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Preface

The first phenomenology conference to be held in Australia was initiated and organised by Miss Maurita Harney, with the assistance of the Humanities Research Centre and the Department of Philosophy (School of General Studies) of the Australian National University.

Miss Harney’s efforts were highly appreciated and justly so. The conference was also highly successful, and the interest and participation in the conference surpassed even optimistic expectations: during the week of 12–14 June more than seventy people with a variety of academic backgrounds from all over Australia attended the conference.

Philosophy in Australia has mainly been in the analytic tradition, although individual philosophers have for a long time taken an interest in phenomenological and related approaches to philosophy. With the increasing influence of phenomenology in other disciplines, a conference appeared — and proved — worthwhile not only as an occasion for the exchange of ideas relating to phenomenology, but also as a valuable interdisciplinary forum.

The approach of Husserl and his followers may be seen as a stimulus or an irritant: in either case, its value for the progress of philosophy remains clear, even to those who may wish to apply it to the topics of the ancients.

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The theme of this paper is Husserl's concept of experience, through which I hope to show that and how Husserl's description points the way toward a more adequate account of experience than traditional ones operating within realist-idealistic and rationalist-empiricist frameworks. Husserl's account is at least initially better founded in so far as it attempts to describe experience as experienced, and to uncover how this is possible. Recognising that there are several possible interpretations of some of Husserl's fundamental concepts - and of special relevance here, those of constitution and Transcendental Idealism - I nevertheless wish to avoid arguing that the one I've adopted is the closest to what Husserl 'really meant', and to avoid trying to reconcile Husserl with his critics, and to concentrate on indicating the way in which this interpretation at least enables further fruitful investigation.

In order to achieve this, Husserl is first placed in the context of the tradition, whose fundamental assumptions and approach I hope to bring out through the contrast with Husserl. Husserl's concept of experience is then described, and interpreted in such a way as to direct attention to the decisive break that occurs with Husserl and the radical significance inherent in his conception. More specifically, intentionality as noetic-noematic correlativity is interpreted as showing that objective unities are given through the multiform and multiplicity of noetic and noematic variations. And constitution, as a function of intentionality, is interpreted as showing how it is possible that such objective unities are intended. The purpose is to show that consciousness and the world with its objects are not foreign to one another, that objectivity is infused with subjectivity and subjectivity infused with objectivity, so that we can understand how the world as world, and any object as object comes to have sense for us, that is, comes to be experienceable. Transcendental Idealism will be interpreted accordingly.

Let me first state that my argument is based on Ideas, vol. 1, Cartesian Meditations, and sections of the Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. (1) Much of the other later material of Husserl's work is still inaccessible to me, but from commentators I have gathered that this material could only positively contribute to my argument. Here I am especially thinking of the research into bodily intentionality.

1. Husserl and the Tradition
In the Cartesian Meditations §41 Husserl asks:

"...as a natural man, can I ask seriously and transcendently how I get outside my island of consciousness and how what presents itself in my consciousness as a subjective-evidence process can acquire Objective significance?"

In this question, and in the nexus of problems raised by it, can be found two important grounds on which Husserl's account of experience can be contrasted with the tradition - or at least themes and assumptions inherent in the tradition.

The one ground is methodological, and concerns the importance of enquiring at the transcendental level. Husserl saw the decisive break between his own and other philosophies as resting on their failure to take the transcendental turn, and his thoroughgoing practice of it. Without the transcendental reduction, Husserl argues, it is impossible to reach the ultimate ground of experience and knowledge, and to uncover the essential laws governing Being. A philosophy remaining within the natural attitude remains one science or psychology amongst others, concerned with particular facts.

The other main ground on which Husserl can be distinguished from the tradition concerns the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, between consciousness and world. Husserl did not develop this as a theme indicating the difference between his own and other philosophies. However on the basis of what Husserl says
about experience, and the specific criticisms he makes of the empiricist-realist and rationalist-idealist conceptions of experience, I propose to argue that Husserl's account is fundamentally different from, and goes beyond, the realist and idealist based philosophies. From what he says in the English Preface to Ideas (2) Husserl makes it clear that he understands Transcendental Idealism as standing outside the realism-idealism debate.

