

International Phenomenological Society

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Source: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Sep., 1981), pp. 111-118

Published by: [International Phenomenological Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2107546>

Accessed: 12/04/2014 16:29

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HUSSERL AND PRIVATE LANGUAGES

1. Some philosophers believe that Husserl is committed to a private language; accordingly, they think that Husserl's position is subject to Wittgenstein's objections in *Philosophical Investigations*. It seems that phenomenological reduction—the methodological device with which Husserl begins philosophical analysis—requires some sort of private language; and if the notion of a private language is incoherent, then Husserl's position is likewise. Unfortunately, this thesis has rarely been examined.

Recently, however, Suzanne Cunningham¹ uses arguments inspired by Wittgenstein in order to argue that Husserl's position is unintelligible. I intend to show that her arguments presuppose an erroneous interpretation of the reduction.

2. Cunningham's interpretation of the phenomenological reduction sets the stage for the arguments against Husserl's "private" language. She believes that the phenomenological reduction has two characteristics: (a) the reduction of real transcendent objects to immanent objects, and (b) the refusal to accept anything as true unless it is "immediately self-evident" (LPR, p. 7). We shall disregard (b), as only (a) is relevant to the argument. A few pages later she identified immanent objects with *private* objects (LPR, p. 16). In what sense of 'private' are the objects of phenomenological discourse purportedly private? They are private in that they are inaccessible; and 'inaccessible' means 'not capable of being known, understood, or used by other persons' (LPR, p. 18). Something can be either contingently or logically inaccessible. 'Contingently inaccessible p' means 'p happens to be inaccessible to all but one person, but can be made accessible to others', whereas 'logically inaccessible p' means 'the very concept of p requires that it remain inaccessible to all but one person'.

¹Suzanne Cunningham, *Language and the Phenomenological Reductions of Edmund Husserl*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976. Hereafter, I shall refer to this work in the text as LPR.

Since language is a means for referring to objects rather than an object itself, it is necessary to classify private languages in terms of the inaccessibility of both their referents and the words that are used *to* refer. The relevant questions are “Who has (or can have) experience of the *referents* of the language?” and “Who understands (or can understand) the language?”, yielding a fourfold classification of private languages:

- (1) a language that refers to contingently private objects,
- (2) a language that refers to logically private objects,
- (3) a contingently private language, or a language that only one person understands, but which could be understood by others, and
- (4) a logically private language, or a language that only one person *can* understand (LPR, p. 19).

Private languages (1) and (2) have been described imprecisely. A *language* does not refer; rather, terms *in* that language refer. So, private languages (1) and (2) should be described as follows: (1) a language, all of whose referring terms refer to contingently private objects, and (2) a language, all of whose referring terms refer to logically private objects. This is no trifling distinction, since it is the key to the refutation of one of Cunningham’s arguments. She thinks that Husserl’s post-reduction language is a private language (1) and (3).

3. Cunningham raises the following objection to private language (1):
 - (a) Every language requires logical connective terms.
 - (b) But logical connective terms do not refer to private objects.
 - (c) Thus, private language (1) is parasitic on a public language, which requires commitment to the existence of other speakers. (LPR, p. 27).

Let us assume that it is correct to say that every language must have logical connective terms.

4. Although Cunningham believes that the preceding objection militates against private language (1), her argument actually has nothing to do with a language that is called “private” solely in terms of its referents. Her own premises imply that this is so, since she says that logical connective terms do not refer (LPR, p. 22). If so, then the necessity of terms for connectives *cannot* constitute an objection to a language that is private only because its referring terms refer to private objects. If the necessity of such terms *were* an objection to a private language (1), then logical connective terms would have to

refer to nonprivate objects. But Cunningham denies that they refer at all. Thus, there is a confusion between meaning and reference here, the argument being nothing but an objection to a private language (4). Since she grants that Husserl's language is not private in that sense, the argument is not an objection to Husserl's post-reduction language *at all*.

There is, however, a way of construing the argument as an objection to languages that are called "private" solely in virtue of (non-public) referents. One may respond to my criticism of the argument as follows: By calling our attention to logical connective terms, Cunningham is pointing out that not all terms refer to objects. So, her criticism *is* a legitimate attack on a language that has *only* terms that refer.

But this is no objection to private language (1). In the first place, the argument is not an objection to private languages *per se*. It is an objection to *any* language, public or private, that consists solely of referring terms. Secondly, is a language that consists solely of terms that refer to nonpublic objects a private language (1)? No. There is nothing in the description of a private language (1) that requires that all of its terms refer to objects. The sole description of that language is that none of its terms refer to contingently public objects, which does not imply that all of its terms refer to (contingently) private objects, since the following two propositions are consistent: (a) None of the terms of L refer to contingently public objects, and (b) Some of the terms of L do not refer at all. So even if we interpret the argument in this charitable way, it is still irrelevant to the point at issue. A language does not refer; terms *in* a language refer.

5. We have seen that Cunningham's objections to private language (1) do not work. But she contends that Husserl's language is also a private language (3). What are her objections to that kind of private language?

