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Title: An exposition and evaluation of Edmund Husserl's answer to the question 'Is it essential to self-consciousness that I situate myself in an intersubjectively shared space and time?'

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Abstract

When I am aware of my diachronic existence, do I then necessarily refer to myself as being an objective particular that is in principle traceable by others in an intersubjectively shared space and time? This is the question that I here wish to pose. I probe it through an evaluation of Edmund Husserl's claim that there could be a consciousness that individuates and unifies itself even if there were no nature or idea of nature. I contest this claim by raising questions that bring out how the constitution of our self-consciousness depends on our capacity to situate ourselves in an objective space and time.

I. The question and Husserl's answer

The question I here wish to pose is this: When I am aware of being an I with a diachronic existence, do I then necessarily refer to myself as being an objective particular that is in principle traceable by others in an intersubjectively shared space and time? In search of an answer to this question I will examine what Husserl says about the self-individuation and -unification of the stream of consciousness in the last paragraph of his *Ideas II*¹.

In *Ideas II* Husserl recognizes that every conscious act necessarily refers to an I who is the *subject* of this act and who is – at least *pre-reflectively* – aware of its *diachronic existence*.

Let me give an illustration of this *pre-reflective* self-awareness. When a tone is retained, one does not only retain this tone but also that one was conscious of this tone when it resounded earlier. This is why, when I suddenly become vividly aware of a bell ringing, I can realize that I have been hearing this bell for a while.

Husserl defends that we can give a phenomenological account of this self-consciousness without having to make any reference to a material world or other minds. Such an account would consist in a description of the transcendental constitution of a unified and individuated consciousness and its subject; i.e. of how they essentially appear in our experience, or, in other words, of how they could not but appear in our consciousness.

If this is true then my question will be answered negatively: I could be aware of having an individuated and unified existence, even if I did not refer to myself as an embodied being with

¹ Edmund Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining To a Pure Phenomenology and To a Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989).

a spatio-temporal place in a world with material objects, and if there were no possibility for others to track or understand me.

Husserl formulates it thus:

...if we *eliminate* nature, ‘true,’ *Objective-intersubjective* existence, there always still remains something: the spirit as *individual spirit*. ... we still have, notwithstanding the enormous impoverishment of ‘personal’ life, precisely an I with its conscious life, and it even has therein its individuality, its way of judging of valuing, of letting itself be motivated in its position-takings. (*Ideas II*, §64 311 [297])

He also claims:

...*no real being*, no being which is presented and legitimated in consciousness by appearances, *is necessary to the being of consciousness* itself (in the broadest sense, the stream of mental processes). (*Ideas I*, 110 [92])

I will first clarify what makes Husserl say this, and secondly evaluate his answer to my question².

II. Husserl’s idea of a self-individuating and -unifying consciousness

If we want to understand why the mere reference to consciousness is enough to understand the spirit as individuated and its consciousness as unified, and why this understanding does not imply a reference to an intersubjectively constituted objective world or to a really existing material world, we should first see what Husserl means by ‘spirit’.

Husserl describes the spiritual I³ as the subject of intentionality (*Ideas II*, 227 §55) and adds that this subject does not appear as an empty pole but as the bearer of a particular history. The idea of the I as an empty pole is what Kant has in mind when he claims that while I should in principle be able to introduce all my thoughts by ‘I think’, I never envision this I like I envision an object. How is this I – of which Kant says that it does not appear to us and thus functions as an empty pole – in fact a bearer of a particular history? Well, says Husserl, it is

² Husserl may only have meant that an empirically real existence of a spatial world is not necessary to the being of consciousness itself. But I take it that he here also concerns himself with the idea about this space, since he generally analyses what should always be given in our experience.

³ Husserl actually never uses the term ‘spiritual I’. He either talks about a spirit or about a personal I that finds itself in a spiritual world. I refrain from using the term ‘spirit’, because it is too general: Husserl also uses this term to refer to the spirit of a building. I prefer to use the term ‘spiritual I’ over the term ‘personal I’ because Husserl wants to emphasize that this former I grasps meaning and is comprehensible even when its manifestation as a personal I is impoverished.

the subject of distinct *Erlebnisse*⁴ which can either be experienced at the same moment (say I hear and see a dog barking) or at different times (say I heard a dog barking and remember that I heard that now).

This intentional subject is always conscious of something, and thus relates to something other than itself. Yet, this does not mean that with the occurrence of this subject, an empirical world is given. An intentional relation can remain even if its object does not empirically exist (227 §55): I can have a thought of a unicorn, even if the unicorn does not exist. This is a first reason to think that this subject doesn't necessarily find itself in an empirically real, or physical world.

