

Husserl and the Possibility of Solipsism

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Abstract:

The article intends to show that, contrary to what has been suggested in many scholarly debates, Husserl's phenomenology does not suppose a solipsistic approach. I demonstrate this by deeply analyzing some passages of *Ideas I* and the *Cartesian Meditations*. To give an account of the concept of Consciousness in Husserl is in part to discuss if the Husserlian *Ego* entails a pure individual and subjective perspective or if this is actually not the case. I conclude that the last option is more plausible. The outcome of the article poses compelling questions to the nature of Reality from an idealist standpoint.

Keywords: Solipsism, Idealism, Consciousness, Experience, Selfness, Perception, Transcendental Ego, Phenomenology, Husserl, Absolute Being

Introduction

Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938) established a new and distinctive approach to reality in Western philosophy. His concerns about the existence of things as conceived by natural sciences (considering the first as existing with external independence, acritically) led him to postulate a different position, in which things only *claim to be*, in other words are “there” only thanks to the accountable situation of my experience of them appearing to me as being. Thus, stressing the fact that things, as we perceive, are not beyond our consciousness about themselves. This Husserlian solution has been interpreted by many as a Solipsistic approach. Although the concept of Solipsism is not totally established in consensual terms, we may take a classical approach of it in order to analyse the issue in Husserl's thought. I will use the observation made by Francis Herbert Bradley (1846 – 1924), who indicates that Solipsism supposes the fact that “I cannot transcend experience, and experience must be my experience. From this it follows that nothing beyond my self exists; for what is experience is its states” (Bradley 1902, 248). In general, this might be the solipsistic approach. Nothing can exist beyond my self being. However, this is obviously problematic. What is exactly encompassed within the self being is subject to debate, and it surely affects the possible solution we may take in regard to the world in general and its existence. Therefore, it seems primordial to understand the real meaning of the self according to Husserl, if we have the intention to unveil if his conception of it leads to Solipsism or not.

Throughout this essay, I will, in accordance with what has been said, discuss the issue of Solipsism in Husserl's thought. I will argue against the view that posits Husserl as entailing a solipsistic approach. After presenting that possible reading, I will try to demonstrate, by focusing on Husserl's texts, such as *Ideas I* and *Cartesian Meditations* that the aforementioned is implausible. I will also rely on comments about Husserl on the issue which also finds difficulties to accept the solipsistic view. The distinction between mental or internal objects and the external ones will be criticized as well, having in consideration it is in connection with the whole discussion about the condition of the self and the feasible kind of epistemological implications that may be drawn for the account of things.

Phenomenology and the solipsistic temptation

An unconsidered reading of Husserl could lead us to think about what the philosopher does when explaining the "inversion" in order to obtain what he considers a proper attitude in accordance with reality, is nothing but a turning to the general view of selfness, where all things (that may be called as external) depend on it. Indeed, Husserl considers that the given object "external" reality for us is nothing but the perceived. Thus, not the thing as naturally would be considered external and in itself, but the perception of it. Then, perception is not even enough as concept, since it presupposes there is something *out there* that would be apprehended through it. So, the notion actually is consciousness. Husserl writes:

Reality is not in itself something absolute which becomes tied secondarily to something else; rather, in the absolute sense, it is nothing at all, it has no "absolute essence" whatever; it has the essentiality of something which, of necessity, is *only* intentional, *only* an object of consciousness, something presented [*Vorstelliges*] in the manner peculiar to consciousness, something apparent (as apparent). (Husserl 1983, 113)

So, reality is an "object of consciousness". If then, we understand consciousness according to Husserl in terms of selfness, it would not be difficult for anyone to regard the latter as no other thing than a mental state that "creates" the world. The world would be constituted by a performative action of consciousness, then apparently leaving no place to a given reality "outside" of this mental action. Taking the notion of self from a judgement like this, might fit very well with the definition of solipsism we indicated before. The problem, if we accept this way of reading Husserl, is that it can lead to think that finally what is real is just our mental willingness, oversimplifying the problem of the possible existence of things and making them mere subjective constructions. Moreover, it may lead to forget that the mental action actually might be only to direct the attention towards what means the *out there*.

Is this the view that Husserl intends in his phenomenological approach? I would definitely say it is not. But in order to show how this view fails to give an account of Husserl's thought, it may be necessary to focus on some particular aspects of it which may shed light on the issue.

