

THE WORLD WELL WON: HUSSERL'S EPISTEMIC REALISM ONE HUNDRED YEARS LATER

By "epistemic realism" I understand the view that the objects of veridical thought and perception both exist and have the characteristics they are therein discovered to have without regard to whether or not they are in any way actually present to any mind of any type.

The possibility of realism in this sense is, for Husserl, the same as the possibility of knowledge. As he indicates at the end of the first lecture in *The Idea of Phenomenology*, as well as at various places in the *Logical Investigations*, in the course of Modern thought,

the ability of knowledge to make contact with an object has become enigmatic ... What becomes questionable is the possibility of knowledge, more precisely, the possibility of knowledge making contact with an objectivity that is, after all, what it is in itself. At bottom, what knowledge accomplishes, the sense of its claim to validity or justification ..., is in question; as is, on the other side, the sense of objectivity, which is and is what it is whether it is known or not, and yet as an objectivity is an objectivity of a possible knowledge, in principle knowable even if it has as a matter of fact never been known or will be known ...¹

Epistemic realism in this sense is entirely consistent with Husserl's statement elsewhere that "... now as ever I hold every form of current philosophical realism to be absurd, as no less every idealism to which in its own arguments that realism stands contrasted, and which in fact it refutes."²

In my view, Husserl had resolved in principle all of the issues about the possibility of knowledge in the sense of epistemic realism by the time he finished the *Logical Investigations*, and he never later retracted the basic position which he there worked out. I realize, of course, that many disagree with this interpretation of his so-called "development," but here there is no possibility of taking up the many subtle issues involved in our disagreement.

¹ E. HUSSERL, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. L. Hardy, Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999, 20-21. All page references to the *Logical Investigations* are to the English translation: E. HUSSERL, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, New York: Humanities Press, 1970, abbreviated as LI.

² E. HUSSERL, *Ideas I*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson, London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1931, 19.

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A few years after its appearance, Wilhelm Dilthey referred to Husserl's *Logical Investigations* as an "epoch making" book.³ Questions could be raised as to what makes an epoch, and in one sense of "epoch" I suppose that the *Logical Investigations* did not make one. So far as the outward historical form of philosophy as a social reality is concerned, perhaps the *Logical Investigations* has created (so far) something more than a major stir, but also something less than an "epoch," in the manner of Descartes and Kant, for example.

In terms of philosophical illumination of the major surface problem of modern philosophy since Descartes, however—the mind's grasp of its world—I believe the *Logical Investigations* was and is epoch making. What it did, for those who thought it through, was to restore the rich manifold of the objectivities of human existence (from the objects of the most spontaneous experiences of nature and social relations to the highest levels of scientific abstraction, as well as the texture of human experience itself) to the status of true being. These no longer had to be things which in one way or another were explained away. To the juggernaut of reduction or nothing-but-ism, arising from thinkers such as Galileo and Hobbes, Husserl replied (and showed) that by far the most of what *they* wished to deny or to neglect as not truly being—or else to falsify in its essence by shoving it into the mind: all of that had its own right to existence, which could be fully demonstrated or observed in the proper circumstances.

Husserl was, of course, not the only great thinker of his day who was troubled about the reductionist outcome of Modern thought. Bergson and Whitehead were two of his contemporaries who were primarily committed to overcoming reductionism, and who, at least to their own minds, had overcome it. But they (and others who shared their concern) failed to provide anything like Husserl's exquisite analysis of thought, perception and knowledge, and hence their case is almost totally one built upon the supposedly absurd consequences of reductionism and analysis of some of the misunderstandings that lead to them. They have little to say about the precise structure of acts of consciousness in relation to their various kinds of objects.

Thus, in discussing how Galileo, Descartes and Locke dealt with "secondary" qualities, Whitehead remarks that, on their views,

... the mind in apprehending also experiences sensations which, properly speaking, are qualities of the mind alone. These sensations are projected by the mind so as to clothe appropriate bodies in external nature. Thus the bodies are perceived as with qualities which in reality do not belong to them Thus nature gets credit which should in truth be reserved for ourselves: the rose for its scent, the nightingale for his song, the sun for his radiance. The poets are

³ H. SPIEGELBERG, *The Phenomenological Movement*, 2nd edition, two volumes, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969, I/123.

entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellency of the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colorless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly.⁴

In fact it might be said that a major lesson of Modern thought is that, if you can't salvage "secondary" qualities, all will soon be lost. The reasons which lead to treating them as "mental" will soon force everything into the mind. As Sartre sharply pointed out in a little essay of 1939, the illusion of Modern philosophy is: "to know is to eat." "We have all believed," he says,

that the spidery mind trapped things in its web, covered them with a white spit and slowly swallowed them, reducing them to its own substance ... The simplest and plainest among us vainly looked for something solid, something not just mental, but would encounter everywhere only a soft and very genteel mist: themselves.⁵

Sartre understood that "Against the digestive philosophy of empirico-criticism, of neo-Kantianism, against all 'psychologism', Husserl persistently affirmed that one cannot dissolve things in consciousness." "... Consciousness is an irreducible fact which no physical image can account for, except perhaps the quick, obscure image of a burst. To know is to 'burst toward', to tear oneself out of the moist gastric intimacy, veering out there beyond oneself, ..." ⁶

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Hume, it will be recalled, had taken up the question of "Why we attribute a *continued* existence to objects, even when they are not present to the senses; and why we suppose them to have an existence *distinct* from the mind and perception."⁷ He concluded, as is well known, that it is neither sense nor reason, but only imagination "that produces the opinion of a *continued* or of a *distinct* existence,"⁸ and that we have no evidence of the existence of anything apart from "the mind and perception."