When Husserl uses the term 'spiritual' to typify a subject, he also emphasizes that this subject grasps meaning. Husserl denies that an account of the grasp of meaning needs to refer to an intersubjective realm of understanding. According to Husserl, this is for example not necessary for my self-grasp. He says:

I can disregard the stratum of apprehension that arises from the fact that I represent myself at the same time as the same one who is apprehended by others externally through empathy. ... In self-intuition in the proper sense (self-perception, self-memory) there enters at the outset nothing of the representation of the way in which I would appear from a there, from an other's point of view. (§57 261)

This is a second motivation to think that, in Husserl's vision, the intentional and meaning grasping subject should be situated in a world of which it is conscious but which is not at first instance or necessarily physical or intersubjectively constituted.

Husserl admits that the spirit is in fact localized in a Body⁵ and appears as one with this Body. Yet, he is also convinced that the constitution of the unity and individuality of this spirit can be apprehended in abstraction from a traceable body. I quote:

the Bodily-spiritual unity we call man...harbors two-fold unities, namely: Bodily unities as material-corporeal unities.... and spiritual unities. Consequently a distinction has to be drawn and we have to maintain that the individual man is: 1)

⁴ I use this Husserlian term to refer to experiences as they are lived through.

⁵ Conform to the standard Husserl translation I will write 'Body' with a capital to refer to what Husserl calls '*Leib*' and 'body' without capital to what Husserl calls '*Körper*'.

unitary Body, i.e., a body which is animated and which bears sense, and 2) unitary spirit. (§56 255)

Let's turn to some of the phenomena that make Husserl claim that the spirit individuates and unifies itself in its course of consciousness.

(1) Husserl mentions how every *cogitatio* and its intending subject are absolutely individuated: in the process of having a thought, no material boundaries need to appear for this thought process to appear as individuated (say, for the thought '2+2=4' to distinguish itself from the thought 'people are not so intelligent as they often think they are'), nor, says Husserl, is the appearance of these physical boundaries required for the occurrence of the experience that *I* am thinking this thought.

(2) Further, this I is the bearer of its habitualities, which implies that it has a particular history. Habitualities should not be equated with what we usually call habits (like the habit of napping after lunch). Habitualities are convictions, memories and feelings that present themselves to their subject as his. The subject may for example feel the *same* grudge again. The sameness of a conviction is here neither determined by its uninterrupted active presence in consciousness, nor by its content, but by the fact that the subject has not in the meantime at some point abandoned or revised it.

(3) Then, there are the subject's motivations. How do they individuate and unify a spirit? Suppose that I imagine how a professor would call me out in his seminar and I would not know the answer. This could motivate me to prepare intensively. Both this imagination and its effect on me are only possible because I am already acquainted with my sensitivity for public humiliation. This event thus refers to a diachronically existing spirit⁶.

(4) Lastly, Husserl points to the formal individuation of *Erlebnisse*. The *Erlebnis* I am living through here and now is unique; it cannot be had by anyone else and never be repeated by me. Husserl calls this individuation of the *Erlebnis* formal, because an *Erlebnis* is not individuated on the basis of a particular content or quality, but only on the basis of its place in consciousness. No *Erlebnis* will belong to the same total state of consciousness: at distinct moments, a similar memory of a same event will be connected to different other thoughts.

⁶ Note that Husserl would be happy to admit that a track of neuron firing could be followed from the moment upon which I started daydreaming to the moment upon which I started intensively preparing for class, without needing to take back that a reason for my preparing for class is the meaning that this imagination has for me.

III. Evaluation

Now we come to my evaluation of Husserl's proposal. I will now give support to a hypothesis which, if it were confirmed, would jeopardize three claims of Husserl's: one concerning an intersubjectively shared space of meaning, a second concerning an intersubjectively shared physical realm and a last concerning an intersubjectively shared time.

The hypothesis I wish to launch is that a referral to a body which can be followed by others in an intersubjectively shared space and time is essential to the awareness of being a diachronic I. I say 'referral to a body' and not 'awareness of a body' because I want to examine whether our awareness of being a diachronic I presupposes that we have the idea of having such a body, even if we do not consciously think about it. If we work with this idea, even if we do so unconsciously, then this idea is still given in experience.

A preliminary argument for my hypothesis and against a claim of Husserl's appeals to a reading of Wittgenstein's arguments against the logical possibility of a private language⁷.

Husserl thinks of the spiritual I as a subject that grasps meaning and claims that there is no necessity for there to be a referral in this subject's self-grasp to possible others who would grasp what this subject grasps.

