

**HUSSERL'S NOTION OF OBJECTIVITY :
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS ***

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The various issues around which the fundamental controversies in philosophy of social sciences revolve concern the questions whether the method of social sciences is fundamentally similar to or different from that of natural sciences (Monism or Dualism), whether the terms of social scientific understanding pertain to individual agents or trans-individual phenomena (Intentionalism v/s Consequentialism), whether social sciences must commit to a realist ontology (Realism or Anti-realism) and whether the end of social sciences is description / explanation or critique etc. Underlying some of these seminal issues is the question whether social sciences can be objective, if so, how ? And if not, why not ? My paper deals with some aspects of this basic question from the point of view of the philosophical movement called phenomenology.

Phenomenology, as formulated by Husserl, is an attempt to ground all knowledge in unshakable foundation. The unrelenting search for certitude is the principal theme that underlies his works. Thus, Husserl proceeds from an attack on psychologism to phenomenology so as to describe the necessary structures of the world. Such a project leads him to transcendental subjectivity. Transcendental subjectivity constitutes the necessary structures of the world as correlates of its own intentional acts.

1. *The Structure of Intentionality*

The doctrine of intentionality of consciousness is the key to understand the notion of objectivity in phenomenological philosophy. According to Husserl,

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consciousness as always directed to some object-consciousness is consciousness of something. Intentionality consists in this directedness of consciousness. Thus, if all conscious acts refer to some objects, Husserl maintains that, object is constituted by the conscious act. The phenomenological analysis of consciousness reveals the noesis-noema structure of experience. Noesis is the objectifying act and noema is the intended object. In other words, noesis and noema correspond to the subject and object poles of experience respectively. Every noesis has its corresponding noema. However, the same object can be apprehended differently. That is to say that the many intended objects may refer to the same object grasped in various intending acts. This implies that there is an underlying unity or identity of different 'noemata' of varying acts. Without this unity we cannot support any claim to objectivity. Now, we may ask how does this unity emerge? An answer to this question points to the phenomenological concept of 'horizon'.

In perception an object is given in a perceptual field or horizon. Any object is perceived from various standpoints. These changes in view point are not accidental with respect to an initial perceptual act. These various perspectives are rather intrinsic to the object. Every actual perception implies an horizon of possible perceptions that are expected to occur. Husserl calls this anticipated set of possible perceptions 'internal horizon' (inner horizon). Apart from this there is 'external horizon' (outer horizon). An object perceived does not appear in isolation. There is no such thing in experience as an isolated object. It always stands in relation to other objects. An object appears amidst other objects simultaneously perceived. This is known as external horizon. To quote Husserl:

In seeing I always 'mean' it with all the sides which are in no way given to me, not even in the form of intuitive, anticipatory presentifications. Thus every perception has 'for consciousness' a horizon belonging to its object For consciousness the individual thing is not alone: the perception of a thing is perception of it within a perceptual field. And just as the individual thing in perception has meaning only through an open horizon of 'possible perceptions', insofar as what is actually perceived 'points' to a systematic multiplicity of all possible perceptual exhibitings to it harmoniously, so the thing has yet another horizon: besides this 'internal horizon' it has an external horizon precisely as a thing within a field of things; and this points finally to the whole world as a perceptual world.¹

Thus, we have seen that 'noema' has horizon both inner and outer, apart from a nucleus'- the central core of meaning or objective sense that invariantly presents in

different acts. But in transcendental perception as against immanent perception the object is not given completely and absolutely. The object of transcendental perception is capable only of a series of perspectives or profiles that is not fully determinable. An element of indeterminacy always hangs on. However, this indeterminacy does not lend to what Quine calls 'indeterminacy of meaning'. For Quine undetermination by experience necessarily leads to indeterminacy of meaning. Contrary to this, Husserl says:

Indeed, the indeterminateness necessarily signifies a determinableness which has a rigorously prescribed style. It points ahead to possible perceptual multiplicities which, merging continuously into one another, join together to make up the unit of one perception in which the continuously enduring physical thing is always showing some new "sides" ... in a new series of adumbrations. Accordingly, those moments of the physical thing which are also seized upon ... gradually become actually presented, the indeterminacies become more precisely determined and are themselves eventually converted into clearly given determination...³

That is, the unity of sense is accomplished by reason prescribing an idea of complete givenness as an *a priori* determination.⁴ In the course of perceptual process, if the anticipations implied in previous perception are fulfilled later, unification takes place. That is to say, if the possible perceptions are actualized, then identification of object is made possible thereby increasing the determinateness of the object.

