

## HUSSERL'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL STANDPOINT

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**ABSTRACT:** Husserl's phenomenology is not an attempt to answer questions about contingent fact and existence. Rather, it is an attempt to specify conceptual truths about phenomena. In particular, it takes no stand on the existence of other minds. Thus, any interpretation of Husserl's answer to the problem of intersubjectivity as affirming the existence of other minds is mistaken.

**H**ow should we describe phenomenological reduction, the methodological device with which Husserl begins to philosophize? What is the motivation for the reduction? Are there conclusive reasons for rejecting Husserl's beginning standpoint?

Years ago Suzanne Cunningham argued that phenomenological reduction should be rejected because it entails an incoherent private language (Cunningham 1976). I defended Husserl and argued that Cunningham's arguments do not prove that Husserl's reduction is committed to a private language (Hutcheson 1981). Further, I saw no reason to say that a private language is incoherent in the first place (Hutcheson 1986). Despite agreeing with my arguments, Brian Harding recently argued in this journal that I agree with Cunningham on a fundamental point, and this alleged agreement is the rationale for him to correct us both with an interpretation of Husserl based on *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Here I want to argue for two things: (1) Harding misinterpreted my arguments by attributing assumptions to me that I never made, and even would reject, and (2) Harding has misunderstood Husserl's phenomenology, too.

Harding's aim is "to defend Husserl against the criticism that his phenomenology is incapable of giving a satisfactory account of intersubjectivity" (Harding 2005: 141). He thinks that as long as Husserl's philosophy is interpreted as being neutral about the existence of other minds, that criticism cannot be answered successfully (Harding 2005: 141). To summarize his argument:

1. According to Hutcheson, Husserl takes no stand on the existence of other minds.
2. To give a satisfactory account of intersubjectivity is to affirm that there are other minds.
3. To affirm that there are other minds is to take a stand on the existence of other minds.
4. Thus, if Hutcheson were right about the interpretation of Husserl's ideas, then the criticism, that his phenomenology is incapable of giving a satisfactory account of intersubjectivity, would be correct.

Harding does not state all of this explicitly, but I think I can show that this is his argument. Since 3 is self-evident, 1 is true, and the argument is valid, the question is whether 2 is a statement of Harding's position. I think it is. For one thing, Harding endorses 4, and it is a straightforward consequence of 1, 2, and 3. Second, Harding thinks that his interpretation of Husserl is an alternative to denying or being neutral about the existence of others:

By 'lonely ego' I mean an ego not directly involved in intersubjective relationships; either negating the existence of other minds (this is Cunningham's position) or assuming a neutral stance regarding their existence (this is Hutcheson's). In both cases, the ego is not intimately related to any other egos. . . . [W]hile the private language criticism of Husserl may not be successful, the answer to that critique does not go far enough towards answering the broader criticism of the lack of intersubjectivity in Husserl's work described by Schmid and others. Correcting the interpretation of Husserl that underlies the (PLC) debate and answering the broader intersubjective critique go hand in hand. (Harding 2005: 144)

What is the alternative to denying or being neutral about the existence of other minds? It is affirming their existence. Thus, Harding thinks that 2 is true.

It is noteworthy that Harding infers a "lack of intimate relationship" to other minds from not affirming (being neutral about or denying) their existence. Since Harding treats affirming the existence of other minds as a necessary condition for answering the "broader criticism," both aspects of the problem of intersubjectivity he identifies (providing a satisfactory account of the existence of other egos or minds, or explaining the relationship of the ego to them) pivot on affirming the existence of other minds (Harding 2005: 142).

However, Husserl does not conceive of the problem of intersubjectivity, or a successful answer to it, as requiring or including an affirmation of the existence of other minds. Harding's premise 2 is a false interpretation of Husserl's phenomenology. I have argued for this elsewhere (Hutcheson 1980).

