

Chapter 2

The Basic Idea and Other Preliminaries

According to Husserl, conscious experience is overwhelmingly outward. We do not live in a private realm of inner thoughts (though our inner life is an important part of our phenomenology), but in a world or reality that we feel to be outside ourselves. Over time, we build up an increasingly detailed sense of this reality, via a kind of “world model” or “world picture” (these are contentious but vivid metaphors). It is instructive to compare this aspect of Husserlian phenomenology with the introspective psychology of Husserl’s time. Researchers in Wundt’s and Titchener’s labs studied experience by reflecting inwards: they were trained to discriminate colors in a changing after-image, tones in a chord, etc. [75]. They would close their eyes and try to look in or “spect intro” on the fluctuating color of an after-image or the components of a sounding chord. Husserl, by contrast, focuses on “external perception” (*äußere Wahrnehmung*).¹ His point of departure is the “natural attitude” of everyday life. In this attitude, we are naïve realists: we take the existence of the world outside of us for granted. In daily life we do not primarily encounter impressions or feelings; *things beyond us* are the dominating factor: the places we go, the people we interact with—family members, side-walks, bicycles, computers, coffee cups. As Heidegger emphasized, we are *In-der-Welt-sein*. In contemporary philosophy of mind this is referred to as the “transparency” of perceptual consciousness: we “normally ‘see right through’ perceptual states to external objects and do not even notice that we are in perceptual states” [53].²

Even though experience is transparent, and we are normally just “in the world,” we can, as phenomenologists, take a kind of external perspective on experience itself. I take this to be one of the points of Husserl’s method of phenomenological reduction. When we perform the reduction we put a moment or period of everyday life in

¹See, e.g. APS 39.

²Though even in external perception we arguably have some indirect sense of the relationship between what we see and the position of our eyes, body, etc.; for a review of this issue from a phenomenological perspective, see [97].

“parentheses,” placing it on a kind of “phenomenological blackboard” (*Ideas* 1, p. 171). We step outside of consciousness, and the naïve realism of everyday life. Within the parentheses, experience stops being transparent; we regard it *as experience*, as an evolving field of consciousness or flux of streaming experiential data. From this standpoint, we can begin to analyze consciousness, identifying mereological parts within it, associating actual experiences with possible experiences (for example, associating what we do see with what we expect we would see if we moved in various ways), and describing phenomenological laws using Husserl’s transcendental and “eidetic” methods.

I supplement Husserl’s blackboard analogy with an indulgent set of metaphors, that I purposefully mix in order to develop a rich intuition for the formalisms and laws to come. I will argue that we can think of our omnipresent sense of external reality in terms of a kind of internal model. Think of it as an actual physical model, like the clay models used to prototype car designs, or the scale models used in special effects and miniature war-games. This would be a vast model, a model of our sense of the entire physical universe, though we can constrain things a bit by focusing on the surface of Earth. So, think of a huge scale model of the entire surface of the Earth. We can think of the stream of consciousness as unfolding “on top of” this model. As we have an experience in some region of the world, we “see” some part of this model, and we can think of experience as actually changing the model: sculpting and refining it. When experiences go as we expect, details are filled in and the model is made more vivid. When experiences frustrate our expectations, the model is altered to reflect what we see. If, driving to work, we see a fumigation tent on a neighborhood building, we update the model to reflect this.

As we move through the world we “move” through this model, updating and refining it in the places we visit. The model is just underneath the surface of consciousness, persisting as experience unfolds. It is like the riverbed below a river, slowly changing and acquiring sediment as the water flows past. Unlike a riverbed, however, which is usually in contact with the water flowing through it, most of this model is dormant; we only “see” one part of it at any time. When we “leave” that part of the model, it persists and slowly changes. Details are washed away, leaving schematic images. When we visit an unfamiliar area, we visit a part of the model that has never been developed at all. Even in these areas the model exists with some kind of structure, based on our general knowledge about that part of the world. Think of the early stages of a clay model, when the colors and shapes are vague, specifying generic things but with none of the details painted in (Diebenkorn paintings come to mind).³ If I were to get off Interstate 40 in Oklahoma City, I’d have general expectations about what a standard middle-American city looks like, but I would not have any specific expectations about the city’s layout. If, however, I moved there, then over time that part of the model would be filled in and refined. I would come to have very specific expectations about the layout of the city; that part of the model

³I have heard it said that figurative paintings like Diebenkorn’s capture the “essence” of a place without specifying any of its detail.

would become extremely detailed. In other areas the model would remain sketchy and incomplete. Mixing metaphors once again, we can think of the model as varying in pixel density, with high resolution details in some areas (in those places you can “zoom in” on the model and still see details), and lower resolution in other areas.