In the noesis-noema structure of intentionality, we have so far analyzed the noema-the intended object, into nucleus and horizon. Similarly, if we analyse the noetic act, we can see that 'intending falls into direct visualizing of the object as well as aiming at its horizon'. Now, this 'aiming at' is always done with reference to a scheme of anticipations known as 'situations'.⁵ Situations arise out of the emotive and valuational modes of intending acts. We cannot ignore the situation as merely one of subjective traits, since as an attitude in regard to the object it has an important role in the constitution of the object.

It is clear now, that both the noetic act and noematic aspect of intentionality are vital in grounding experience. If we neglect the situatedness of intentional act and concentrate only on the noema, we fall prey to naturalism. On the other hand, ignoring the noema and attending only to the act loads us to unmitigated relativism. However, phenomenological analysis shows that both noesis and noema are the

two poles of the same pointer called intentionality of consciousness. Nevertheless, the relation between noesis and noema is not one of equality. As Helmut Kuhn points out, noesis has primacy over noema. According to him, "The very objectivity of object is to be defined in terms of objectivating activity".⁶ Moreover, Husserl speaks of the object as constituted by the subjective sources. Then the question is: will it not end up in relativism? The answer lies in the notion of 'Lebenswelt' or 'Life-world'.

2. *Life World*

Life-world is the world of common experience. It is the world prior to the theoretical attitude. The theoretical attitude which idealizes entities paves the way to objective science. In other words, science is an ideal construct or theoreticological superstructure which has its basis in the life-world. Life-world, then is a pre-given world that exists for all in common. It is always taken for granted in all human life, in all human activities. The life-world is a realm of original self-evidences (self-givenness). Every mediate cognition confined to this domain has the sense of possibly perceivable as the thing itself, as self-given. Hence all verifications go back to these modes of self-givenness. The thing itself in this given mode of self-evidence is intersubjectively experienceable and verifiable. It is not a substraction of thought. Thus, we have life-world and objective-scientific world which is obtained by idealization. However, the knowledge of the objective-scientific world is grounded in the life-world. The meaning of science becomes intelligible only when one explores the relatedness of the scientific world to the life-world.

Life-world thus understood, comprises multiplicity and relativity. It is a subjective-relative world. To each one of us the objects in the world at large appear under the varying perspectives, according to one's point of view. Hence the life-world implies a community of individuals who interact with each other. It is a historical community. Thus, a life-world is relative to a certain society at a given moment of its history. However, there may be invariant structure of the life-world. As Husserl says:

No one ever thinks about the predications and truths which precede science, about the 'logic' which provides norms within the sphere of relativity, or about the possibility, even in the case of these logical structures conforming purely descriptively to the life-world, of inquiring into the system of principles that give them their norms *a priori*.⁷

So as to grasp the essential features of the life-world, Husserl subjects it to a series of epoche. The first epoche concerns the objective sciences, thereby precluding us to find any common objects of the life-world such as spatial shape, motion, sense quality etc. (these are all concerned with objective sciences). But our bracketing reveals that these are the same structures the life-world has despite its relative features. This general structure itself is not relative.

As life-world the world has, even prior to science, the 'same' structures that the objective sciences presuppose in their substitution of a world which exists 'in itself' and is determined through 'truths in themselves'... These are the same structures that they presuppose as a priori structures and systematically unfold in *a priori* sciences, sciences of the logos, the universal methodical norms by which any knowledge of the world existing 'in itself objectively' must be bound.⁸

Nevertheless, the spatio-temporal world that is prior to the theoretical attitude (the scientific attitude) is not one of ideal mathematical points or the straight lines or planes. The bodies in the life-world are actual bodies. Yet not in the sense of the physicist's actual bodies. In other words, these general features of the life-world, though they share the same names, are not concerned with theoretical idealizations and hypothetical substructions.

Now we have to make a separation in principle of the a priori of the life world from the objective a priori. This is achieved by the first epoche of all objective sciences along with all objective a priori sciences. It provides us the insight that the universal a priori of the objective sciences itself is grounded in a universal a priori of life-world. In the search of the general structure of the life-world, we come across the world as the universe of things, distributed within the world-form of space and time. It is the universal field of all actual and possible praxis as horizon. 'To live is always to live in certainty of the world'. It is to be conscious of the world and of oneself as living in the world. The pregivenness of the world effects a givenness of the individual things. Though things (objects) and world are inseparably united, there is a difference between the way we are conscious of both. We are conscious of things as objects within world-horizon. Each object is an object of the world horizon. We are conscious of this world horizon only as a horizon for existing objects. Thus relativity and multiplicity presuppose the world-horizon. Over and against the seeming relativity of the life-world, it exhibits an invariant structural framework or a conceptual scheme that incorporates the relative and changeable.