Let me add to what I wrote in "Husserl's Problem of Intersubjectivity." If Husserl were to affirm the existence of other minds, that would be realism about other minds, a transcendental realism. Husserl regards transcendental realism as "absurd." Husserl is quite consistent on this point. In *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl makes it

clear that his philosophy is Cartesian in name only (Husserl 1960: 23–25). Descartes aimed to infer the existence of the world, including other minds, from the cogito and God. Husserl regards that as a misinterpretation of consciousness itself and what makes sense from a phenomenological standpoint. There are parallel passages in the *Crisis* (Husserl 1970: 73–84), and so Harding cannot truthfully claim that my interpretation relies too heavily on *Cartesian Meditations*.

Why does Husserl regard transcendental realism as absurd? Husserl does not even think that affirming the existence of other minds would be desirable. Husserl conceived of philosophy as answering the most fundamental questions, and for him, those are questions about phenomena, not existence. For Husserl, affirming the existence of other minds would be to abandon philosophical ground. Chafing at misunderstandings of his phenomenology, Husserl writes:

We can see how difficult it is to maintain and use such unheard-of change of attitude as that of the radical and universal epoche. Right away 'natural common sense,' some aspect of the naive validity of the world, breaks through at some point and adulterates the new kind of thinking made possible and necessary in the epoche. (Whence also the naive objections of almost all of my philosophical contemporaries to my 'Cartesianism' or to the 'phenomenological reduction' for which I have prepared the way through this presentation of the Cartesian epoche.) This nearly ineradicable naivete is also responsible for the fact that for centuries almost no one took exception to the 'obviousness' of the possibility of inferences from the ego and its cognitive life to an 'outside,' and no one actually raised the question of whether, in respect of this egological sphere of being, an 'outside' can have any meaning at all. (Husserl 1970: 80)

Although Husserl does not assert that an inference to an outside is senseless here, he does strongly suggest it. Further, he does say that an inference to an outside is senseless elsewhere (Husserl 1969: 230–231). Affirming the existence of other minds would constitute an inference to an outside. It is ironic that Harding, at one point, suggests that I rely too heavily on *Cartesian Meditations*. He even thinks I attribute to Husserl Cartesian-inspired skepticism about other minds. However, I have consistently interpreted Husserl as a non-Cartesian. Unfortunately, Harding has unintentionally aligned Husserl with Cartesianism.

This points to the motivation for phenomenological reduction. For Husserl, it was a way of separating questions of (contingent) fact and existence from philosophical questions about phenomena. It is not that Husserl regards the existence of other minds as doubtful. It is that he regards the affirmation of their existence as not a philosophical statement. Similarly, when I interpret Husserl as being neutral about the existence of other minds, it is not because I think (or believe that Husserl thinks) that other minds are doubtful. Thus, Harding is mistaken when he writes: "I am taking it that neutrality about other minds entails a certain skeptical distance from them" (Harding 2005: 144). No. For Husserl, neutrality about other minds separates non-philosophical from philosophical questions about them. I did argue

that neutrality about other minds entails the *coherence* of skepticism about other minds (Hutcheson 1986). But that is a far cry from stating that skepticism about other minds is *true*.

Harding's statement that "neutrality about other minds entails a certain skeptical distance from them" is clearly false. There might be, and often are, non-skeptical reasons for remaining neutral about something. For example, a philosopher might argue that creationists' arguments for equal time are without merit, and yet remain neutral about whether evolutionary theory is, in the main, true. The philosopher might be completely confident that the basic statements of evolutionary theory are true, choosing to refrain from passing judgment because that is the expertise of biologists and other scientists, rather than philosophers. The reason very well might be that creationists' arguments for equal time can be demolished without making that commitment. When a philosopher criticizes an argument for a particular conclusion, she need not argue that the conclusion is false. Similarly, Husserl can remain neutral about the existence of other minds even though he is not skeptical at all about their existence.

Even though neutrality about other minds does not entail skepticism about other minds, it is a further question whether Husserl thought neutrality about something could be reconciled with complete confidence in its truth. He does. Even in *Ideas* (§ 31), in which Husserl repeatedly characterizes phenomenological reduction as the attempt to doubt (thus inviting misinterpretations as endorsing skepticism), Husserl notes that "we can *attempt to doubt* anything and everything, however convinced we may be concerning what we doubt, even though the evidence which seals our assurance is completely adequate" (Husserl 1931: 107–108). On the next page Husserl writes: "In relation to every thesis and wholly uncoerced we can use this peculiar ἐποχή, a certain refraining from judgment which is compatible with the unshaken and unshakable because self-evidencing conviction of Truth" (Husserl 1931: 109).