Let us first examine Husserl's specific criticisms. In Ideas §12 and §20 Husserl argues that empiricism results in scepticism and absurdity when it identifies experience with sense-experience and hence regards facts of nature as the only possible facts. To be consistent, such an empiricism would be unable to justify its own principles and methodology, just as it rejects ideas and essences as metaphysical entities. Husserl adds further criticisms when this empiricism is associated with realism. (3) It then treats physical nature as an absolute which can never be apprehended itself, but is the cause of subjective appearances and empirical experiences.

The rationalist-idealist position is also criticised in Ideas §21 for failing to recognise the fact of pure intuition and so treating self-evidence as a feeling. More importantly, Husserl is concerned to distinguish his own position from that of subjective idealism for he rejects the idealist transformation of the world into subjective illusion. (4)

It appears that the criticism of the empiricist-realist and rationalist-idealist positions is based on the former treating the world as absolute, and the latter treating the world as illusion. Presumably Husserl would relate the absurdity of these positions to their failure to take the transcendental turn. Another, and not necessarily incompatible, source of this absurdity consists in starting with the assumption that consciousness is closed and the world opaque to it, such that the possibility of experience as anything other than private becomes problematic. There is also a problem in explaining how it is that we are conscious of identical and continuing objects as external to our sphere of consciousness. If we unquestioningly adopt this assumption of two exclusive spheres of being, only one of which we are directly aware, and that is our consciousness, then our solution to the problems of how we can experience identical objects, and how these can have objective significance, will be formulated in terms of idealism and realism. We can follow Berkeley and Hume and deny the existence of a transcendent world, or at least deny our possible knowledge of it, and attribute our experience of identical objects to the imagination. Alternatively, we can follow Descartes and Locke in saying our ideas of objects are representations caused by the objects, and the guarantee of the identity of the represented objects and of their external existence is God or science. Either way we are forced to neglect the world or to neglect consciousness.

The significance of Husserl's theory is that it goes beyond these alternatives. It may seem odd that the quotation I have given from Husserl to formulate the grounds of his difference from the tradition, appears to adopt the same traditional framework. To repeat, Husserl asks:

"...can I ask seriously and transcendently, how I get outside my island of consciousness and how what presents itself in my consciousness as a subjective-evidence process can acquire Objective significance?"

Here consciousness is presented as an island which I have a problem getting out of. However, my argument is that despite Husserl's apparent acceptance of the traditional framework, it is inherent in his conception of intentionality as noetic-noematic correlation, and as constitution, that consciousness and world are not two closed and self-contained spheres of being.

Let us turn now to Husserl's account of experience.

2. Husserl's Concept of Experience

For Husserl consciousness is a stream of experiences characterised by its multiplicity of everchanging modes of experiencing - such as perceiving, reflecting, remembering, willing, - with their multiplicity of everchanging contents of objects. For the purposes of this paper the question of
the ego will be left aside, and attention will be directed toward the two sides of experience already mentioned - the act of experiencing and its object. These aspects of experience need to be further characterised: the particular acts, for instance, according to variations in the levels of clarity and the strength of focus on the objects. (5) In perception we may be focusing on an object whose background environment we are only vaguely aware of, though we may turn our attention to it. The object of experience is given through various perspectival appearances according to manners of appearing such as blurred or bright, and always in relation to other things such as its other sides or aspects, and its environment.

Already it is becoming clear that for Husserl consciousness is an activity, not a receptacle, and that it is not closed to the world. On the contrary, it is characterised by its activity of opening up the world for us. The problem, though, is to understand how it is that through the multiplicity of acts and manners of appearing of objects and so on, objects are given such that we recognise them as the same. In Ideas § 33 Husserl puts the problem more generally, saying he is interested in the essence of consciousness in general, and also in how the 'natural' fact world comes to be known.