In what follows I interpret Husserl as describing rules and structures associated with this kind of developing model of reality. What Husserl does, on my account, is allow the phenomenologist to take a God-like view on a person’s model of reality, as if it were flattened and laid out on a huge modeling table. “Ah this is how California was constituted for this person,” such a phenomenologist might say, contemplating the model, “notice all the detail around Los Angeles and Merced, but Alaska was sketchy for him...”⁴

These ideas and metaphors illuminate an explanatory dimension of Husserl’s phenomenology (cf. APS, p. 631ff). The world model and the formal constructs associated with it explain what our expectations are as we move around in the world, and how those expectations change in time. As we will see, these ideas can be made more precise using philosophical tools like supervenience, and mathematical constructs like dynamical systems theory and probability theory. Supervenience formalizes a kind of dependency relation whereby what we immediately or “immanently” see depends on what we would expect relative to different counterfactual sequences of movements (the metaphorical world model is a fusion of expected views of the world relative to different movements). Dependencies between immanent and counterfactual structures will be a running theme in what follows. We also consider mathematical constructs, in particular probability distributions which describe how surprising different possible experiences would be, were they to occur, and dynamical systems which describe updates to the world model based on experience. The image of an evolving world-model thereby connects our understanding of first-person phenomenological structures with a set of mathematically tractable explanatory constructs, which can in turn be linked with parallel formalisms in other disciplines, as we will see in the concluding chapter.

⁴Perhaps the most detailed existing account of what I call a “world model” is Gurwitsch’s account of an “order of existence” [30]. The basic idea in Gurwitsch is to start with a particular experience, e.g. of the entrance to a subway station, and then note that one also has a sense (in the “thematic field” of the focal perception; cf. Sect. 7.1) of all the things near the station. These other things are “relevant” to the subway station. We now shift attention to one of these relevant things, e.g. a nearby storefront. That storefront will have its own thematic field. We can imagine repeating the process until we have completely delineated our sense of the physical world, in the form of a network of possible experiences each of which is relevant to its neighbors in the network. Thus an order of existence is “an indefinitely extended thematic field” [30, p. 381]. Gurwitsch goes on to develop a kind of hierarchy of orders of existence and relationships between them. He treats physical reality as the “one all-encompassing order of existence... the life world of all human beings communicating with each other either directly or indirectly” [30, p. 387]. This world has several “sub-orders,” including the “spheres” of family-life and work life. Gurwitsch also describes separate orders of existence corresponding to “worlds of the imagination,” domains of mathematical objects, and other “eidetic domains” (thus Gurwitsch considers the same kinds of additional “constitutive domains” I do in Sect. 10.3). In each case the order of existence is thought of as a system of potential experiences connected by relevancy relations. I am sympathetic to Gurwitsch’s approach, and think it could be cleaned up and fruitfully synthesized with this one (cf. the approach taken to Gurwitsch in [117]).

In order to make this project tractable, I make several simplifications. Like a scientist beginning with a simple *Drosophila* model, or like Husserl beginning *Thing and Space* by focusing on the simple case of stationary objects perceived via visual images and eye movements, we must begin with a simplified framework in order to understand the basic features of the account, which is complicated even on its own.

First, I focus specifically on our model of the physical world insofar as we directly visually perceive it and explore it via bodily movements. This involves several exclusions and abstractions. By focusing on visual perception I exclude non-visual modalities like smell and touch (except insofar as it figures in what Husserl called “kinesthetic experiences” of moving one’s body). By focusing on the physical world I exclude non-physical objects, e.g. fictional objects or abstract objects like numbers. By focusing on direct visual perception I exclude indirect forms of visual access to physical objects, e.g. imagining how an object might look from different angles. By focusing on the sensory appearance of a thing I abstract from other strata of meaning Husserl describes, including “active structures” (more on these shortly) as well as implicit social features that are “intersubjectively constituted” (such that, for example, I see the house as something that could be seen by others). So, when I refer without qualification to perceptions, I mean direct visual perception of physical things. Similarly, when I refer without qualification to (for example) my interpretation of Husserl’s account of intentionality, I mean Husserl’s account *as it applies* to direct visual perception of physical things.

Second, I focus on *stationary* physical objects, like houses, chairs, and tables (naturally I am setting aside small-scale, unperceived changes which constantly occur in all physical objects). Changing physical objects—e.g. moving cars, rustling trees, and fires—present special issues that I believe are best analyzed on the basis of an initial analysis of stationary objects (in this I follow Husserl, who only considers “the constitution of objective change” at the very end of *Thing and Space*, after having focused almost entirely on unchanging things).

