge the persistent dualism of subject and object which has so dominated modern scientific thought since the time of Descartes. This fundamental insight was inspired by Husserl’s teacher, Franz Brentano. See Stewart and Mickunas, *Exploring Phenomenology*, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ideas I*, § 33.

noetic phase of experience, which is to be directly contrasted with the *noematic phase* of experience, that is, the extent to which the particular individual finds experience *already* meaningful by virtue of its essences, i.e., the way things typically appear.¹⁵ Viewed in this manner, we can see that meaning is co-constituted within a dynamic relationship between consciousness and experience, between self and world—each shapes the other, meaningfully.¹⁶

However, seeing a particular object can only tell us that something *is* the case for the particular individual seeing that particular object. At the same time, every individual experience, while always particular to an individual, is necessarily structured in a particular way—again, it has an essence. A second act of consciousness is designed to move the individual beyond the facticity of his or her particular consciousness to a region where necessary and universal essences may emerge for any consciousness whatsoever. This is accomplished through the imaginative variation of the modes of consciousness, which reduces the object of consciousness to its absolutely essential elements. During this process of imaginative variation, the reflecting individual notes what elements of the perceptive act remain constant through all aspects of the variation. This process allows a consciousness to transcend the primacy of its own particular perspective and introduce itself into a dimension of experience where universal essences emerge from the chaos of particular facts, pretheoretically.¹⁷ Seeing such an essence tells us that something *must necessarily* be the case for any consciousness whatsoever.¹⁸ It is this act of consciousness which forms the basis of phenomenology's claim that it is an intersubjective, rigorous, and eidetic scientific activity.¹⁹

Finally, what makes any science possible is the production of statements which are to be taken up and utilized by other and subsequent generations of scientists. In the science of phenomenology, the expressive tool that will allow essences to emerge to consciousness is description. The term “description” is used to distance phenomenology

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, § 88. See also Kohák, *Idea and Experience*, p. 127.

¹⁶ We can also see how phenomenology bridges the gap between idealism and empiricism.

¹⁷ Husserl, *Ideas I*, § 32. Also see Kohák, *Idea and Experience*, p. 39.

¹⁸ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §§ 6, 34, the entire Third Meditation, and *Ideas I*, § 44. See also Cunningham, *Language and the Phenomenological Reductions of Edmund Husserl*, pp. 10-12, and Kohák, *Idea and Experience*, p. 135.

from the hard sciences which seek to “explain” a phenomenon by imposing causal superstructures onto the phenomenon which then account for it.²⁰ Seeing essences, like seeing particular facts, requires that we see clearly, and seeing clearly requires effort. Seeing essences is rendered especially difficult because of our habitual modes of consciousness. Therefore, phenomenological descriptions must have an evocative quality to them, because they are the means of pulling each of us out of our particular perspectives and towards the realm of essences. In describing their lived experience to one another, individuals working as coordinated phenomenological researchers strive to eliminate ambiguity, test observations through comparisons, and refine clarity. Collectively, these increasingly clarified descriptions will reveal the essential structures of whatever phenomenon of experience is under investigation, much in the same way that the collective observations of hard scientists reveal certain theoretically useful structures pertaining to various parts of the natural world. Thus, phenomenological descriptions work in conjunction with the acts of consciousness just described, and have the very important function of not only recording insight but of *evoking* it in others. This is precisely what I will be attempting to do to you, in regard to the phenomenon of litter.

2. A phenomenology of litter: from the facts of the matter to the essence of the matter.

Ever since moving to Detroit three and a half years ago, I have become increasingly sensitive to the presence of litter. Litter seems to be embedded in the very fabric of this city, so much so that it seems hardly worthy of comment. Some long-time residents see the litter but don’t see it as an offense; it is simply part of their everyday environment, like the leaves on the trees. Others appear to not see litter at all; it doesn’t seem to appear to their consciousness in any significant way. Some see the litter but

¹⁹ *Ideas I*, § 33. See also Kohák, *Idea and Experience*, pp. 60, 180-81.