Harding's remark that "neutrality about other minds entails a certain skeptical distance from them" is off hand, introduced without any supporting argument at all, and yet it plays a crucial role in his argument. If *skepticism* about other minds were entailed by neutrality, then that *would* render any interpretation of Husserl's phenomenology as being neutral about the existence of other minds vulnerable to the criticism that it is committed to epistemic solipsism. But there is no such entailment. The statement, "neutrality about other minds entails a certain skeptical distance from them," is demonstrably false.

Harding might have stated a different argument:

1. To answer the problem of intersubjectivity successfully is to refute skepticism about other minds.
2. Neutrality about other minds entails other minds skepticism.
3. Thus, the problem of intersubjectivity cannot be answered successfully if Husserl were neutral about other minds.

But we can see that not even this would succeed, since neutrality does not entail skepticism. Husserl's motivation was not the Cartesian one of doubting everything that can be doubted on the basis of a skeptical hypothesis, not even in *Cartesian Meditations*. His motivation is to demarcate philosophical questions. Thus, Harding is wrong about my interpretation. He is also wrong about Husserl.

It might be replied that I refer only to Husserl's position in *Cartesian Meditations*, not to the stance taken in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. However, Husserl does not endorse affirming the existence of other minds, or anything else, in the *Crisis*, either. Consider:

Our epoche (the one determining our present investigation) denied us all world-life and its worldly interests. It gave us a position above these. Any interest in the being, actuality, or nonbeing of the world, i.e., any interest theoretically oriented toward knowledge of the world, and even any interest which is practical in the usual sense, with its dependence on the presuppositions of its situational truths, is forbidden; this applies not only to the pursuit, for ourselves, of our own interests, (we who are philosophizing) but also to any participation in the interests of our fellow men—for in this case we would be interested indirectly in existing actuality. No objective truth, whether in the prescientific or the scientific sense, i.e., no claim about objective being, ever enters our sphere of scientific discipline, whether as a premise or as a conclusion. (Husserl 1970: 175)

If claims about existing actuality are excluded by the epoche, and the claim that there are other minds is a claim about existing actuality, then the claim that there are other minds is excluded by the epoche. Thus, if Husserl thought that a satisfactory solution to the problem of intersubjectivity can be given from the phenomenological standpoint, then Husserl rejects the belief that to give a satisfactory account of intersubjectivity is to affirm that there are other minds. And he does so in the *Crisis*. Thus, the interpretation of Husserl as affirming the existence of other minds from the phenomenological standpoint is unwarranted.

Furthermore, Harding himself makes this surprising statement about phenomenological reduction: "The phenomenological reduction (or epoche) means treating phenomena as mere perceptions without making any assumption about their external existence" (Harding 2005: 142). Here Harding appears to be saying that phenomenological reduction entails neutrality about the existence of things. Does he then think that Husserl abandoned phenomenological reduction in the *Crisis*?

I argued that Husserl does not aim to affirm the existence of other minds, that Harding has misinterpreted Husserl's phenomenology on that score. But can we give a satisfactory account of intersubjectivity without affirming that there are other minds?

Suppose we revise the argument I stated Harding might have used:

1. To answer the problem of intersubjectivity successfully is to refute skepticism about other minds.

2. To refute skepticism about other minds is to prove that there are other minds.
3. Thus, the problem of intersubjectivity cannot be answered successfully if Husserl were neutral about other minds.

This argument has a different second premise. Is it possible that Husserl's phenomenological standpoint rules out a satisfactory account of intersubjectivity? The answer depends on what a satisfactory account of intersubjectivity is. Consider the statement "To answer the problem of intersubjectivity successfully is to refute skepticism about other minds." A refutation of skepticism about other minds might consist in proving that we do know that there are other minds (and *a fortiori* that there are other minds). In other words, a refutation of skepticism about other minds might consist in a proof that epistemic solipsism is false. If I am right about Husserl's phenomenology, he offers no proof that epistemic solipsism is false. Such an argument would be incompatible with the phenomenological standpoint.

