

Husserl and the ‘absolute’

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It is natural to use this celebration of Husserl’s 150th anniversary as an occasion to reflect upon his legacy. This can be done in different ways. One possibility is to study the influence he has exerted on the development of 20th century philosophy. That the influence has been immense can hardly be disputed. This is not to say, of course, that everybody agreed with him, but the fact that subsequent phenomenologists, including Heidegger, Ingarden, Schütz, Fink, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lévinas, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Derrida, Henry and Marion, as well as leading figures in a whole range of later theory formations, including hermeneutics, critical theory, deconstruction and post-structuralism, felt a need to react and respond to Husserl’s project and program testifies to his importance. We can, however, contrast this more backward looking approach with a more forward looking appraisal of Husserl’s legacy, one that basically asks the following question: “What are the future prospects of Husserlian phenomenology?” Or to put it differently, “Does Husserlian phenomenology remain relevant for philosophy in the 21st Century?” These are of course huge questions, and there are again different ways one might go about trying to answer them.

One possibility is to inquire into the way in which Husserlian phenomenology contains concrete analyses of continuing value. Thus, one

might for instance examine to what extent his specific analyses of, say, embodiment, time-consciousness, intentionality, imagination, self-consciousness, intersubjectivity etc. far from having been superseded by subsequent accounts in continental philosophy, analytical philosophy of mind or cognitive science have only recently started to be assimilated and integrated into current thought and research. In short, one way to argue for the continuing relevance of Husserlian phenomenology is by showing that there still is much to learn from his painstaking analyses of various concrete phenomena. I think this is a completely respectable way of approaching the question; moreover, it is a way that is currently quite influential.

But would Husserl have been satisfied with this kind of legacy? In his eyes, would the absorption of many of his concrete analyses into foreign research programs have been sufficient to demonstrate the healthy state of phenomenology? I suspect not. I think Husserl would have been much more concerned with whether or not his very conception of philosophy was still alive. This is obviously a different way to measure his legacy, but this will be my focus in the present paper.

So to repeat, the basic question I wish to raise and discuss is to what extent Husserl's fundamental conception of philosophy is one phenomenologists still can and should promote.

1. Husserl's idealism

One available and widespread reply is negative. Indeed, on this view, Husserl's philosophical vision is so outdated that the most charitable course of action is to bury it in silence. It is both intriguing and also somewhat odd that some of the most dismissive attacks on Husserl have been made by other phenomenologists. Consider, for instance, the way in which Husserl has been read by numerous Merleau-Pontians.

In his book *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty* Madison writes that Merleau-Ponty in the central essay 'The Philosopher and His Shadow' attempts to unearth the implications of Husserl's late philosophy and to think his 'unthought thought'. But as Madison then continues, "the essay is no doubt more interesting for what it tells us about Merleau-

Ponty's own late thought" (Madison 1981, 170). Thus, according to Madison, the essay is not so much about what Husserl did say, as it is about what he should have said, and it must consequently be read as an exposition of Merleau-Ponty's own thoughts rather than as a genuine Husserl-interpretation (Madison 1981, 213, 330). And as he then adds: "I do not mean to say that Merleau-Ponty completely misunderstood Husserlian philosophy [...] but only that he did not want or could not believe that Husserl was nothing more than the idealist he was" (Madison 1981, 271).

In Dillon's book *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* we find a very similar interpretation. Speaking of the same essay from 1959, Dillon writes: "Just as he finds his own thought in the unthought of Husserl, the Husserl Merleau-Ponty finds reason to praise is frequently an extrapolation of his own philosophy" (Dillon 1987, 27). And Dillon then basically continues along the same line as Madison: If Husserl had rigorously pursued the ontological implications of the notion of the lifeworld which he set forth in *Krisis* "he might have altered his own transcendental idealism (with all its latent solipsism) and arrived at a position similar to Merleau-Ponty's. But the fact is that Husserl never abandoned the reductions or the idealism to which they inevitably lead" (Dillon 1997, 87).

It is not difficult to find further examples, but let me make do with just one more: In his book *Sense and Subjectivity. A Study of Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty* Dwyer writes that although Merleau-Ponty occasionally tries to make excuses for Husserl and even distorts his doctrine in order to make it more palatable, the fact remains that for the most part, Husserl's work was antithetical to Merleau-Ponty's (Dwyer 1990, 33-34). And as Dwyer then concludes: "In my view, what, for the most part, Husserl meant by and practiced as 'phenomenology' can only be described as giving new meaning to the word 'muddled.' The less said about the details of Husserl's philosophy the better" (Dwyer 1990, 34).