²⁰ Furthermore, Husserl holds that even the naturalistic sciences are beholden to a descriptive realm which is essential to their “explanatory” function, insofar as all theories must be verified against experience. It is precisely on the claim that phenomenology thematizes this more fundamental descriptive realm that Husserl can declare phenomenology to be first philosophy, the science that *grounds* all the other sciences in

don't bother to pick it up. It offends their sight, but they claim no responsibility for it. It is not their problem, but the problem of some Other (e.g., groundskeepers or streetsweepers, or those who littered in the first place). I myself don't like litter; I often pick it up and put it in a trash can whenever I have the time. This is how I view litter in what phenomenologists call the "natural attitude."

I am aware that my distaste for litter likely originates in the middle-class convention that "litter is bad—don't do it." This judgment is clearly normative, and is something I *bring to* the phenomenon. At the same time, when I encounter a piece of litter and think to myself, "What pig left this here?" I am also positing a *cause*. In other words, I am also asking "*why* is this here?" or "*how* did this get here?" or "*who* put this here?" I am trying to *explain* why litter appears. Such attitudes are evidence of my predilection to experience litter in the explanatory mode of consciousness that belongs to the "theoretical attitude," as well as my normative prejudice against it. So long as I hold on to these attitudes, I will never get to the essence of litter. Phenomenological method demands that I not judge or explain phenomena, but rather *describe* them. The question for phenomenology, then, is not what *causes* litter, but *how it appears to consciousness*, without reference to anything but the appearance itself.

I might begin to explore this question by calling to mind and attempting to catalog all the litter I've ever encountered. This would include small bits of glass and Styrofoam, all kinds of candy wrappers, pop and beer cans of various brands in various states, plastic and paper bags, clothing, plastic bottles containing various quantities of all sorts of fluids, empty pizza cartons, hamburger wrappers, paper and plastic cups, newspaper pages, all kinds of cardboard, car parts, lengths of metal pipes, large chunks of concrete, an upright piano, an old fashioned washing machine with rollers, and even a microwave oven on an interstate highway. In short, I (and most of us, I assume) have encountered as litter vastly differing objects of every imaginable size, shape, composition, mass, color and condition.

This far from complete catalog suggests two things. First, it suggests that virtually any object in the world can come to be considered litter. And secondly, it shows

that it makes their explanation more truly explanations, in the sense that they become explanations without presupposition, once treated phenomenologically. See Husserl, *Crisis*, § 64.

why the hard sciences cannot provide an adequate answer to the phenomenological question, *What is the essence of litter?* Even if a “complete” list of litter could be compiled, what could this list possibly tell us about litter in its essence? Such a list would be incoherent, a mere compilation of facts, and would tell us nothing about how all of these disparate objects came to be counted as litter. For instance, is red paper more litter than yellow paper? Is glass more litter than metal? The facts will not tell us anything about the essence of litter; the trick is to get from the facts of the matter to the essence of the matter, so we can understand what litter *means*.

In order to do this, it is necessary to put aside the facts and regard the world as a kind of ultimate horizon within which all objects must appear; every experience is in-the-world. It is then necessary to set off the region of experience I want to investigate from the rest of experience. Let me circumscribe my field of investigation by referring to this region as the “litter-world.” Litter is a kind of object that appears to my consciousness differently than objects that are not litter. Further complicating the analysis is a suggestion I made earlier—that virtually any object can be considered litter. If this is accepted, then I must also accept the claim that the same object can be litter at one time, and not-litter at another. This suggests an obvious point of departure for my phenomenological analysis: what essentially changes about an object when it moves from the genus objects-in-the-world to the species of litter-objects-in-the-world?

Let me take up this question with a particular object, as it appears to my particular consciousness: a pizza box. I must reduce this object to appearance, which means I must strip it of its facticity. This means that I no longer regard as noteworthy its size or dimensions, its weight, whether it is full or empty, the color or condition of the cardboard, or its absurd Little Caesars cartoon logo. It is not something to be explained or judged—it is a pure appearance to be experienced from near or far, from one side or the other, from above or below, etc.

Still speaking at the level of *my* particular consciousness, it is apparent that I give my experience of this particular object a meaning by the *way* I experience it. The manner in which I experience this object is guided by *how* it appears to my consciousness. There is something about this particular object that disturbs my consciousness, but this disturbance should not be construed as a judgment. This disturbance is ontological in

character, not normative. Typically, in my lived experience, I encounter particular objects as belonging in particular regions or contexts. For instance, I typically encounter cars on roadways, or in driveways and parking lots. A car sitting on the roof of a building is not how cars typically appear. Such encounters disturb me because they are atypical; ontologically-speaking, these cars seem to have lost their way from their typical being-in-the-world. In other words, particular objects typically appear in a particular place in a typical way.