However, a refutation of skepticism about other minds might consist in a proof that epistemic solipsism is unfounded, rather than false. If Husserl were to begin with the premise that any good reason to endorse epistemic solipsism would be based on experience, Husserl could then add that although experience does sometimes permit (even lead to) doubting whether a particular intentional object is another mind, experience does not offer any reason to endorse the global skepticism about other minds that constitutes epistemic solipsism. Husserl could also trace the conceptual and experiential connections between the belief in other minds and the beliefs in a real public world and knowledge that is shared or possibly shared. In ¶ 29 of *Ideas* and elsewhere, Husserl describes and analyzes from a phenomenological standpoint our taking there to be other minds.

Whatever holds good for me personally, also holds good, as I know, for all other men whom I find present in my world-about-me. Experiencing them as men, I understand and take them as Ego-subjects, units like myself, and related to their natural surroundings. But this in such wise that I apprehend the world-about-them and the world-about-me objectively as one and the same world, which differs in each case only through affecting consciousness differently. Each has his place whence he sees things that are present, and each enjoys accordingly different appearances of the things. For each, again, the fields of perception and memory actually present are different, quite apart from the fact that even that which is here intersubjectively known in common is known in different ways, is differently apprehended, shows different grades of clearness, and so forth. Despite all this, we come to understandings with our neighbours, and set up in common an objective spatio-temporal fact-world as the world about us that is there for us all, and to which we ourselves none the less belong. (Husserl 1931: 105)

Husserl is not asserting that there are other minds there or elsewhere. He is referring to taking there to be other minds and tracing conceptual connections.

To be sure, an advocate of epistemic solipsism would not accept the premise that any good reason to endorse epistemic solipsism would be based on experience. Rather, a skeptic regarding other minds would or could point out that our ordinary claims to know that there are other minds entail the falsehood of skeptical scenarios, according to which there are no other minds. Husserl could have to agree with the entailment, but I think he would disagree with the further contention that the entailment would suffice to make a case for epistemic solipsism. I think Husserl would say that the possibility of the skeptical scenario only shows that the existence of other minds is not apodictically evident. This is in line with what Husserl writes in *Cartesian Meditations*, *Ideas*, and elsewhere.

Consider this passage from *Cartesian Meditations*:

At no point was the transcendental attitude, the attitude of transcendental epoche, abandoned; and our theory of experiencing others did not aim at being and was not at liberty to be anything but explication of the sense, 'others', as it arises from the constitutive productivity of that experiencing: the sense, 'truly existing others,' as it arises from the corresponding harmonious syntheses . . . other transcendental egos, though they are given, not originaliter and in unqualifiedly apodictic evidence, but only in an evidence belonging to 'external' experience. (Husserl 1969: 148–149)

Two things are noteworthy: (1) there is no attempt to prove the existence of others; the aim is to explicate a sense; (2) the evidence of others in experience is not apodictic, which is in keeping with what I have suggested Husserl would say in response to a skeptical argument for epistemic solipsism.

How should we describe phenomenological reduction, the methodological device with which Husserl begins to philosophize? In part we should describe it as entailing neutrality about the existence of things, including the existence of other minds. What is the motivation for the reduction? Husserl sought to demarcate philosophical questions from matters of (contingent) fact and existence.

Are there conclusive reasons for rejecting Husserl's beginning standpoint? I cannot defend an answer here, but I shall try to explicate the philosophical terrain (Hutcheson 1982). Your answer will depend on your conception of philosophy. If you think of philosophy as clarifying *and* affirming or denying our ordinary beliefs, then Husserl's phenomenology is not for you. But if you think that philosophy does not answer all questions, particularly those of contingent fact and existence, then Husserl's phenomenology, which is devoted to a purely conceptual analysis, is not objectionable for bracketing existence. It is a contingent fact that other minds exist. But there are necessary truths linking the concepts of the objective world and of knowledge to the *possibility* of other minds. Husserl's phenomenology is an attempt to clarify those conceptual truths.

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