Third, I do not consider what Husserl calls “active processes” where we explicitly think about things using linguistically structured concepts, e.g. looking at a car and thinking “I better get the brakes checked before the family vacation.” Rather, I focus on what Husserl calls “passive processes,” i.e. our implicit understandings of things independently of any linguistically structured cognitions about them.⁵ In the car example this would correspond to my simply seeing the car, independently of associated thoughts about its brakes. In practice it may be impossible to completely abstract passive perception from active conceptual understanding, which has been

⁵There is some ambiguity in the active/passive distinction. For Husserl active processes are associated with the voluntary direction of attention (i.e. what is today called “endogenous attention”): “the realm of activity is...a realm of free volitional activity” (2001, p. 283); “all genuine activity is carried out in the scope of attentiveness” (2001, p. 276). However, in practice the examples of active processes Husserl uses tend to be linguistically mediated as well. An example would be looking at a house and then saying, “Ah, that’s a California Bungalow, probably built in the 1930s.” I specifically bracket the linguistic dimension of the active/passive distinction. I am *not* bracketing attention, and in fact focal visual contents will be an emphasis in what follows. For further discussion see [97, 108].

shown to exert a top-down influence on the way we implicitly perceive things ([70], p. 84). Still, we can think of pure passiveness as a useful limit abstraction for the purposes of analysis. Husserl himself takes this approach: “An object... that does not yet bear any traits that stem from active accomplishments is actually a limit-concept for us, an abstraction...” (APS, p. 288).

Fourth, Husserl focuses most of his efforts on analyzing our experiences of *individual objects* over time (as opposed to the entire field of objects given in experience). However, this kind of individual object perception itself assumes an additional set of structures beyond those considered here, e.g. perceptual laws that determine when a perceived thing segregates itself from a visual surround, and dynamical relations such that successive segregated images are felt to present the same thing from different perspectives. Husserl calls this a “synthesis of identity” or “unity of coinciding” (APS 39), as distinguished from other forms of synthesis (e.g. the synthesis of fulfillment) to be discussed below. Given the nature of the cases I focus on—which involve what I will call “object tracking” sequences of movements—I will have to make some use of the concepts of object individuation and identity over time. However, I will not give a detailed analysis, space being limited.⁶

Finally, note that others have formalized Husserlian phenomenology in the same spirit as I have, though with different emphases. Examples include Marbach [58, 59] (who develops a precise “phenomenological notation” for describing, among other things, iterated intentional modifications, e.g. imagining that one is viewing a picture);

Petitot’s work formalizing Husserlian concepts using topology and geometry [73], Boi’s work on “Husserlian geometry” [6], Miller’s work formalizing Husserl’s theory of time consciousness [62], Krysztofiak’s work on the formal structure of the noema [47], and Smith and McIntyre’s work on intentionality and horizon theory [81]. Other examples are reviewed in [106]. These projects generally have the same overarching goal in mind—making Husserl’s ideas more precise, using contemporary formal tools.⁷ I will end by making note of Michael Madary’s work, which I discovered as

⁶I will note, however, that it is possible in principle to run the entire analysis presented here without assuming any account of object individuation. This can be done by focusing on our visual understanding of the physical world as a whole: our model of our complete physical reality. For example, a sequence of perceptions of a house can be regarded as a sequence of perceptions of (one part of) the entire physical world. So instead of a story about how our model of the house is built up, we have a story about how one part of our model of the *whole physical world* is built up, and thus questions of object individuation are bracketed. Cf. the discussion of outer horizons as maximal inner horizons in Chap. 7, note 2.

⁷Husserl was in some sense opposed to this kind of project: he is famous for his critique of naturalism and for his critical-historical analysis of the “mathematizing” tendencies of Western science. On the other hand, Husserl was a mathematician by training, and he himself formalized certain phenomenological structures, for example the structure of time-consciousness and some features of the constitution of space. He also seems to leave it open that a “*mathesis* of mental processes”

I was making final revisions to this manuscript. He is engaged in a project similar to this one, emphasizing some of the the same core features of Husserl's phenomenology as I do (especially anticipation and fulfillment), and using them to develop new interpretations of an impressive range of problems in philosophy and cognitive science [54, 55, 56].

(Footnote 7 continued)

(*Ideas* 1, p. 169) might be possible. I have addressed this apparent tension in [106]. Briefly, my analysis is that Husserl rejects any "naïve" use of non-phenomenological structures like mathematics in phenomenology, *before* they have been phenomenologically grounded. To make uncritical use of mathematics in phenomenology would be to violate the principle of the phenomenological reduction, which is that one must initially bracket all non-phenomenological considerations and simply describe objects as they appear to consciousness. However, once the reduction has been carried out and mathematics has itself been properly grounded in phenomenology, its methods can be legitimately used in phenomenological settings.

Husserlian Phenomenology

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