My experience of this particular pizza box as a litter-object disturbs me precisely because its appearance is atypical and out of place. Of course, from a spatial-temporal perspective, it *does* have a place: the pizza box is *there* right *now*. Even if the wind blew it down the street a few inches, I could point again and say, *now* the pizza box is right *there*. But from a phenomenological perspective this object has, like the errant automobiles to which I just alluded, lost its way. There is an uncanny aspect to its appearance. It is no longer in its “typical” place. And where would that be? In its own proper region or context. For example, when I encounter a pizza box in a pizza shop, I do not experience it as litter; it does not disturb my consciousness because it belongs in this context. Nor am I disturbed if I encounter a person walking down the street munching on a slice while holding a pizza box. But if I see the person drop the box onto the ground and walk on, the context of the box fades and eventually disappears, leaving behind an object deprived of its proper place. In a sense, one can say this object has been abandoned or discarded by its context. It no longer “belongs.” This is the way an object is transformed into a litter-object, from its being just one more object in the world.

From this analysis I would like to draw some provisional conclusions. If it is accepted that in lived experience we encounter objects in the world as typically appearing in particular places in typical ways, then what distinguishes litter-objects from other objects is their *radical placelessness that appears through the absence of their typical context or region*. And if this is accepted as an essential aspect of the experience of litter, then this kind of placelessness is part of what it means (at a primordial level) for something to be litter. Litter typically appears as out-of-place. This is common to all of the objects on my short factual list; it is this essential aspect which draws these disparate objects together, as litter-objects. Thus, when I encounter a litter-object, the question that

underlies my normative judgment “what pig left this here?” is the more fundamental question: “where is this object’s place?” Ontologically, the litter-object disturbs me in its abandonment, its placelessness. This is part of the meaning of this experience, which is *prior* to any judgments or explanations of it. And because this is part of the meaning of litter, I respond to this experience by taking up the litter-object and “placing” it somewhere, like a trash can. In doing so, I co-constitute this meaning by reinforcing it through my act of consciousness.²¹

I would like to return to an assertion I made earlier: that virtually any object in the world can be considered litter. Up to this point I think my analysis has borne this out. I would like to test this claim a bit further, and perhaps proceed to a deeper level of analysis. Can this analysis be applied to objects we do not typically regard as litter-objects, e.g., objects such as buildings?

So far I have discovered that one essential element of litter is its “untethered” quality, its radical placelessness. I’ve suggested that this placelessness is due to the litter-object being abandoned by its context. In what sense is this true of buildings we typically speak of as being “abandoned”? Such a building presents certain facts that mark it as abandoned, e.g., chained and padlocked entrances, broken or boarded up windows, graffiti, general disrepair, etc. Still, the abandoned building seems to be part of its landscape, its context. It is typically surrounded by other buildings. Some of these buildings may be marked as abandoned; others are not. However, I find that the appearance of abandoned buildings ontologically disturb my consciousness in a way very similar to that of litter. Yet at the same time, the abandoned building seems to have a place. It was given a place when it was built, and it will not blow away like other kinds of litter. So in what sense is it abandoned?

The only way to answer this question phenomenologically is to look more deeply into the phenomenon of litter. One way of doing this is to ask, what does placelessness

²¹ It could be said that all this lends a phenomenological meaning to the old public service slogan, “Put Litter in its *Place*.” This suggests that a distinction should be made between litter and trash. Trash has a place; litter does not. This is why trashcans full of litter do not seem out of place, because trashcans themselves appear in typical contexts and regions (though on this formulation, trashcans can also in principle appear as litter). However, an *overflowing* trashcan is ontologically disturbing in the same way