Husserl argues that we can only understand how this experience of the 'natural' fact world, how this givenness of identical objects is possible if we refrain from making the existential commitment involved in the natural experience, and 'standing back', reflect on the experience as experienced. It is crucial to note here, that the refraining from the existential commitment is not a doubting or denying of existence. For instance, in perceiving a green leaf I naturally assume that just such a leaf is there in the world and belongs to the tree which equally exists. Husserl is asking us to put aside the question of whether the leaf and its tree really exist, whether the leaf is really green, and to examine what is involved in the perceiving of a green leaf, which includes of course that the perceiving involves a belief that the perceived leaf exists. That is, we reflect on the perceptual experience as a perceiving-perceived relation. We reflect on the experience of ourselves experiencing the world and its objects, accepting that the experiencing posits the world while the reflecting experience leaves this position aside. The world is given, but we don't concern ourselves with justifying its givenness, rather we accept that it is given and explore how it is given and how this is possible.

This means that our own experiences and acts of experiencing are possible objects of further reflective experiences (6), which is made possible by the relative transparency of consciousness (though this transparency has not been shown yet).

We are now in a position to describe the structures of consciousness which make possible the experience of the 'natural' fact world as we experience it.

3.1 Intentionality as Noetic-Noematic Correlation

Having decided that to describe and analyse how the world and its objects come to be for me such as they do, it is necessary to 'stand back' and reflect, Husserl takes as his starting point the characteristic of consciousness to be consciousness of something. That is, the intentional experiences which fully focus on the object and are properly called acts, and those unfulfilled, not yet focused experiences which are nevertheless intentional, such as awareness of the background in perception or 'stirrings' of pleasure. (7)

It is shown that we can describe intentional experiences according to what is involved in the act of experiencing, and according to its intentional correlate. The act of experiencing Husserl calls noesis, and says it is composed of the hyle, otherwise known as sense-data or sensations, and the act proper. The hyle are formed (or synthesised) by the act proper in the process through which the whole act points to an object. (8) (The role of the hyle has been strongly criticised; Husserl, in Cartesian Meditations (9) argues that it should not be treated in an atomistic fashion. However to properly deal with this question would require discussion of the bodily intentionalities, which I have admitted earlier is beyond my scope. So I will leave it open
except to say that the concept of hyle must be accepted
and accounted for in some way - to reject it is to reject
the role of the body and its sense organs in experience.)

As mentioned earlier, there are many types of intentional
acts - perceiving, distrusting, remembering and so on; and
within these we can distinguish between levels of clarity,
focusing, attention and so on. But what is common to the
acts is that they all refer to an object. For every per-
ceiving, something is perceived. This much should serve as
a preliminary characterization of intentional acts. Perhaps
we should add here that Husserl regards perception as the
primordial act of 'outer' perception, because in any willing,
desiring, valuing the 'thing' desired must also be perceived.(10)

Turning now to the intentional correlate of the act, we
find a similarly complex description. The intentional
correlate of the act or noesis Husserl calls noema; in
perception the noema is the "perceived as such". (11) The
noetic-noematic relation is such that every noesis has a
noema - and if we distinguish phases within these we can
follow Husserl in saying: "no noetic phase without a noematic
phase that belongs specifically to it". (12) That is noesis
and noema are correlated. But Husserl stresses that the
relationship between consciousness and its object is not the
same as that between noesis and noema:

"We must stress this point in advance, that the
parallelism between the unity of the noematically
'intended' object, of the object we have in 'mind',
and the constituting formations of consciousness
....... should not be confused with the parallelism
between noesis and noema, understood in particular
as parallelism of noetic and corresponding noematic
characters." (13)

Rather, it is through the noemata that the object is reached.(14)