A characteristic feature of this and many similar criticisms is that Husserl's idealism is singled out as a blatant and flagrant weakness. Another frequent feature is the quite limited textual basis on which the criticism is usually based. Recently, however, a rather similar criticism of Husserl's idealism has been voiced by a couple of Husserl scholars with a far

more extensive knowledge of Husserl's writings than Madison, Dillon, and Dwyer. In that sense, it is also a criticism that has to be taken more seriously.

In Dermot Moran's recent book *Husserl: Founder of Phenomenology* we are presented with an interpretation that views Husserl's mature philosophy as a form of transcendental idealism that "recognized all consciousness as part of the mysterious transcendental life of the subject in an intersubjective community of co-subjects" (Moran 2005, 173). Elsewhere Moran remarks that Husserl, especially in his later works offered complex, paradoxical and deeply ambiguous claims about the transcendental ego. Moran frequently returns to the notorious § 49 in *Ideen I* and to Husserl's notion of a world-annihilation and argues that it shows to what extent Husserl's transcendental idealism is committed to the ontological primacy of subjectivity (Moran 2005, 178). Indeed on Moran's reading, Husserl's characterization of the ego as being absolute amounts to a very strong metaphysical claim (Moran 2005, 197). As Moran writes, Husserl's metaphysical language suggests that he took seriously the claim to have found an absolute source of the world (Moran 2005, 231). In his concluding assessment of Husserl's contribution to philosophy, Moran consequently notes that Husserl must be faulted for having advocated a view of consciousness that took it to be essentially absolute, self-enclosed and immanent (Moran 2005, 241).

In his 2003 book, *Husserl and the Cartesian Meditations*, A.D. Smith offers a meticulous and well-informed reading of the *Cartesianische Meditationen*. As part of his analysis of the 4th Meditation, he also comes to dwell on the character of Husserl's idealism. To start with, Smith makes it clear that one would misunderstand the fundamental thrust of Husserl's transcendental project if one thought it excluded questions regarding existence and reality. As Husserl himself declares in § 23 of *Cartesianische Meditationen* the topics of existence and non-existence, of being and non-being, are all-embracing themes for phenomenology, themes addressed under the broadly understood titles of reason and unreason (Hua 1/91).¹ As Smith

¹This phrasing obviously reminds us of the final part of *Ideen I*, which carries the title *Reason and Reality*.

goes on to say, phenomenology isn't merely concerned with the question of how consciousness is involved in the constitution of any object-sense, but also in the question of what it means for a given type of object to exist and be real (Smith 2003, 159). On Smith's reading of Husserl, reality is ultimately a question of a regulative ideal; it is the ideal correlate of an ultimate intersubjective confirmation.¹ It would for Husserl make no sense to suppose that a world meeting this strong condition of ultimate, intersubjective confirmation should yet prove to be unreal. To seriously entertain this possibility would be to try "to uproot our notions of reality and unreality from their experiential basis in confirmations and disconfirmations, whence these notions derive all their sense and meaning" (Smith 2003, 179). However, what follows from this, according to Smith, is that Husserl rather than merely being a transcendental idealist like Kant is in fact an absolute idealist. One who would claim that nothing would exist in the absence of consciousness (Smith 2003, 179). According to Smith, Husserl's position amounts to the claim that physical facts and entities supervene on consciousness, they are nothing over and above experiential facts (Smith 2003, 183-185). And as Smith concludes his overview, Husserl's grand metaphysical picture of the world will strike most readers as somewhat speculative, if not to say baroque (Smith 2003, 210).

I think it is fair to say that on both Moran's and Smith's appraisal, whatever merits Husserl's phenomenology might have, whatever relevance it might have for 21st century philosophy, his idealism isn't part of it. Perhaps Moran and Smith are right, but in the following, I will nevertheless propose a somewhat different interpretation of Husserl's idealism. Let me at the outset confess that I don't think it is really possible to propose an interpretation that accords with everything Husserl had to say on the topic. The reason is simply that he at various times defended somewhat different views on the matter. But not only will I claim that my interpretation does justice to core components of his proposal, I also think it makes Husserl's position far more plausible.