attest to? Placelessness attests to a *lack of care*. Here I am drawing on Heidegger, who claims that everything which exists belongs to a care structure.²² We care, and things receive our care. However, Heidegger makes a distinction between *caring for* things [*Fürsorge*] and *caring about* things [*Besorgen*].²³ It is through this distinction that we can come to see how abandoned buildings can be experienced as litter. Such buildings have a place in the physical world, but they no longer have a place in a *lived* world, animated by care. Such buildings are abandoned, not only by a typical context or region in a lived world, but at a more fundamental level they are *abandoned by care*. Indeed, typical contexts or regions in a lived world *testify* to care. Therefore, I must conclude that *placelessness is only an aspect of carelessness*. This conclusion in turn forces me to re-formulate the fundamental meaning or essence of litter: litter is *that which appears as placeless in a lived world through the absence of care*. So, in giving an abandoned building my care I am reasserting its place, not spatially, but ontologically. Through my care, I am bringing it back to a lived world.

3. Detroit: can a city appear as litter?

It is one thing to apply this analysis to pizza boxes and buildings; it would seem to be quite another to apply it to the city of Detroit. Please remember that I am not asking whether Detroit is littered; that is the fact I began with. I am asking whether Detroit, as something which appears to my consciousness, can appear as litter. In other words, does Detroit *appear as placeless in a lived world through the absence of care*?

Clearly a city the size of Detroit possesses many more dimensions than a typical piece of litter; it is a much more complex object. Street litter and abandoned buildings are experienced as discreet events—I move through a lived world and encounter these objects, which ontologically disturb me, and then move past them. By way of contrast, I move *through* Detroit. It envelopes me and presses in on my consciousness. The city's appearance *does* ontologically disturb me in a way very similar to that of street litter and

that the person dropping the pizza box is disturbing; what is being witnessed is a separation of object from context. Dumps and landfills are unusual cases worthy of further consideration.

²² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1962), § 41.

abandoned buildings, but it does so relentlessly, and not just because of the litter and abandoned buildings encountered there. The whole city has an uncanny appearance, not because care is wholly absent but because care has been steadily withdrawn. Detroit has been slipping from a lived world for decades.

This requires further explanation. My earlier analysis of litter implies that there can be many gradations of care, and given the complexity of Detroit as an object we should expect its appearance to be more ambiguous in regard to this care. Clearly, Detroit is still “lived.” It is not like a “ghost town” of the American west, or the ruins of an ancient city laying undiscovered in the thick jungles of Central America. Detroit still has a lived meaning, but it is a degraded meaning. To draw an analogy: the elderly in the worst nursing homes have a somewhat uncanny appearance due to the diminished care they are receiving. Because of this diminished care, they are slipping out of a lived world. In a certain sense, it can be said that these human beings are *cared about*. But in this instance, to one degree or another, the purpose of the care is to reduce human beings to litter, so they no longer have to be *cared for*.²⁴ Ontologically-speaking, Detroit shares this status with the neglected elderly. Through the steady withdrawal of care, it is for the most part no longer *cared for*.

What has been the nature of this steady withdrawal of care from Detroit? Starting as early as the late 1940s, the economic life of Detroit began to diminish when the automobile industry determined it was cheaper to build new factories outside the city than to re-tool existing plants in the city center. Middle class whites followed their jobs to the new suburbs, leaving behind less economically-mobile blacks. This worsened already tense race relations in the metropolitan area and deepened the city’s economic crisis.²⁵ The civic unrest of the late 1960s accelerated “white flight” to the suburbs, and by 1998 79% of the population in Detroit was African American, while 78% of the

²³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §§ 26, 39-41.

²⁴ It should be clear from my analysis that human beings, both living and deceased, can also appear as litter. It is said that bodies abandoned after a battle “litter the landscape.” Until these bodies are given a place in a lived world through care, they will continue to appear as litter, ontologically placeless. Another example of living human bodies appearing as litter might be the homeless who appear to litter our streets. Offensive to many eyes, in some places they are legally swept from city centers—out of sight, out of mind, and ultimately deprived of care.

population in the surrounding suburbs was white.²⁶ In 1988 no building permits were issued in Detroit.²⁷ During the 1990s the city lost 1% of its housing stock each year to arson, and in 1990 alone the city spent \$25 million on the removal of abandoned houses and other structures.²⁸ By 2000 the population of Detroit stood at just over 951,000—half of its 1950 population of over 1.8 million.²⁹ In summary, Detroit has been slowly abandoned. The city seemed to officially acknowledge this phenomenon when in 1993 its own Ombudsman proposed that the most vacant areas of what had once been the fourth largest city in the U.S. simply be abandoned. City services to these areas were to be discontinued, and their residents relocated. The empty houses would then be demolished, and the empty areas fenced off to be allowed to return to nature.³⁰ However, perhaps the most stark testament to this attitude of abandonment is the fact that some of those leaving the city have gone so far as to take their dead with them, disinterring their loved ones from Detroit cemeteries and reburying them in the suburbs, as if retrieving bodies from a corpse-littered battlefield.³¹