This view of Hume, though supported by him upon assumptions and descriptions not generally shared by other great Modern philosophers, can, not unfairly,

⁴ A. N. WHITEHEAD, *Science and the Modern World*, New York: Mentor Books, 1956, 55-56.

⁵ J.-P. SARTRE, "Intentionality: a Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology," trans. J. Fell, *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 1, 1970, 4-5.

⁶ J.-P. SARTRE, "Intentionality," 4.

⁷ D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, London: Oxford University Press, 1955, Bk. I, Part iv, Sect. 11, p. 188.

⁸ D. HUME, *A Treatise*, 188 and 193.

be regarded as an outcome of the Modern period of Western philosophy, and as one which, though formulated in significantly different ways, still dominates contemporary thought as we enter the 21st Century. This is true even though "mind and perception" is not usually now conceived of in the highly individualistic sense of Hume and other Modern philosophers prior to Kant. The "genteel mist" encountered is no longer the individual mind, but transcendental forms, history, language and culture, which are thought of as somehow fundamental to the individual (not it to them) and which perhaps even "construct" the individual.

Donald Davidson characteristically comments: "Yet if the mind can grapple without distortion with the real, the mind itself must be without categories and concepts. This featureless self is familiar from theories in quite different parts of the philosophical landscape.... In each case, the mind is divorced from the traits that constitute it."

Now of course, as Davidson himself insists, the mind simply cannot be divorced from the traits that constitute it. Nothing can. But the point to be taken from his statement quoted is that, *if* the mind has "categories and concepts," it *must* distort "the real" when it comes to "grapple" with it. But on the other hand it must have them so to "grapple." Hence the mind must distort its objects and therefore never has access to undistorted objects, i.e., to things as they are *apart from* the distorting caused by the grappling with or toward things "in themselves."⁹

Richard Rorty takes an even stronger position than Davidson, rejecting the idea that different "conceptual schemes" grapple with the same "matter." "The suggestion that our concepts shape neutral material no longer makes sense once there is nothing to serve as this material."¹⁰ The whole idea of alternative conceptual frameworks and corresponding worlds loses its sense. Rorty simply rejects the idea of a world and, taking a page from Nietzsche's book, replaces that idea with some constraint placed on beliefs, and especially new beliefs, by the "vast body of platitudes, unquestioned perceptual reports, and the like," which are already in place. This "vast body" of course has no contactable "outside" any more than does Hume's "mind and perceptions." Hume admitted that belief in independent and continued existence can never be eradicated, "nor will any strained metaphysical conviction of the dependence of our perceptions be sufficient for that purpose."¹¹ I think Rorty would agree. But still the basic Humean view carries over to most of philosophy after the "linguistic turn," as it is sometimes called, and in some form to much of continental philosophy after Husserl.

Indeed, I often hear from people who are experts on Husserl's thought that he adopts a version of the same view: that he too holds to some very elaborate version of the epistemically encapsulated mind. Perhaps I am mistaken, but I think this view of the

⁹ D. DAVIDSON, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, London: Oxford University Press, 1984, 185. Similarly Putnam and his rejection of the very idea of a quality "in itself." H. PUTNAM, *The Many Faces of Realism*, La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987, 8.

¹⁰ R. RORTY, "The World Well Lost," in his *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, 4.

¹¹ D. HUME, *A Treatise*, 214.

encapsulated mind is precisely the one Husserl successfully overturned in the *Logical Investigations* and presumes to be refuted in all his later works. A good way to appreciate Husserl's contribution is to emphasize that he believed Hume could be shown wrong, given the analysis of the act of consciousness which Husserl himself provides. A distinct and continued existence apart from consciousness is indeed possible for objects of consciousness of various types, especially the physical, since they owe nothing to the mind that contemplates them.

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The possibility of recovering authentic knowledge of the amazing richness of manifold fields of being, including the human self, and especially the inexhaustible ideal realms of essence, resulted in a powerful surge of philosophical interest and activity among Husserl's younger associates. Indeed, the possibility of knowledge is tied very directly to the possibility of philosophy itself—which of course has been seriously in question among philosophers themselves for a century or so. If Husserl was right, there was hope. Something of significance could be done. Accomplishments, results, were possible. This hopeful outlook may have been what Jean Hering had in mind by speaking of a "phenomenological springtime."¹² In the Preface to the English translation of *Ideas I* Husserl speaks of the discovery of a new Atlantis, and, mixing his metaphors, of his having "actually wandered in the trackless wilds of a new continent and undertaken bits of virgin cultivation."¹³ And, further mixing his metaphors, he speaks of "the infinite open country of the true philosophy, the 'Promised Land', which he sees, but himself will never set foot in."¹⁴

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There are two major points in Husserl's analysis of cognition that provide the basis for his epistemic realism and the corresponding hopefulness.

1. His theory of concepts (and propositions).

2. His understanding of the polythetic or many-rayed nature of some—indeed most—acts of consciousness.

Concepts have usually been thought of in one of two ways: as *acts* of minds upon objects, or as objects that stand *before* the mind. The former is the way of Kant and of the second Wittgenstein and, obviously, Davidson, Putnam, Rorty and many (perhaps most) others.

The latter is the way of Locke, Frege, Russell and Alonzo Church. On this latter view the concept may also be the result of an act, a creation of the mind, as in the

¹² H. SPIEGELBERG, *The Phenomenological Movement*, 168

¹³ E. HUSSERL, *Ideas I*, 23.

¹⁴ E. HUSSERL, *Ideas I*, 28-29.

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