¹Incidentally, this is also why Husserl's subsequent account of intersubjectivity far from being merely one constitutive analysis among many is absolutely crucial. On its success depends Husserl's account of reality, and therefore the viability of transcendental phenomenology as a whole.

The first issue that needs to be settled is obviously whether it is true to ascribe some kind of idealism to Husserl, and whether the idealism in question is an integral part of his conception of phenomenology. This can hardly be disputed, but just in case, here is a pretty unequivocal statement:

Carried out with this systematic concreteness, phenomenology is *eo ipso* “transcendental idealism”, though in a fundamentally and essentially new sense. [...] *The proof of this idealism is therefore phenomenology itself.* Only someone who misunderstands either the deepest sense of intentional method, or that of transcendental reduction, or perhaps both, can attempt to separate phenomenology from transcendental idealism (Hua 1/118-119).

It would be premature to conclude that this basically settles the issue, however. Consider, for instance, the following statement by Husserl found in a text dating from 1937:

Here at the outset I require only this one thing, that one keep these sorts of prejudice, one’s knowing in advance the meaning of those words that I have furnished with entirely new sense: phenomenology, transcendental, idealism [...] firmly locked away in one’s breast [...]. Initially, one hears and sees what is being presented, one goes along and sees where it might lead and what might be accomplished with it (Hua 6/439-440).

To put it differently, the issue is not whether or not Husserl was committed to a form of idealism. The issue is what precisely this idealism amounted to. In order to get a sound grasp on the basic nature of Husserl’s phenomenology, I think it is crucially important to recognize that although Husserl used many traditional terms, the use of these terms was by no means traditional. This, I would insist, also goes for the notion of *transcendental idealism*.

2. The transcendental turn

In 1925 Husserl wrote a letter to Ernst Cassirer where he described the development of his own appreciation of Kant in some detail (Husserl 1994, 5/4). Initially, Husserl had been strongly influenced by Brentano’s neg-

ative appraisal of Kant, but subsequent studies made Husserl realize the affinity between his own project and that of Kant. There is, of course, one place where Kant's influence on Husserl is particularly visible. As Husserl admits in *Erste Philosophie I*, when he decided to designate his own phenomenology as transcendental, he was exactly making use of a Kantian concept (Hua 7/230).

One way to interpret Kant's revolutionary *Copernican turn* is by seeing it as amounting to the realization that our cognitive apprehension of reality is more than a mere mirroring of a pre-existing world. Moreover, transcendental philosophy transformed the pre-critical search for the most fundamental building blocks of empirical reality into a reflection on what conditions something must satisfy in order to count as "real"; what is the condition of possibility for the appearance of empirical objects? In short, the goal of transcendental philosophy is not to offer a metaphysical account of reality, but to justify and understand what it means for the world to count as real and objective.

Why does Husserl's phenomenology merit the name transcendental? Husserl's standard answer is that phenomenology is transcendental because its aim is to clarify the constitution of transcendence (Hua 17/259). Or as he puts it in *Cartesianische Meditationen*, the two concepts transcendence and transcendental are correlated and the task of transcendental phenomenology consists in *elucidating* mundane transcendence through a systematic disclosure of constituting intentionality (Hua 1/34, 65). What does this amount to? Husserl concedes that traditional epistemology has also been confronted with the problem of transcendence, but in its traditional form, the problem has been how certainties and evidences pertaining to the immanency of conscious life can gain objective significance (Hua 1/116, cf. 16/139), or to put it more bluntly, the problem has been how to get outside the sphere of consciousness. But as Husserl makes clear, this rendering of the problem makes it completely nonsensical. It presents us with a pseudo-problem, which only arises if one forgets the true lesson of intentionality and conceives of the mind as an isolated world-detached entity. As he writes in the volume entitled *Transzendentaler Idealismus* it is not a mere happy coincidence that there is such a perfect match between

the object itself and the way it appears to us in perception. It is not as if we have two independently variable dimensions that by happenstance fit each other, as if the manifold of appearances could be given in a regulated way and the object still fail to exist, or the object exist even in the absence of the possibility of such givenness (Hua 36/30). Rather, as he puts it slightly later in the book: “object, objective being, and consciousness belong *a priori* inseparably together” (Hua 36/73).

How do they belong together? The constitutive relation that supposedly obtains between consciousness and reality is interpreted by Moran and Smith as amounting to a metaphysical dependence. This is why they both argue that Husserl is a metaphysical idealist.