Her argument can be summarized as follows:

- (a) Any language is bound by rules for the proper use of words.
- (b) The only way to check to see if one is following rules is to appeal to (actually existing) other speakers of that language.
- (c) Such appeals cannot be made if one's language is a private language (3). Thus, Husserl has no way of checking for consistency in the use of his words. So either the reduction cannot be performed successfully, or one has a language that cannot be used to describe (LPR, pp. 27-29).

I think that the thesis that Husserl's post-reduction language is a private language (1) or (3) requires an erroneous interpretation of the phenomenological reduction. Let me show why.

6. The claim that phenomenological reduction includes the reduction of all transcendent (real) objects to private objects would be true only if intentional objects and transcendent objects were two mutually exclusive classes. However, Husserl argues against that thesis. In the case of perception, the intentional and real (transcendent) objects are *identical*. To assert the opposite is to be involved in an infinite regress, to substitute consciousness of an image of *x* for perception of *x*.² Husserl, then, believed that he could talk about transcendent realities post-reduction; and he did not think that intentional and transcendent objects (even real ones) form mutually exclusive classes.

There is a misunderstanding of the meaning of 'bracketing out transcendent reality', as this passage illustrates: "The reduction brackets out all transcendent reality, and it would be important to have a language which reflects this. *Thus, the referents of the language must be exclusively immanent*" (LPR, p. 28, emphasis mine).

Husserl explains the meaning of 'bracketing real objects'. Briefly, it means that although one continues to undergo perceptions, *one makes no use of the judgments that are based on them*. That is, as a phenomenologist who is describing and analyzing perception (say), one makes no judgment that entails the existence (or nonexistence) of the thing perceived.

As phenomenologists we avoid all such affirmations. But if we 'do not place ourselves on their ground', do not 'co-operate with them' we do not for that reason cast them away. They are there still, and belong essentially to the phenomenon as a very part of it. Rather, we contemplate them ourselves . . . and we take the thesis of perception and its components as constituent portions of the phenomenon (Ideas, p. 244, last emphasis mine).

The phrase 'the *thesis* of perception' is important. Part of the thesis of perception is that (generally) the perceived thing exists. Post-reduction, however, one treats the thesis of perception as a thesis, rather than making use of it. To a perceiving subject in the natural attitude, the thesis of perception does not appear as a thesis; rather, perception reveals the way things *are* to one in the natural standpoint. If one asserted the thesis of perception, existential propositions would be involved. Accordingly, one makes no such assertions after

²Edmund Husserl, *Ideas*, Trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson, London: Collier Books, 1969, pp. 242-43. Hereafter: *Ideas*.

the reduction. But that does not prevent one, *qua* phenomenologist, from talking *about* what is “there for him” from the natural standpoint.

To speak in an image: The ‘bracketing’ which perception has undergone prevents any judgement being passed on the perceived reality (i.e., any judgement that has its ground in the *unmodified* perception, and therefore accepts its thesis as its own). But it does *not* hinder any judgement to the effect that perception is the consciousness of a real world (provided the thesis thereof is not set in action) . . . (*Ideas*, p. 244, first two emphases mine).

To talk about perception as the consciousness of the real world is only to say that we *take* ourselves to perceive the real world (usually), which is part of the thesis of perception. Such observations do not imply commitment to the existence of the real world.

When Husserl discusses the phenomenological reduction in chapter 3 of *Ideas*, characterizing it as the suspension of the thesis of the natural standpoint, his detailed description of what is there for any subject from that standpoint is itself a phenomenological description (*Ideas*, p. 95). Such a description would be impossible if Cunningham’s interpretation were correct, since therein Husserl refers to transcendent realities or, more precisely, transcendent realities *for a subject*.

So, the suggestion that phenomenological reduction would lead to phenomenism if it were not for the eidetic reduction is simply not true (LPR, p. 10). It presupposes (falsely) that the reduction involves a form of reductionism, whereby physical objects are reduced to appearances of them or possibilities of appearances. Such reductionism could take place only if one systematically confused the appearance of a physical object with the thing itself. Husserl *never* confused the two. For similar reasons the contention that “In consequence of its metaphysical neutrality, Husserl’s inquiry was to be about *consciousness* and not about the nature of the objects of consciousness” (LPR, p. 7) is mistaken, too. As we have seen, it *is* about the objects of *consciousness*, or the relationships that necessarily obtain between consciousness and any given kind of intentional object. Husserl’s works are filled with such analyses. It is a mistake to think that phenomenological reduction yields what is “inner” as its object of inquiry, setting aside what is “outer.” The reduction has nothing to do with this inner/outer picture; it requires only that all objects be *intentional*, some of which are transcendent.

Surprisingly, there is a passage in which Cunningham says something true about the reduction and the referents of phenomenological discourse.

By the first [the phenomenological] reduction Husserl merges both physical and psychic phenomena into the group known as 'intentional objects', suspending consideration of their existence in any natural-scientific or psychological sense. For an object to be 'intentional' the *only* thing that need be said about its status is that it is *intended* by consciousness. Whether that object could, under other circumstances, be classified as physical or psychical, immanent or transcendent, is *irrelevant*. All that has been said by calling it 'intentional' is that the object is *meant* or intended by an act of consciousness. *Its status as intentional does not emanate from any of its own qualities, but rather from its relationship to an intending act* (LPR, p. 38, first, third, and last emphases mine).