In light of these facts, it could be said that those who have physically abandoned Detroit over the past 50 years are most responsible for this withdrawal of care. They are like the person abandoning their empty pizza box and walking away, leaving behind an object deprived of its proper place. Placelessness, as I have said, is a testament to carelessness, and Detroit appears as placeless in a lived world animated by care. Yet it must be said that those who have retreated to the prosperous suburbs surrounding Detroit still manifest care in regard to the city. However, they no longer *care for* Detroit. Rather, they only *care about* Detroit, and this “caring about” manifests itself in a

²⁵ This is best documented by the historian Thomas Sagrue in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

²⁶ U.S. Census Bureau.

²⁷ Dan Hoffman, “The Best the World Has to Offer,” Public lecture at the Union of International Architects Congress XIX, Barcelona, Spain, July 1996).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ U.S. Census Bureau.

³⁰ The Ombudsman, Marie Farrell-Donaldson, was merely following the recommendations of a report called the *Detroit Vacant Land Survey*, which had been authored by the Detroit City Planning Commission in August 1990. See Charles Waldheim and Marli Santos-Munné, “Decamping Detroit” in *Stalking Detroit* (Barcelona, Spain: Actar Publishers, 2001), p. 104. Also see “The Day of the Bulldozer,” *The Economist*, 8 May 1993, pp. 33-34.

³¹ Lisa M. Collins, “Detroit is not alone,” *Detroit MetroTimes*, 10-16 December 2003, p. 17.

comportment of aversion. Like those who litter but find litter unsightly in their own front yards, what former Detroiters care most about the city is that it *stay south of Eight Mile Road*.

To the extent that Detroit is regarded by its northern neighbors as akin to a large abandoned pizza box south of Eight Mile, these neighbors are partly responsible for this withdrawal of care and hence the predominant meaning of the city as litter. But I would insist that these suburbanites are not solely responsible for this meaning. Another factor is a media that has been demonizing Detroit for years, but I claim that media only distorts meaning, it does not create it. Behind such distortions is a complex dynamic which has constituted the present meaning of Detroit, and it plainly involves those who have remained in the city.

The collective and transgenerational experience of the city by its citizens over the past 50 years has produced an *ethos* of carelessness, which is manifested in the litter that suffuses Detroit, and which perhaps animated the 1993 plan to abandon large areas of Detroit to nature (which, by the way, was never implemented). The litter makes the city uncanny in appearance, as does those parts of the city where homes have long been abandoned by those who dwelled in them. On the east side of Detroit there are whole city blocks where one or two houses stand alone, literally abandoned by the neighborhood that once surrounded them. Successive city administrations have fostered this *ethos* of carelessness by abandoning these neighborhoods—where the lived world of a city is most vital and animate—to their own fate, while caring more for ballparks, football stadiums, casinos, and other projects of so-called “renaissance.”³² The result has been severely degraded city services, eroding infrastructure, and a dysfunctional public school system. In light of all this, the city of Detroit, like the aged within bad nursing homes, is slipping away from a lived world, the context which nourished it and animated its past meanings.

To draw further on this analogy, many Detroiters’ experience of the city has made them comfortable with the various forms of neglect surrounding them, just as long-time

³² The trope of renaissance (“To be borne anew”) is commonplace in reference to the urban redevelopment of American cities, and Detroit is no exception. I would observe that the phrase infers that the city, or at least the old city, is dead—i.e., is no longer “lived.”

nursing home aides have come to see dementia, bedsores, wasted bodies and emotional neglect as the meaning of the end of human life. Litter is both a noun and a verb; it is both a *thing* and an *action*, and many Detroiters have taken litter into their very manner of being, their very manner of becoming. This explains why so many Detroiters no longer see litter as a manifestation of neglect; it has simply become a part of their lived world as citizens of this city. To put it in Husserlian terms, the noematic phase of the experience of Detroit (i.e., the extent to which the city is *already* meaningful, as a city of profound neglect) overwhelms the noetic phase of the experience of Detroit (the extent to which a different meaning can be *conveyed onto* the city). This domination of the noematic phase of experience reinforces the prevailing meaning of Detroit as litter.