The meaning of consciousness in Husserl's phenomenology

The question is then what is intended by Husserl when considering consciousness and the notion of selfness. If the right scientific attitude in Husserl terms, is to “parenthesize” the world, or in other words take it as a non natural and granted reality, and hence observe it as the experience of the subject in itself, the action should not be necessary understood as an absolute creation of the world, but as the acquaintance of what we experience as a phenomenon. In contrast to what Husserl seems to suggest in the last isolated quote, a more complex scenario is described by him thereafter:

...instead of naively *effecting* the acts pertaining to our Nature – constituting consciousness with their positing of something transcendent, and letting ourselves be induced, by motives implicit in them, to effect ever new positings of something transcendent – instead of that, we put all those positings “out of action”, we do not “participate in them;” we direct our seizing and theoretically inquiring regard to *pure consciousness in its own absolute being*. That, then, is what is left as the sought - for “*phenomenological residuum*” though we have “excluded” the whole world with all physical things, living beings and humans, ourselves included. Strictly speaking, we have not lost anything but rather have gained the whole of absolute being which, rightly understood, contains within itself, “constitutes” within itself, all worldly transcendencies. (Husserl 1983, 113)

There are two fundamental implications in this explanation made by Husserl regarding consciousness and what it involves. Firstly, the philosopher establishes a radical view on the conception of our experience: if we focus only on what is our perceptive action in itself, we find out that all that is left is consciousness in its pure existence, which is finally the true acknowledgeable being, replacing what we considered as being in a common sense attitude in general. Secondly, this being that “is left” after the phenomenological reduction is not equivalent to the self being. Actually, the acceptance of the self being is also part of the abandoned natural attitude. The understanding of what is really left then is crucial, for it excludes the possibility of considering any kind of subjective mental essence as conforming the world, and so making solipsism even a more implausible view here. For this “absolute being” gained by reduction, paradoxically cannot be reduced to some element of the world (even if it may be regarded in general as a fundamental one, such as the mind), because it can also “look” towards it, although the mentioned element may “participate” in the action (for it is possible anyway to assert that consciousness is exercised by the mind as well).

Therefore, we are in front of the “absolute being”, as Husserl says, and its absoluteness comes from the fact that everything, every element or being of the world is subjected to it, for it cannot be or “claim to be” without it.

Solipsism finds difficulties here to stand. How a being which excludes ourselves as its backbone can be regarded as reducing everything to mere selfness? It could be argued that although the self is excluded, the whole given world has the same fate, and if we can say that our experience

is still there and that it nevertheless is “our” experience, there must be a kind of subjective condition still present. However, is this really the case? Is the Husserlian absolute being a one “attached” to an individual subject? My answer would be no, and the reasons here subsequently explained.

Consciousness beyond the self

Is the absolute consciousness something different to individual consciousness? What Husserl intends to say when he mentions things such as *self-experience*, or even more important, when he talks about the *transcendental ego*? It seems that depending on the interpretation one may have regarding this aspects of Husserl’s thought, we may take the latter as solipsistic or not. For instance, Thomas Baldwin, in his article entitled *Phenomenology, Solipsism and the Egocentric Thought*, puts some restraints to consider it necessarily solipsistic, and even posits some doubts on the effectiveness of Husserl’s “absolute being of consciousness”, by saying that “The phenomenologist’s parenthesizing of the natural world should lead him to parenthesize his thoughts as well, even though one who entertains these counterfactual speculations does not thereby contradict himself in doing so; the possibility of his thoughts is guaranteed by his actual existence within the natural world.” (Baldwin and Bell 1988, 35) It is possible to ask, however, if Husserl actually regarded the absolute conscious being as something, again, fastened to, or residing in men. It may be the case that his intention when describing what actually is the transcendental ego was to liberate the phenomenological approach from common sense self perceptions, including all external natural world. Then, the possibility of the thoughts of the phenomenologist that parenthesizes, if they are something different than himself, but at the same time they do not take part in the natural world (in a different way as Baldwin would indicate in the aforementioned) would lead to the definite residuum, to what is really left: experience in itself. In his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl writes about this particular issue:

Just as the reduced Ego is not a piece of the world, so, conversely, neither the world nor any worldly object is a piece of my Ego, to be found in my conscious life as a really inherent part of it, as a complex of data of sensation or a complex of acts. This “*transcendence*” is part of the intrinsic sense of anything worldly, *despite* the fact that anything worldly necessarily acquires all the sense determining it, along with its existential status, exclusively from my experiencing, my objectivating, thinking, valuing, or doing, at particular times – notably the status of an evidently valid being is one it can acquire only from my own evidences, my grounding acts. If this “*transcendence*”, which consists in being non-really included, is part of the intrinsic sense of the world, then, by way of contrast, the Ego himself, who bears within him the world as an accepted sense and who, in turn, is necessarily presupposed by this sense, is legitimately called *transcendental*, in the phenomenological sense. (Husserl 1982, 26)