I agree wholeheartedly. But this is inconsistent with the thesis that no intentional objects can be transcendent.

7. We are now in a position to respond to the suggestion that Husserl's post-reduction language is a private language (3). Is Husserl's post-reduction language a language that is (in fact, not logically) understood by only one speaker? I believe that this question cannot be answered on the basis of Husserl's philosophical position. Let us see why.

After the reduction, one is not permitted to *assert* that others exist or anything that entails the existence of others. Nor can one say that others do not exist or anything that implies it. If so, then Husserl is not committed to the thesis that his post-reduction language is understood by only one speaker. Since Husserl is neutral regarding the existence of others, he is philosophically neutral with respect to the question "Do other speakers of phenomenological language exist?"

The only question that is relevant to the successful performance of the reduction is whether Husserl's philosophical statements imply the existence (or nonexistence) of things or other subjects. If those statements do not have such implications, and the statements consist of only analyses of the relationships that necessarily obtain between consciousness and a given kind of intentional object, then phenomenological reduction has been performed successfully.

A comparison can be made with the status of intentional objects. We have already seen that an object is intentional irrespective of its own qualities. An intentional object can be the same object that, under *other* circumstances, (i.e., when we are no longer adopting the phenomenological attitude), can be classified as existing, not existing, etc. It is simply that we are precluded from *saying* that it exists (or does not exist), once we have adopted Husserl's standpoint.

Similarly, the status of phenomenological language is not a function of its own qualities. If the statements constitute analyses of the

relationships that necessarily obtain between consciousness and a given kind of intentional object, and none of the statements have existential implications, then the discourse is phenomenological. Solely the use of language to do phenomenological analyses makes it phenomenological. Thus, it is (numerically) the *same* language that, under other circumstances, could be said to be understood by others. Someone who has adopted the phenomenological standpoint is simply not permitted to *say* that it is understood by others, which clearly does not imply that his language is not public. Therefore, our question (“Is Husserl’s post-reduction language understood by only one speaker?”) is unanswered and unanswerable. Both possibilities (a public language and a language that happens to be understood by only one speaker) are consistent with the phenomenological standpoint. Consequently, the view that Husserl’s post-reduction language is understood by only one speaker is unfounded.

8. Heretofore I have been entertaining the hypothesis that Husserl’s post-reduction language is a language whose referring terms refer to contingently private objects. Now I wish to argue that one is never entitled to say that Husserl is philosophically committed to a private language (1).³

My argument is of the same kind that I just used. Husserl is not entitled to say that the intentional object being analyzed is actually intended by a number of subjects, since if he said that, he would be philosophically committed to the existence of others. But that restriction does not imply that it is *not* intended by many subjects.

As we have seen, the status of objects as intentional is not a function of any of their own qualities. This means that when we are no longer adopting the phenomenological attitude, we could truthfully say that the object is actually intended by a plurality of subjects, provided only that that is the case. Therefore, it does not follow from the characterization of the reduction that all the referents of phenomenological discourse are contingently accessible to only one subject. If one *takes no stand* with regard to the actually public qualities of any given intentional object, then it is an open question whether the intentional object is public or private.

³Robert Solomon misinterprets Husserl’s post-reduction language just as Cunningham does, in an otherwise fine article. “Similarly, Husserl’s language, insofar as it is a ‘private’ language, is what Castañeda has called *strictly* private language, a language *all* of whose terms (i.e., all of whose referring terms) refer to private objects.” Robert Solomon, “Husserl’s Private Language,” *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 5, #3 (Fall, 1974), p. 215. But cf. p. 226.

Suppose that someone is reading a phenomenological paper at a philosophical meeting. Suppose that the reader used a table at the front of the room as an example, in order to analyze our concept 'physical object'. Now is our imaginary reader precluded from using that table as an example simply because it is actually intended by a number of subjects? Hardly. The only question that we need to ask is "Does the reader make any philosophical statements that imply commitment to the existence (or nonexistence) of others or the table?" If not, then his analysis is within the restrictions imposed by the phenomenological attitude, so long as he is analyzing the relationships that obtain between consciousness and a given kind of intentional object. Of course, our reader may make *incidental* remarks that betray the fact that he believes that the table exists and others see it. In Husserl's writings, too, one will find the pronoun 'we' and similar locutions. But Husserl recognizes that such locutions are for the sake of ease in making philosophical points only, and are avoidable. Accordingly, the presence of such locutions in Husserl's writings does not constitute an objection to Husserl's post-reduction language. So the view that all of the referents of phenomenological referring terms are private is unfounded, too.

9. Thus, only a misunderstanding of the phenomenological reduction prompts the charge that Husserl's philosophical language is (as a matter of contingent fact) private. Cunningham's objections are unusual, since most commentators on Wittgenstein take him to be attacking only the notion of a *logically* private language. I think that I can show that Husserl's post-reduction language is not logically private, either. But that is outside the scope of this discussion paper.

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