Nevertheless, such an attempt to overcome relativism looks trivial. What Husserl achieved is only a formal essence. Hence, Mohanty is right when he says that "What was threatened at the level of contents is thereby gained only at the level of form".⁹ Husserl himself realizes this. Hence he says: "...the first step which seemed to help at the beginning, that epoche through which we freed ourselves from all objective sciences as grounds of validity by no means suffices".¹⁰ So, Husserl turns to a pre-given world itself. He carries out a universal epoche in which a total transformation of our attitude in the life-world is carried out. Through this universal epoche or transcendental reduction we discover the correlation between the world and world-consciousness. Transcendental reduction liberates one from the internal bond of the pre-giveness of the world to a realm of absolutely self enclosed and absolutely self-sufficient correlation between the world itself and world-consciousness. By world consciousness Husserl means the conscious life of the subjectivity which validates the world. This transcendental subjectivity bestows meaning and ontic validity on the life-world. In other words, transcendental epoche effects absolute correlation between the life-world and transcendental subjectivity. However, Husserl cautions us that transcendental subjectivity is not a point of view or interpretation about the world. Every point or view or interpretation about the world is grounded in the pre-given world. By transcendental epoche the world becomes a phenomenon. Hence, transcendental subjectivity constitutes the world. This universal subjectivity / intersubjectivity is nothing but the mankind. However, the human beings are a component part of the world. This leads to a paradox: humanity as world-constituting subjectivity and yet as incorporated in a world itself. To resolve this paradox we have to look into the constitution of intersubjectivity itself. 'I' as the one who practises the epoche put all other human beings in the epoche including my empirical ego. Then 'I' as transcendental ego, first constitutes a primordial sphere of objects and constitutes in itself the alter-ego. Thus, in me another 'I' achieves ontic validity as copresent with his own ways of being self-evidently verified. The ego by its transcendental functions, exhibits transcendental intersubjectivity in its transcendental communalization and constitutes, in the functioning system of ego poles, 'the world for all'. Each subject, in its transcendental mode, constitutes the world as world for all. Husserl says that:

....each human being 'bears within himself a transcendental I' - not as a real part or stream of his soul... but rather in so far as he is the self-objectification as exhibited through phenomenological self-reflection, of the corresponding transcendental I.¹⁴

Here, the paradox gets resolved: we human beings in the natural objective sense do belong to the world as real entities. But at the same time, these real entities themselves are phenomena and as such themselves object poles and subject matter for inquiring back into the correlating intentionalities. By the function of this intentionality alone the human beings have their ontic meaning.

Hence, Husserl, by virtue of transcendental epoche, transforms everything objective into transcendental subjectivity. In other words, objectivity in phenomenological philosophy resolves into transcendental subjectivity.

In his arguments against relativism in the *Prolegomena to Pure Logic*, Husserl accuses the relativist of contradicting himself. The relativist makes claims that are supposedly objective truths which are later used to show that those very claims are not possible. In other words, the relativist assumes the nonrelative validity of his own concepts in order to show how any such theory or concept is relative. Do these arguments make Husserl an anti-relativist? David Carr answers in the negative. Carr draws some elements from Husserl's phenomenology which make a relativistic interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology tenable. As he points out, Husserl's search for 'The Given' - the unmediated objects in intuition- does not supply an irrefutable cognitive link to the external world. Since the perceptual objects in space and time are the most primitive objects, Husserl denies the availability of any sense-data beneath the directly given. Reflection on the sensation does not give any evidence for the existence of the objects but only makes claim about those experiences themselves.

Husserl makes a distinction between the object which is intended and the object as it is intended. This distinction is crucial as there are various ways in which an intention relates to its object. In other words, an object which is intended can be intended differently. From this, it follows that though Husserl holds the unmediated nature of objects, it is only with regard to the mediation by some other object. Husserl allows the mediation by concepts- thus the 'object as it is intended'. This distinction between object which is intended and object as it is intended is further developed into the analysis of 'profiles'. It speaks of the object as always seen from some angle or another. As has been mentioned earlier, the object of transcendental perception is never given fully. From this it follows that our perception of objects or cognitive experience of them is always

perspectival. With regard to the cognitive experience of an object, some other perspective is possible as other possible 'intending-as' is allowed. This leaves the object undetermined by our reference to it as other 'intending-as' make other possible references which has obvious implications of relativism. Moreover, the temporal character of consciousness as conceived by Husserl is prone to a relativistic interpretation. Consciousness is conceived as consisting of distinct phases. Thus the present has past and future with it through 'retention' and 'protension'. The passing experiences are held within the present as a background awareness as the future is anticipated in the present. The same of the present is derived from the past as well as the future anticipation. Now Carr argues that if we assume that each individual has a different experiential part and different concerns from each other, then each one confronts the world of his experience in a way that is unique to him or his community.