We could clarify this through an example of perception
of an object, and in the process draw out further features
of intentionality. In perception the perceived object is
known through its modes of appearing, and these change in
various respects. They change if the object changes - say
a tree in the wind; they change if we change our position
relative to the object - we move closer to the tree; they
change according to the degree of attention we are paying
to the object, and so on. An object is intended through
all these changing appearances, and while the object and
its appearances are inseparable, we do need to draw the
distinction conceptually. The 'perceived as such' are the
appearances which are correlates to the noeses. While
maintaining a perceptual noesis I have a variety of perceptions
as I move closer to the tree and it blows in the wind. The
'perceived as such' which Husserl calls noema are a multi-
plicity which refer to a self-same object. Thus we can see
that for every noesis there is a corresponding noema and
that through the noema or noemata one or several noeses can
intend an identical object. Thus the noema parallel the
noes in so far as they are similarly intentional. But we
can also see that for any variation in the noesis there will
be a corresponding variation in the noema. If the intentional
act is only a vague attention which is then clearly focused,
the noema will correspondingly alter from say indistinct to
distinct. (15)

Husserl is much more specific, and provides more detail
of the noematic meaning and intending by, and through,
which the object is given. However, for our purposes we can
be content with the statement by J.N. Mohanty that:

"The reference of consciousness to its object is
made possible through
(a) the correlation (between noesis and
noema), and
(b) the noematic 'nucleus' by virtue of
which the noema also refers to the
object, and
(c) the consequent noematic intentionality". (16)

Perhaps we need to add as a point of clarification, that
all reference to objects in the foregoing discussion must be
understood as bracketed objects, in so far as we are not
concerned with the question of whether they really exist. The
significance of this "change of signature", as Husserl calls
it, may be questioned though, for Husserl repeatedly mentions
that whatever is said of the modified objectivity must find
a correspondence in the unmodified objectivity. (17)

One other problem concerns the phenomenological status
of the noema. Is it part of experience, a methodological
device, or a metaphysical construct? Since we are not here
undertaking a phenomenological description of experience we
are not in a position to resolve this question. What we can
say, so far as the argument is concerned, is that if the
possibility of accepting the noema as phenomenologically
given is to remain open, then the noema must not be
interpreted as opaque. It does not stand between consciousness
and its object and obstruct their relation, rather it must
be understood as the transparent medium through which the
object is intended or given. Further, the noema is not
caused by the object, not is it representative of it.

On the basis of this brief description of intentionality
as noetic-noematic correlativity we can draw out the themes
that enable Husserl to go beyond realism-idealism.

Fundamentally, the significance of intentionality is
that we can no longer postulate an isolated, closed, receptacle
conception of consciousness over and against which is an
opaque and absolute world. Intentionality makes con-
sciousness an activity of transcending itself, projecting
out into the world through the dispensing of meaning. The
world is now meaningfully open to us - it is not so much that
a chasm between consciousness and world has been bridged, as
that consciousness and world are seen as interdependent and
interpenetrating.

The noetic-noematic correlativity through which con-
sciousness intends the world and its objects suggests that
we are not an empty consciousness waiting for objects to
cause representative ideas in us, as implied in the empiricist-
realist view; nor are we a full consciousness independently
of a relation to objects, as implied in the rationalist-
realist view. Intentional experience involves the inter-
action of both act and object, which means that neither
world nor consciousness can be denied, and sense-experience
and the activity of consciousness cannot be neglected.

We will return to, and expand on these themes, after
we have further exhibited Husserl’s concept of experience.

3.2 Intentionality as Constitution

Intentionality understood as noetic-noematic correlativity

has been interpreted as showing that something is always
intended or meant in any act of consciousness; and that
objective unities are given despite the constant flux of
consciousness with its multiplicity of modes of consciousness
and manners of appearing of objects. But Husserl goes
further than showing that it is always objects that are
experienced. By describing the function of intentionality
known as constitution he shows how it is that objects are
given, how it is that a multiplicity of noema come to have
objective sense.

