



The phenomenological attitude

Description

On moving to a new office I inherited a shelf of books from the room's previous occupant. Amongst them were two books by the Austrian-German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). I had come to the field of Phenomenology via the writings of Husserl's student Martin Heidegger's and Heidegger's commentators and critics. That put Husserl in the category of great thinkers whose insights were superseded by their student.

As I am considering the theme of cities and consciousness I am bound to (re)visit Husserl seriously. After all, Husserl invoked consciousness as a pivotal element in his understanding of what it is to be in the world. In *Ideas*, he writes,

“we engross ourselves in the essence of the *consciousness of something*, in which, for example, we are conscious of the factual existence of material things, animate organisms, human beings, the factual existence of technical and literary works, and so forth.” (67).

Conscious is an adjective, Which means it can also appear in a verb phrase to qualify to be. So we know what it means for someone to be conscious. Husserl prioritises the transitive use of the verb phrase, where there's an object of consciousness: *I am conscious of* or *I have consciousness of*!

I'll investigate the implications of his philosophy of consciousness later on, but here it's worth considering the objects of human consciousness and our relationship as humans to them. Husserl's writing is difficult for the non-philosopher, but his insight provides a helpful point of entry to understanding the phenomenological attitude, an attitude that has been adopted by many in architecture and the arts.

I am conscious of a world endlessly spread out in space, endlessly becoming and having endlessly become in time. I am conscious of it: that signifies, above all, that intuitively I find it immediately, that I experience it. By my seeing, touching, hearing, and so forth, and

in the different modes of sensuous perception, corporeal physical things with some spatial distribution or other are simply there for me, “on hand” in the literal or the figurative sense, whether or not I am particularly heedful of them and busied with them in my considering, thinking, feeling, or willing” (51).

Contrary to Husserl, Descartes started his philosophical standpoint with introspection and a sense of self doubt, thereby establishing the human being’s validity as a self-contained subject in a world of objects. For Husserl, that experience of a self comes further down the line. It is a derived experience, rather than fundamental. Husserl starts with experience of the world, and the world as populated with things that have value.

“this world is there for me not only as a world of mere things, but also with the same immediacy as a world of objects with values, a world of goods, a practical world. I simply find the physical things in front of me furnished not only with merely material determinations but also with value-characteristics, as beautiful and ugly, pleasant and unpleasant, agreeable and disagreeable, and the like. Immediately, physical things stand there as Objects of use, the “table” with its “books,” the “drinking glass,” the “vase” the “piano,” etc. These value-characteristics and practical characteristics also belong constitutively to the Objects “on hand” as Objects, regardless of whether or not I turn to such characteristics and the Objects. Naturally this applies not only in the case of the “mere physical things.” but also in the case of humans and brute animals belonging to my surroundings. They are my “friends” or “enemies,” my “servants” or “superiors,” “strangers” or “relatives,” etc.” (53).

Descartes also accorded a primary role to the positioning of objects in space and their measurable properties. Contrary to Descartes, Husserl puts mathematics in its place as a particular form of practice and a particular attitude.

“I busy myself, let us say, with pure numbers and their laws: Nothing like that is present in the surrounding world, this world of “real actuality.” The world of numbers is likewise there for me precisely as the Object-field of arithmetical busiedness; during such busiedness single numbers of numerical formations will be at the focus of my regard, surrounded by a partly determinate, partly indeterminate arithmetical horizon; but obviously this factual being-there-for-me, like the factually existent itself, is of a different sort. The arithmetical world is there for me only if, and as long as, I am in the arithmetical attitude” (54).

I’m listening to Husserl’s *Ideas* as an unabridged audio book, which perhaps takes me to the limits of what I can absorb through attending to a voice on its own, though perhaps the audio experience tunes my ear to a particular vocabulary. The quotes above emerged as if melodies in an otherwise dim confusion of noise. I found a PDF of a translation by F. Kersten online to aid me in my study, and the quotes above are from that translation.

It helps that I was already primed by Heidegger’s similar account of being-in-the-world, which presumably develops from Husserl his teacher. See post: [Inconspicuous architecture](#).

References

- Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson. New York: Collier Books, 1962. First published in German in 1913.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology (Ideas Pertaining To A Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy First Book)*. Trans. F. Kersten. The Hague, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Logical Investigations*. Trans. J.N. Findlay. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970. First published in German in 1900.
- Jacobs, Hanne. "Husserl on Reason, Reflection, and Attention." • *Research in Phenomenology* 46, no. 2 (2016): 257-276. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691640-12341338>
- Matheson, Russell. *Husserl: a Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Bloomsbury, 2006.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence

Tags

1. Husserl
2. Phenomenology

Date Created

December 10, 2022

Author

rcoyne99