If we accept that in the non phenomenological attitude, the self is part of the world (just like we would say that any person, with its own consciousness, is part of the world just as the objects in general are), then we are bound to say that Husserl is not accepting that view on the self, when

we think about it in the phenomenological attitude. For Husserl clearly denies that the Ego takes part in some worldly state, and even more interestingly, he denies that any worldly object can be part of it. So the reduced Ego, the standing alone absolute consciousness, by which we experience all the worldly things is not a common sense individual self, nor something related to the subjective individuality. It seems that instead of this, Husserl is intending the existence of a different kind of “given” consciousness, related to experience in itself, which is not our psychological consciousness and is therefore not centred in the attitudes and perceptions a man aware of his selfness may have.

This radical aspect of the Husserlian approach may have not been understood totally by his critics, which would see in his intended pure consciousness the subjective essence still, and then accuse him of having a solipsistic point of view. An example is Merleau Ponty, since he considers that “Truth does not inhabit only the inner man” (Baldwin and Bell 1988, 36), and he supposes that natural inner man to be the same Husserl would mean with his transcendental Ego.

Pure consciousness as something given

I would then tend to think that what Husserl actually intended with the reduction to pure consciousness is not determined by some kind of subjective entity, but comes actually to be a given thing, that would make also viable to look at the world as something only possible thanks to it, thanks to the existence of this given pure consciousness. What is the essence or nature of this consciousness can lead certainly to discussion, and even more controversial might be the fact that its “essence” or “objective character” might lead to the contradiction of claiming that Husserl’s intention of parenthesizing the world is done by a natural and objective thing. But the existence of this conscious residuum that can parenthesize the world and ourselves as subjects of it is the element that gives way to any possible transcendental phenomenology. If considered as a mental procedure, which gives way to the perception of objectiveness or worldly things, then we would not be making justice to a proper interpretation of Husserl’s purposes. Dan Zahavi, in his article *Husserl’s noema and the internalism-externalism debate*, by attacking proposers of this latter view, explains:

Generally speaking, they involve what might be called a mentalistic misinterpretation of the phenomenological dimension. Rather than seeing the field of givenness, the phenomena, as something that questions the very subject-object split, as something that stresses the co-emergence of self and world, the phenomena are interpreted phenomenologically, as part of the mental inventory. And finally, these criticisms slight all the places where Husserl explicitly denies that the true purpose of the epoché and the reduction is to doubt, neglect, abandon, or exclude reality from our research, but rather emphasizes that their aim is to suspend or neutralize a certain dogmatic attitude towards reality. (Zahavi 2004, 9)

What Zahavi suggests is to notice that Husserl proposes the phenomenological reduction not as an action of the mind towards the recognition of things, where the first has the power to bring the latter to existence, but as the acknowledgement of a truth about reality we would not

achieve without it, namely to see the stream of experience as the thing to be analysed, instead of directly forgetting or not being aware of it and grant the content of experience a non questioned existence. Moreover, as this recognition leads to accepting that the only non dogmatic reality is the given stream of experience, which excludes the naturalization of things and ourselves as well, any solipsistic interpretation about the phenomenological attitude is implausible.

In addition, the possible debate on the distinction between internal and external objects becomes less determinant, since is clear that the phenomenological reduction brings the stream of experience as the main object to focus on, where all the objects we thought of as part of the world are the content of this stream, including our own self as well. This is not, however, a denial of the world and its objectivity, nor even the belief of the existence of it thanks to some internal extreme idealism that would entail the subject with the power of giving life to what appears.

Conclusion

Husserl's phenomenology is prone to be interpreted as solipsistic, thanks to a misunderstanding of what the transcendental Ego actually means, as well as the unclear and sometimes obscure character of the notion pure consciousness. We have seen that nevertheless, both concepts, if carefully analysed, do not necessarily lead to accepting a view where the world appears as a consequence of a capacity of perception within the self. Although Husserl makes references to a subjective point of view in many parts of *Ideas I* and the *Cartesian Meditations*, certain passages also show that what is really given as phenomena cannot be indicated as personal or individual, nor even totally mental. The transcendental Ego exists as the parenthesizing of the worldly experience is done, and this existence is not plausible to be explained if we focus in its possible subjective aspect, since it also encompasses any subjective entity "claiming to be". This way, it may not be feasible to encapsulate Husserl's thought in a kind of full-blown radical idealism centred in thinking entities only, and then his thought might not be in contradiction with the thesis elaborated by another non naive idealist such as Francis Bradley, who states: "You can not, starting from the given, construct a self which will swallow up and down every element from which it is distinguished." (Bradley 1902, 258)

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