One way to counter this interpretation is well known. It consists in interpreting Husserl’s transcendental reduction in such a way that it aims at excluding the actual existence of the world from consideration (Carr 1999, 74). That is, all reference to the being of transcendent reality is dropped in order to focus instead on its sense or meaning (Carr 1999, 80). On such a reading, Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology is concerned with meaning rather than with being, and all that transcendental subjectivity can be said to be constituting is the meaning of the world and not its being (Carr 1999, 108). For the very same reason, Husserl’s idealism is taken to be of a methodological kind rather than of a substantial or metaphysical kind. To put it differently, Husserl’s transcendental investigation is carried out under metaphysical suspension. It is metaphysically neutral.

In my view, however, this is the wrong way to counter the interpretations of Moran and Smith. Although I would agree that transcendental phenomenology and metaphysics are two different enterprises, I don’t think it will do to interpret transcendental phenomenology as if it is metaphysically neutral. As if it was in principle compatible with a variety of different metaphysical views, including metaphysical realism or subjective idealism. To put it differently, transcendental phenomenology cannot permit itself to remain neutral or indifferent to the question concerning the relationship between phenomena and reality. But by having to take a stand on this relationship, phenomenology also by necessity has meta-

physical implications (cf. Zahavi 2001, 2008a). I think such an interpretation is clearly supported by texts from Husserl's own hands, for instance the following:

Finally, lest any misunderstanding arise, I would point out that, as already stated, phenomenology indeed *excludes every naïve metaphysics* that operates with absurd things in themselves, but *does not exclude metaphysics as such* (Hua 1/38-39).

But does the fact that phenomenology doesn't suspend or ignore questions regarding being and reality, does the fact that phenomenology isn't simply metaphysical neutral but on the contrary has metaphysical implications entail that Husserl's transcendental idealism is a form of metaphysical idealism? I think not. A closer examination of Husserl's notion of the "absolute" will explain why.

3. Husserl's absolute

As already mentioned, Moran and Smith both interpret the constitutive relation that obtains between subjectivity and reality as a relation of metaphysical dependence. Now, there are multiple ways to interpret such dependence. I cannot discuss them all, but it should be obvious that many of them can be ruled out right away. One such possibility would be to interpret the metaphysical dependence as a causal dependence. This would literally turn the transcendental subject into some kind of prime mover, and make Husserl's phenomenology a competitor to various astrophysical theories regarding the birth of the universe. Given that Husserl on many occasions distinguishes intentionality from causality, I think we can safely leave this interpretation to a side. It is also supported by a remark found in *Ideen I*, where Husserl makes it clear that consciousness is absolute in a totally different sense from that in which a divine being might be said to be absolute (Hua 3/125). Another option is obviously the suggestion made by Smith, namely to interpret the constitutive relation as a question of supervenience. On Smith's definition, supervenience is to be interpreted as entailing the claim that worldly objects are ultimately nothing over and above experiential facts. You might wonder whether this would not ulti-

mately turn Husserl into a kind of phenomenalist, a position he on many occasions explicitly distances himself from (e.g., Hua 19/764-65). But even if we avoid that specific mistake, and claim that the metaphysical dependence of worldly objects on consciousness instead of being of a reductive kind – worldly objects cannot straightforwardly be reduced to conscious states – is more akin to a relation of founding, I still think we would be faced with something approaching a category mistake. To claim that the relation that obtains between the constituting subject and the constituted object is a relation of supervenience would supposedly entail that if we carried out a sufficiently thorough scientific investigation of the object, we would at some point reach its supervenience base and metaphysical source, namely transcendental subjectivity, but this suggestion strikes me as misguided. Transcendental subjectivity is to be disclosed by means of a reflective move, and not by means of a meticulous investigation and dissection of the object. To put it differently, when Husserl argues for the constitutive link between mind and world, this is not meant to amount to a form of panpsychism. As he points out in *Transzendentaler Idealismus*: If we look closer at reality, we will not find consciousness all over the place. If we analyse a physical object, it does not dissolve in consciousness, it dissolves in atoms and molecules. Thus, it is not as if statements about botanical or geological states of affairs are henceforth to be reinterpreted as statements about mental content (Hua 36/28-29).