In Cartesian Meditations II Husserl says that intentional
analysis

"brings the highly diverse anonymous processes into
the field comprising those that function
"constitutively" in relation to the objective sense
of the cogitatum in question,"

and that through this analysis we can make understandable

"how, within the immanency of conscious life and
in thus and so determined modes of consciousness
belonging to this incessant flux, anything like
\"fixed and abiding\" objective unities can become
intended and, in particular, how this marvellous
work of \'constituting\' identical objects is done
in the case of each category of objects." (18)

Raising the question of constitution of objective
unities involves raising some highly contentious issues;
for example, whether constitution can be phenomenologically
justified, and whether it means creation of objects in a
sense which would commit us to subjective idealism. However,
I want to stress that it is not my purpose here to justify
and reconcile everything Husserl said about constitution.
Rather, without avoiding the problematic areas, I hope to
draw out a consistent interpretation of constitution which
shows how it is that objective unities are given without
reducing them to subjective illusions.

Husserl’s aim is to show how \"fixed and abiding
objective unities\" can be intended, even though they are
given through varying manners of appearing and a
multiplicity of modes of consciousness. (19) This concerns
anything which is a possible object for consciousness,
including subjective processes - although here the
constitution of the unity of consciousness will be left aside.

Fixed and abiding objective unities are constituted through a process of combination of manners of appearing and of intentional acts called synthesis. (20) That this unity is not a mere connectedness (21) can be seen if we refer back to the discussion of the meant object, the "determinable X" intended by a ncesis in Ideas. (22) There the objective unity was that of which appearances are appearances, that of which certain predicates are predicated, and which is inseparable from them. Here, similarly, it is that to which a multiplicity of acts of consciousness are directed through a succession of appearances. And synthesis is the process whereby we recognize the same object through a multiplicity of appearances. (23) Through a synthesis multiple modes of appearances become constituted, are invested as having objective sense.

Synthesis gives rise to a consciousness of identity - whether it be of something self-identical, or of a multiplicity of things intended unitarily. (24) That is, there are both monothetic and polythetic synthetic acts, through which an objective sense is intended.

Husserl insists that the Intentional synthesis whereby a unity of objective sense is constituted, despite noetic and noematic variations, is not arbitrary but operates according to strict concepts of types of consciousness and types of objects. (25)

Furthermore, because of the aspect of intentionality whereby every intentional object is surrounded by horizons that can be further explicated, and all conscious focal acts refer to further potential ones implicit in them, (26) the process of constitution and the analysis of constituting intentionalities remains forever incomplete. The constitution of an objective unity can never be fully laid bare because it always refers to something else. (27) Completeness would mean perfect knowledge, a fully transparent consciousness.

We now come to the question of whether, or to what extent, constitution is creative or productive of its object.

Initially Husserl states that the object is synthetically constituted regardless of whether the process is active or passive on the part of the ego. (28) He later gives both active and passive syntheses a part to play in experience, although the latter is more fundamental in that all active syntheses are shown to presuppose ongoing passive syntheses. (29)

Passive synthesis is based on association, to which belongs

"sensuous configuration in co-existence and in sucession". "Subjective processes, as objects in immanent time" and "all real natural objects belonging to the Objective spatio-temporal world" (30)

are said to be passively constituted. Although Husserl doesn't make it quite clear, it seems as if passive synthesis applies primarily to perception of physical objects, and we will realise the significance of this if we recall the remark made earlier that, for Husserl, perception is the fundamental experience. We need to add that passive synthesis is governed by eidetic laws, and earlier meanings sedimented in the history of the particular synthesis. (31)

It seems reasonably clear that this passive synthesis, as the fundamental one, is not creative of its object. Perhaps a more appropriate expression would be that the object constitutes itself in consciousness, rather than that consciousness creates the object. As passive, it also seems to be anonymous; we do not consciously constitute the perceptual object, although the constituting or synthesising involved can be uncovered by intentional analysis.

On the other hand, Husserl is quite explicit about the active synthesis being "productively constitutive". (32) But it must be remembered that these new objects are produced "on the basis of objects already given". The sorts of things that are actively synthesised are cultural products and ideal objects such as numbers. But this is not surprising - that the specifically cultural is a conscious creation hardly amounts to the claim that the world and its objects are merely products of my imagination. On the contrary, it gives us a means of properly examining the relation between thought and culture, and the ways in which the world is meaningful for us.
This doctrine has, I think, been variously misinterpreted, and rejected, as resulting in subjective idealism. Perhaps part of the reason for this lies in the ambiguity of some of Husserl's expressions, including even the title of the doctrine. Notwithstanding, we proceed to interpret it as standing between, or above, idealism and realism.