However, we cannot brand Husserl a relativist as he holds a teleological concept of history and consciousness. Husserl may well accept these relativistic implications but he overcomes relativism with his notion of intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity is the coincidence or consensus of simultaneous but different intendings of the same object or state of affairs. Though perceptual evidence does not guarantee intersubjective agreement it nevertheless appeals to it. Further, experience makes it forth coming. The role of communication of what one has perceived is emphasized by Husserl. Such a possibility of being able to communicate and consequently to understand what is being communicated is never ruled out. The very fact that the life-world is constituted by the transcendental intersubjectivity as its intentional correlate gives credence to the possibility of intersubjective agreement.

3. *Phenomenological Philosophy of Social Science*

For Husserl, science, like any other cultural fact is a product of human praxis. It takes shape from the interaction of the members of that professional community. It is an open community in so far as the works achieved by the predecessors are taken up and continued by the successors. Criticisms, confirmations and corrections find their place in the activities of the community. This praxis aims at a justifiable agreement among its practitioners. Here Husserl anticipates the post-positivist philosophies of science.

Husserl criticizes the Galilean style of mathematizing the nature. It misunderstands the objective nature as something hidden from the life-world - a reality that is to be explored beneath the appearances of the life-world. For Husserl, objective nature is a regulative principle - an idea with respect to which members of the scientific community orient their work. The idea gets approximated in theories which are the products of the scientific praxis. By such a regulative principle, the subjectivity and relativity of common experience can be overcome in so far as these ideals guide and direct the specific human activity. For Husserl, to be objective means nothing but to have results attained by mutual criticism that withstand further criticisms.¹³ In other words, objectivity is consensus or coincidence of judgements shared by the members of a community. Now, we have to clarify the nature of this consensus. This consensus or coincidence is explained by the concept of truth. For Husserl, truth is not predicated of judgements but of affairs. It is an assertion of what is the case. This assertion is made possible by the phenomenological concept of 'evidence'. Evidence is a mode of consciousness, a manner in which an object is given to consciousness. The establishment of evidence has nothing to do with mysterious vision, rather it is an achievement of consciousness. It is established in the complex act of synthesis. The synthesis of evidence is a coincidence of empty intention and fulfillment. An intention is empty if we merely intend something as truly existing. In order to have evidence we have to identify it with intuitive fulfillment. Evidence thus becomes the experience of self-giveness of something. Then, truth is an idea of the correspondence between meaning intention and meaning fulfillment.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Husserl talks about truth as idealized rational acceptability.

In the logical sphere, in the sphere of statement, 'being truly' or 'actually' and 'being' something which can be shown rationally' are necessarily correlated. This holds, moreover, for all modalities of being all doxic positional modalities. Obviously, the possibility of the rational showing referred to here should be understood, not as empirical, but as 'ideal', as an essential possibility.¹⁵

Both natural sciences and social sciences grow out of the pre-scientific life world as cultural accomplishments. Social sciences, or Humanistic sciences, as Husserl calls them, are the 'sciences of the human subjectivity in its conscious relation to the world as appearing to it and motivating it in the world as appearing it in action and passions and conversely it is the science of the world as the surrounding world

of persons."¹⁶ Social sciences thus deal with the mundane intersubjectivity. There is a difference in attitude between natural sciences and social sciences. Natural sciences have the theoretic attitude towards the objective world while social sciences are directed towards universal subjectivity, - towards the personal attitude as against the natural scientist's theoretical attitude. Thus, the attitude of the social scientist makes the pre-given life-world as his starting point. (S)he finds himself or herself in a world which surrounds him or her. (S)he is practically determined in different ways by this world and his/her praxis makes the world a new. Hence social sciences cannot be reduced to or entirely modeled on natural sciences.

Nevertheless, as R.J. Bernstein reminds us, we have to distinguish the various dimensions of the activity of the social scientists.¹⁷

1. A social scientist, like any other man, is a participant in the everyday life-world. (S)he interprets his/her own actions as well as of others.
2. As a social scientist, like any other scientist, (s)he interacts with his/her professional community.
3. As social scientist *per se*, (s)he is concerned with a representation and explanation of the structures of the everyday life-world. (S)he then takes a theoretical stance against the practical stance.

To sum up, we may say that the theories / hypotheses / explanations etc. are objective in the sense that they are subjected to intersubjective norms of the scientific community.

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