Husserl's decisive point is that reality far from being some brute fact that is detached from every context of experience and from every conceptual framework is rather a system of validity and meaning which needs subjectivity, that is, experiential and conceptual perspectives if it is to manifest and articulate itself. It is in this sense that reality depends upon subjectivity, which is why Husserl claims that it is just as nonsensical to speak of an absolute mind-independent reality as it is to speak of a circular square (Hua 3/120). This is not to deny or question the existence of the real world, but simply to reject an objectivistic interpretation of its ontological status. In this sense, Husserl's transcendental idealism can be seen as an attempt to redeem rather than renounce the realism of the natural attitude. Or, to put it differently, Husserl would claim that the

transcendental reduction enables us to understand and account for the realism that is intrinsic to the natural attitude. In fact, as we know Husserl even writes that his transcendental idealism contains natural realism within itself (Hua 9/254).

But how does this square with Husserl notorious statement in *Ideen I*, where he writes that “pure” consciousness can be considered an independent realm of being, and claims that even though consciousness would be modified if the world of objects were annihilated; it would not be affected in its own existence (Hua 3/104-105).¹ This is (regrettably) not to be dismissed as an isolated blunder. We can find plenty of statements from the period 1913-15, where Husserl repeats what he said in *Ideen I* and claims that the existence of consciousness does not require an actually existing world (Hua 36/78-79). Whereas the existence of consciousness is absolute and necessary, the existence of the world is merely accidental and relative (Hua 36/111). This is why consciousness, according to Husserl, must be considered the root (*Wurzel*) or source (*Quelle*) of every other form of being (Hua 36/70).

Can one reconcile such statements with the claim that Husserl is not a metaphysical idealist? I think so. Let us consider the clear and concise presentation of his idealism that we find in § 55 of the lecture course *Einleitung in die Philosophie* from 1922-23, which has now been published in *Husserliana* 35.

Husserl starts out by declaring that “ein Idealismus, der sozusagen die Materie totschrägt, der die erfahrene Natur für bloßen Schein erklärt und nur das seelische Sein für das wahre erklärt, ist verkehrt” (Hua 35/276).

¹Let me emphasize that Husserl’s imagined annihilation of the world must not be interpreted as an attempt to drive a wedge in between the world as we experience it and the real world. Husserl is most definitely not claiming that it makes sense to suppose that the phenomenologically given could remain the same while the world itself ceased to exist. Quite to the contrary, in fact, since he explicitly states that such a proposal is nonsensical (Hua 34/402). Husserl’s point is rather that our experiences might conceivably cease to be ordered in a harmonious and coherent fashion, further, he argues that we in such a case would no longer have any reason to believe in the existence of an objective world. Thus, Husserl is not arguing that every type of experience is compatible with the absence of the world or that every type of experience would remain the same even if the world didn’t exist. All he is saying is that some form of consciousness might be possible even in the absence of an objective world.

Anybody who has grasped the true sense of the phenomenological method will realize that

Kein intentionaler Gegenstand ist in dem jeweiligen *cogito* ein reelles Moment; wenn viele Bewusstseinsakte denselben intentionalen Gegenstand evidenterweise in sich tragen, so haben sie nicht ein reelles Moment gemeinsam (Hua 35/276).

To put it differently, a proper analysis of intentionality shows the falsity of subjective idealism. As Husserl then continues, however,

man wird sich der weiteren Evidenz nicht entziehen können, dass auch das wahre Sein nur seinen Sinn hat als das Korrelat der besonderen Intentionalität der Vernunft, somit als eine ideale Einheit, wesensmäßig unabtrennbar von Ich und Ichbewusstsein. [...] Das wahre Sein, und speziell etwa das wahre Sein der Natur, ist nicht ein Zweites neben dem bloß intentionalen Sein. Das gilt, obschon wir scheiden müssen zwischen der von uns jetzt gerade so und unvollständig, unter Präsumtionen vermeinten Natur und der Natur selbst. [...] [A]ber die Natur an sich selbst, als Kontrast zu allen einseitigen unvollkommenen Gegebenheitsweisen, ist nicht ein widersinniges Jenseits alles Bewusstseins überhaupt und aller möglichen Erkenntnissetzung [...] [s]ondern es ist eine im Ego selbst entsprungene und jederseits zu konstituierende regulative Idee (Hua 35/276-277).