4. Conclusion: where care has been withdrawn, it can be given again.

I want to be clear that this essay was not motivated by an outsider's disdain for the city of Detroit. To the contrary, and at an objectively intellectual level, I find Detroit to be a very stimulating place, primarily because I find it unique. Though the phenomenon of shrinking post-industrial cities is global in scope,³³ I know of no other large city within such a prosperous nation which has suffered such devastating neglect over such an extended period of time, short of open warfare. But more fundamentally, I simply began with my experience of litter as disturbing, and offered a phenomenological analysis of it, which brought me to the conclusion that Detroit suffers from a withdrawal of care, as does litter.

Though this suggests that Detroit as a whole presents as a place abandoned by care, I want to stress there are places in the city where the mode of *caring for* still manifests itself. Just off the blighted main thoroughfares, behind the dollar and party stores, the fast-food joints, the nail-and-hair salons and the check-cashing stores, it is not all that difficult to find well-tended neighborhoods where people have carved out dwelling places full of care. Anarchists and voluntary peace communities have renovated abandoned houses and brought care to urban gardens.³⁴ For close to twenty years, the

³³ Lisa M. Collins, "Detroit is not alone," pp. 10-16.

³⁴ Dominique Osborne, "Radically wholesome," *Detroit Metrotimes*, 12-17 September 2002, p. 98.

Detroit artist Tyree Guyton has fought to care for one of the most blighted areas on Detroit's near east side, taking up abandoned houses on Heidelberg Street as "found objects," and with the help of his community transforming them into dazzling pieces of urban art.³⁵ In April 2001, the artist and architect Kyong Park came upon an abandoned Detroit bungalow and, with the assistance of architecture students from this university, cared enough about it to literally give it a place, disassembling the structure and then reassembling it in Europe, where it has since toured France, Germany and the Netherlands.³⁶ Our school of architecture is also involved in developing the Adamah Plan, a project which seeks to transform the vacant areas of Detroit into a vast space for gardens, grazing lands, tree farms, dairies, wind-driven generators, and co-housing in reclaimed industrial buildings.³⁷ In cooperation with community residents, UDM's Collaborative Design Center has initiated the Fire-Break Project, whereby vacant or burnt-out houses are transformed into provocative installations in an attempt to "change a particular and distinct blight on the landscape into an asset . . . to turn a negative condition into a positive one."³⁸ To state it phenomenologically, what all of these projects aim at is literally the making of meaning *care-fully*, by *caring for* the city, sometimes one house or space at a time. Where care has been withdrawn, it can be given again.

In summary, then: Caring is a question of comportment, and phenomenology teaches us that comportments may be transformed. If this is accepted, then it is possible that through the proper comportment Detroit may once again become *cared for*, and reclaim its place in a lived world. To the extent that this analysis has connected caring and "place-ness" and brought these notions to the fore, perhaps this essay can be considered a small expression of *caring for* Detroit, wherein I dwell. (And as Heidegger tells us, to dwell *is* to care.)

³⁵ Robert Arens, "The Heidelberg Project" in *Stalking Detroit* (Barcelona, Spain: Actar Publishers, 2001), pp. 126-29. Also see "The Heidelberg Project" [World Wide Web] 2003 [cited 26 January 2004]; available from <http://www.heidelberg.org>.

³⁶ Grace Sumam "'A little piece of home' in Orleans, France," *Westsider*, Vol. 3, no. 1., p. 10. Also see Lisa M. Collins, "Detroit is not alone," p. 14.

³⁷ Curt Gyvette, "Down a green path," *Detroit Metrotimes*, 13 October-6 November, 2001, pp. 10-13. "Adamah" is Hebrew for "of the earth."

³⁸ See "Design/Build+Urban Installations: Fire-Break" [World Wide Web], 2001 [cited 26 January 2004]; available from <http://www.arch.udmercy.edu/06Sign14.html>.