The first point is that Husserl did not deny the existence of the world, nor even doubt it. On the contrary, he insists that the world is transcendental consciousness, and indubitably there as the intentional correlate of consciousness. The difference is that we can logically question the existence of the world, but not that of our consciousness of the world. In this sense the world is relative to consciousness. But consciousness without world would be empty, and world without consciousness would be meaningless. Consciousness is intentional as we have seen, consciousness and world are inextricably interrelated. When we put aside the question of the existence of the world, what we do is turn our attention to the modes of givenness of the world and its objects, and to the structures of our consciousness of it.

The world is transcendent of consciousness and is given to, or experienced by, consciousness primarily through a passive constituting process wherein that which is given is experienced as meaningful. World and objects only have the sense, being a world, and being an object, in relation to subjectivity. Being a world, or an object means having a sense, and having a sense means having a 'sense for'—not any particular person, but in relation to a possible consciousness of. As Quentin Lauer puts it:

"Without subjectivity there can be no objectivity; there can be no objects; there can only be chaos without significance."

To be an object is to be in relation to a subject, and to be a subject is to be in relation to an object.

"The subject is subject not merely because it is related to objects, but because the relation is constitutive of the very objectivity of objects. Conversely, objects are not merely related to subjects; their relatedness constitutes the very subjectivity of subjects." (33)
It is not that the subject creates the world, rather that only in the reciprocity of subject and world can the world be a world for the subject. To explicate the ways in which the world and its objects are given to consciousness, is to explicate this reciprocity. This is what we take Husserl to mean when he says that a sense-explication

"carried out as regards every type of existent ever conceivable ... as regards the transcendency actually given to me beforehand through experience" signifies a "systematic uncovering of the constituting intentionality itself." (34)

4. Some Consequences

We are now in a position to realize the full significance, and potential, of Husserl's concept of experience. As we have said, intentionality understood as noetic-noematic correlation shows us that experience is always objects, that consciousness is directed to something other than itself. This means that consciousness is not a closed receptacle only aware of its own ideas, but is an activity directly involved with the world, through which we can understand both ourselves and the world.

Once we accept that consciousness is not closed, the sense in which knowledge is not a mental state becomes clearer. This is the sense that to describe what we know is not to describe another mental state, but to describe the thing known. This is made possible by the relative transparency of consciousness - a transparency we've discovered in the possibility of intentional and reflective experiences.

Not only is consciousness not closed, but the world can't be opaque to consciousness, or merely in-itself. The world and its objects are necessarily related to consciousness; in and through this relationship objective sense is achieved. Objectivity and subjectivity are interdependent and interrelated.

But not only does the theory of intentionality show us that we experience objects, that acts of consciousness can have objective significance; it also, in its constitutive function, shows us how it is possible for us to experience objects as the same. Through syntheses of identification based on association, we recognize a multiplicity of acts of consciousness and modes of appearances as referring to an object. We can only identify an object through its appearances, but this is not to suggest that the thing is something other than what appears. This recognition of "fixed and abiding objective unities" points to a multidimensional temporal character of consciousness.

With Husserl's concept of intentional experience we no longer need to fall into the metaphysical trap of denying the existence of the world and its objects, treating them as subjective illusions. Neither do we need to resort to a representative theory of ideas, or causal theory of mind, to explain that and how we came to experience objects in a world horizon as having objective significance.

Footnotes

(2) Ideas, p. 22.
(3) Ibid. $52.
(4) Ibid. $55.
(5) Ibid. $35, $44.
(6) Ibid. $36.
(7) Ibid. $84
(8) Ibid. $85.
(9) Cartesian Meditations, $16.
(10) Ideas, $95.
(11) Ibid. $88
(12) Ibid. $93.
(13) Ibid. $98.
(15) Ibid. $92.