Husserl next explains that a straightforward object-directed investigation will only discover various determinations of the object and never reveal transcendental subjectivity, but what transcendental reflection can nevertheless unearth is the following a priori law:

Kein Gegenstand ist als Wirklichkeit denkbar ohne die wirkliche Subjektivität, die befähigt ist, diesen Gegenstand in wirklichem Erkennen zu realisieren. Man kann sehr wohl sagen: kein Objekt ohne Subjekt wie kein Subjekt ohne Objekt, wo Objekt Gegenstand in weitestem Sinne besagt (Hua 35/277-278).

Such a phrasing might suggest a straightforward equality, but Husserl is quick to dismiss such an idea. Whereas objects possess relative being, the subject possesses absolute being. But what then does absolute being amount to? Here is what Husserl says:

So hat also nur das Subjekt beständig verwirklichtes und wirklich selbständiges Sein: absolutes Sein, wie wir auch sagen, eben als Sein im Für-sich-selbst-Sein (Hua 35/278).

Or as it is rephrased a couple of pages later: the reality of the I, is the reality “eines absolutes Seins, eines sich selbst erlebenden und sich für sich selbst konstituierenden” (Hua 35/282). As I think should be clear from these statements, the absoluteness that Husserl ascribes to subjectivity pertains to its manifestation. Subjectivity is for-itself, it is self-manifesting or self-constituting, whereas this determination is something that all objects per definition lack (Hua 35/278). The condition for the appearance of any object is located outside that object itself, and to that extent objects are relative and dependent. But the fact that consciousness possesses this form of phenomenological absoluteness doesn't entail that consciousness is a metaphysical absolute. Or to put it differently, the absolute of phenomenology is not the absolute of metaphysics. That Husserl was not the only phenomenologist to think along these lines is easy to show. Consider, for instance, the following point made by Sartre in the introduction to *L'être et le néant*:

Consciousness has nothing substantial, it is pure “appearance” in the sense that it exists only to the degree to which it appears. But it is precisely because consciousness is pure appearance, because it is total emptiness (since the entire world is outside it) – it is because of this identity of appearance and existence within it that it can be considered as the absolute (Sartre 2003, 12).¹

That Husserl's absolute is a non-metaphysical absolute was already emphasized by Boehm, who went on to argue that the reason why Husserl denied the absoluteness of reality was because he wished to preserve its independence and transcendence (Boehm 1959, 231-232, cf. Hua 3/92-93 and Alweiss 2003). It is surely no coincidence that Husserl elsewhere is at pains to point out that any talk of consciousness as being absolute isn't meant to entail that every other type of being is merely apparent, unreal or fictitious. The latter claim would in fact be completely false. Nature is

¹Similar ideas can also be found in Henry. For an extensive discussion, cf. Zahavi 1999.

real in the true and full sense of the word, and it would be quite misguided to measure this kind of being with a yardstick that belongs elsewhere in order to somehow discredit its status (Husserl 36/70-71).

It has occasionally been claimed that far from seeking to question the existence of the world, the real purpose of Husserl's thought-experiment is to reveal that there is more to consciousness than merely being a worldly object. Thus, Husserl's real aim is to emphasize the difference between conceiving of the subject as an object in the world and conceiving of the subject as a subject for the world, i.e., as the meaning-bestowing and world-disclosing subject of intentionality. Granted that this is correct, as I believe it is, one might concede that Husserl's Cartesian inspired world-annihilation is ultimately quite misleading. This is so, first and foremost, because any talk of an imagined annihilation of the world is bound to give rise to all kinds of misunderstandings, one of which is the view that the task of phenomenology is to investigate the mind in isolation and separation from both world and intersubjectivity. Having conceded this, however, one could then proceed by pointing out that Husserl himself eventually became dissatisfied with this approach. For a concrete and early example, consider a text written around 1914-1915, where Husserl argues that actual being, or the being of an actual reality, doesn't simply entail a relation to some formal cognizing subject, but that the constituting subject in question must necessarily be an embodied and embedded subject. To put it differently, already in this period, Husserl is claiming that the subject in order to constitute the world must necessarily be bodily embedded in the very world that it is seeking to constitute (Hua 36/133). In addition, as he then continues, the constitution of an objective world also requires that the subject stands in an essential relation to an open plurality of other embodied and embedded subjects (Hua 36/135). These are obviously ideas that Husserl were later to elaborate much further.

Husserl's transcendental idealism is committed to the view that the world is necessarily correlated to an intersubjective community of embodied subjects. His transcendental idealism doesn't deny the existence of mind-independent objects in the uncontroversial sense of empirical realism, but only in the controversial sense of metaphysical realism. Indeed,

I would suggest that a useful way to interpret Husserl's transcendental idealism is by defining it negatively as a rejection of metaphysical realism. One way to define metaphysical realism is to see it as being guided by a certain conception of knowledge. Knowledge is taken to consist in a faithful mirroring of a mind-independent reality. It is taken to be knowledge of a reality which exists independently of that knowledge, and indeed independently of any thought and experience (Williams 2005, 48). If we want to know true reality, we should aim at describing the way the world is, independently of all the ways in which it happens to present itself to us human beings, that is, we should aim for a description where all traces of ourselves have been removed. Metaphysical realism assumes that everyday experience combines subjective and objective features and that we can reach an objective picture of what the world is really like by stripping away the subjective. It consequently argues that there is a clear distinction to be drawn between the properties things have 'in themselves' and the properties which are 'projected by us'. Whereas the world of appearance, the world as it is for us in daily life, combines subjective and objective features, science captures the objective world, the world as it is in itself.

Husserl would reject this view. He would reject the suggestion that science can provide us with a description from a view from nowhere as if science simply mirrors the way in which pre-existing and mind-independent nature classifies itself. He would argue that a view from nowhere is unattainable, just as he would deny that it is possible to look at our experiences sideways on to see whether they match with reality. This is so, not because such views are incredibly hard to reach, but because the very idea of such views is nonsensical.

To define transcendental idealism as basically amounting to a rejection of metaphysical realism, to define it in terms of its deliberate blurring of the distinction between ontology and epistemology, might at first sight appear as a rather deflationary definition, but not only does it capture some of Husserl's main motives for advocating a form of transcendental idealism. It is also a definition that happens to make transcendental idealism much less marginal than one might initially have expected. In fact,

given this definition it can even be said to have had quite a following in 20th century philosophy. Not only will Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger on this definition count as transcendental idealists, but so will a number of prominent figures in analytical philosophy, who all argue that the only justification obtainable and the only justification required is one that is internal to the world of experience and to its intersubjective practices. To that extent, I would actually argue that Husserl's conception of the transcendental is distinctly modern.

Let me provide three examples:

- Davidson has occasionally been taken as a staunch realist, but in his *Dewey Lectures* he regretted that he had advertised his own position as a brand of realism (Davidson 1990, 304). As he then went on to say, realism – understood as the position that truth is “radically non-epistemic” and that all our best researched and established beliefs and theories may be false – is a view he now considered incomprehensible (Davidson 1990, 308-309). As he would later write in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*: “A community of minds is the basis of knowledge; it provides the measure of all things. It makes no sense to question the adequacy of this measure, or to seek a more ultimate standard” (Davidson 2001, 218).

- McDowell has been quite explicit in affirming his sympathy for post-Kantian (transcendental) idealism (McDowell 2002, 271), and it is obvious that he sees no conflict between doing so and at the same time endorsing a form of direct perceptual realism. As McDowell argues, the direct perceptual realism that he recommends on transcendental grounds is one that lets experience be an openness to how things are, i.e., one that denies that we as cognizing beings are somehow cut off from the world as it exists “in itself” (McDowell 2002, 291).

- Putnam has presented his own view as an attempt to find a third way beyond classical realism and subjective idealism, and between “reactionary metaphysics and irresponsible relativism” (Putnam 1999, 5). Putnam consequently sees no conflict between his rejection of metaphysical realism and his endorsement of a kind of empirical realism. Despite their attempt to monopolize the term realism, metaphysical (scientific) realists have frequently made the idealist move of making a certain restricted the-

oretical outlook the measure of what counts as real. As a result, the existence of such everyday objects as tables, chairs, nations, economic crises, and wars have been denied with the argument that none of these entities figure in the account of reality provided by natural science (Putnam 1987, 3-4). When Putnam insists that the metaphysical realists do not take natural realism sufficiently seriously, and when he argues that it is the philosophers traditionally accused of idealism, namely the Kantians, the Pragmatists, and the Phenomenologists, who actually respect and honor our natural realism (Putnam 1987, 12), he is, unwittingly, following in the footsteps of Husserl. As Husserl declared in a famous letter to Émile Baudin in 1934: "No ordinary 'realist' has ever been so realistic and so concrete as I, the phenomenological 'idealist'" (Husserl 1994, 7/16).

4. Conclusion

To quickly sum up my conclusion: I think it is both possible and desirable to interpret Husserl's transcendental idealism in a less metaphysical way than Smith and Moran and many other critics have done. Such a reading will at the same time reveal a greater continuity between Husserl's project and various 20th century positions than might initially have been expected. On my reading, Husserl is committed to the view that reality depends transcendently upon consciousness (though I also think he eventually veered towards a view that to a larger extent emphasized the importance of facticity and passivity and the interdependence of subjectivity, intersubjectivity and world, thereby also transforming the very notion of the absolute – but that is another story).¹ This view has various metaphysical implications – it has implications for our fundamental understanding of what counts as real and it leads to a rejection of metaphysical realism – but it doesn't entail that consciousness is the metaphysical origin or source of reality. Husserl might indeed consider consciousness a necessary condition for reality. To that extent, Smith is right in saying that for Husserl nothing would exist in the absence of consciousness. But there is a long way from such a claim to the far more radical claim that consciousness

¹For various explorations of these issues, cf. Zahavi 1999, 2003, 2004, 2008b, 2009.

is a sufficient condition, though that seems to be what Smith's reading amounts to when he interprets the constitutive relation as a question of supervenience, and claims that physical facts are nothing over and above experiential facts. By contrast, as I see it, Boehm got it right, when he 50 years ago wrote:

Wäre *nicht* das absolute Bewußtsein, *nichts* vermöchte zu sein. Es heißt aber *nicht*: *Durch* das absolute Bewußtsein ist alles, was ist. [...] Nichts ist ohne das absolute Bewußtsein, wiewohl nichts ist mit dem absoluten Bewußtsein. Das Bewußtsein ist nämlich ein transzendentes Absolutes, sofern es das „absolut“ notwendige Fundament alles anderen – alles realen – Seins ist. Aber keineswegs ist schon alles andere Sein – oder vermag auch nur zu sein –, wenn bloß das absolute Bewußtsein ist (Boehm 1959, 238-239).

If my proposed interpretation of Husserl's transcendental idealism is correct, the latter is obviously not something that can easily be removed from his philosophy as a whole. On the contrary, it remains an integral part of his very conception of phenomenology. This was also clearly affirmed by Husserl himself:

Im Grunde genommen liegt schon in der phänomenologischen Reduktion, der richtig verstandenen, die Marschroute auf den transzendentalen Idealismus vorgedeutet, wie denn die ganze Phänomenologie nichts anderes ist als die erste streng wissenschaftliche Gestalt dieses Idealismus (8/181).

Husserl's notion of reduction has, of course, been almost as reviled as his transcendental idealism. Although I have no time to argue for this now – I have done so elsewhere – I think much of the standard criticism is based on something approaching a complete misunderstanding of the term. As I see it, Husserl's reduction constitutes the original breakthrough. It announces the transcendental move that once and for all opens the field of phenomenological research, thereby permitting an investigation of the dimension of phenomenality as such. It is a move from a straightforward metaphysical or empirical investigation of objects to an investigation of the very framework of meaning and intelligibility that makes any such straightforward investigation possible in the first place. Moreover,

it is an opening that is presupposed in every proposed radicalization by subsequent phenomenologists. This is also why I don't think that contemporary phenomenology can or should dispense with Husserl's reduction or with his properly understood transcendental idealism (though one might indeed ask whether the term "idealism" is well chosen, or whether it rather remains so tainted that it would be better to replace it). To that extent, I would obviously consider the question regarding the future prospects of phenomenology inseparable from the question regarding the future prospects of Husserlian phenomenology.

As I said in the beginning, Husserl might have been more concerned with the continuing relevance of his transcendental project than with the extent to which the details of his concrete analyses were taken up by future generations of researchers. We shouldn't forget, however, that Husserl also stressed the importance of providing minute and careful analyses at the expense of developing ambitious and speculative systems. As he wrote in a letter to Natorp, he remained unsatisfied "as long as the large banknotes and bills are not turned into small change" (Husserl 1994, 5/56). After prolonged discussions of methodology, constitution and transcendental idealism, it might be both tempting and perhaps also prudent to take Husserl's own advice to heart.

Phenomenology should capitalize on the fact that other philosophical traditions and scientific disciplines can profit from its meticulous investigations of concrete phenomena. At the same time, it should also continue to develop and refine its own distinctive kind of transcendental philosophy. In my view, Husserlian phenomenology remains of relevance on both counts.

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