One strand in Wittgenstein's reasoning that I endorse, and take to refute this claim, is this. We can only be said to grasp the meaning of something if we are able to recognize when something has the same meaning. If there are criteria on the basis of which I recognize this meaning, then others, who are like me and know of these criteria, should be able to recognize this meaning as well. It is true that some meaning seems to *immediately* come to me, like the meaning of pain in my toe. In such a case I don't seem to infer that something has a specific meaning through seeing that certain phenomena fulfill certain criteria. Still, I use concepts (as, say, 'sensation' or 'having') in my understanding of this pain. Others like me will know the meaning of these concepts as well. When I grasp the meaning of something, I single it out as something, and others can follow this selection as well as they can follow an index finger.

The conclusion of this is that, if my self-grasp is really a grasp and thus in principle meaningful for whoever wishes to follow my attention, others seem to appear at the horizon of every experience that I have of myself or of what I go through.

⁷ Cfr. §§243-315 in Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

Secondly, I wish to provide support for the idea that our consciousness of being a unified and individuated spirit is tied up with our consciousness of having a body that takes up some space in an intersubjectively shared physical world. My support is not conclusive⁸ but meant to render this idea intuitive.

The first phenomenon I wish to hint at is that we seem to situate our thought processes within the boundaries of our bodies. I neither locate my thought processes in the corner on the opposite of the room, nor do I experience these as stretching out over the entire universe. Rather they seem to occur, right here, inside, or close to my body, and I'm tempted to say, oftentimes inside our head – the latter perhaps most clearly when I spend some time trying to formulate a thought, or also when I deliberately keep my thoughts to myself, and with exceptions such as when I become aware of a certain desire, or feel an emotion stir me. The origination of the experience that my thought processes are in my head may be quite contingent. It may in great part depend on the fact that my eyes, ears and mouth are where my head is; and an opposite phenomenon seems to occur in the famous, although exceptional, event of an out-of-body-experience. Yet, this does not make the phenomenon I hinted at less real or considerably less general.

However, a further step is needed to support the idea that situating our thought processes in our body is really essential to our experience of being a (diachronic) I. Time prevents me to here develop an argument to defend this as a logical necessity. So I will limit myself to hinting at certain phenomena which make intuitive the idea that my experience of being a (diachronic) I is jeopardized when I no longer locate my thought processes and awareness of being a self inside my body, as well as that this experience of being an I is restored when we reestablish this latter awareness.

One case illustrating that my experience of being a (diachronic) I is jeopardized when I no longer locate my thought processes and awareness of being a self inside my body is the phenomenon of psychosis – in psychosis the world and the self will disintegrate together. A second case is the fact that when one pretends that one sees right through someone this will initially cause panic (this is especially visible when a child is ignored in this way) and ultimately have a numbing and deadening effect.

A phenomenon in support of the idea that the experience of being an I is restored when we reestablish the bodily awareness is that when someone completely loses herself, say because

⁸ For more conclusive arguments confer chapter 7 in Gareth Evans. *Varieties of Reference*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) , as well as Quassim Cassam. *Self and World*. (Oxford: University Press, 1997). It is my intention to evaluate and develop these arguments in further work.

of a traumatic event or in psychosis, we will not typically try to restore her identity by asking her who she thinks she essentially is, but rather by grabbing her by the shoulders or letting her have a seat. She herself will oftentimes try to gather herself by dabbing her face with water; a cure found useful by psychiatrists who have wrapped patients like these in bandages or put them in bath. Knowing where I am and what my boundaries are seems in all these cases to help restore my idea that I am an I.

If all of this is true and my consciousness of being an I always requires that I have an experience of my bodily boundaries, then Husserl's claim that we can describe the transcendental experience of our spiritual unity without reference to our experience of our bodily unity is refuted.

Lastly, I would like to make a case for the hypothesis that our experience of being a diachronic self does not merely depend on us situating our conscious acts in an internal time, as Husserl suggests, but also requires that we locate our conscious thoughts in a time that can be shared by others. I will defend this hypothesis by asking Husserl two critical questions in this regard, and conclude by suggesting, how this hypothesis, if confirmed, can shed some new light on the philosophical discussion of what allows for what in the constitution of personal identity.

(1) Husserl says that the I about which we are here talking can never vanish. It will even be there in the dreamless sleep, be it only in reference to its becoming more awake and active again⁹. We then realize in retrospect that it has been there all the time. If this is so and our awareness of this I is an awareness of an I that has always been there, even when we were at some point neither pre-reflectively nor reflectively aware of it, do we then not refer to it as being carried by a *Leib* or some other kind of body that has continuity in an objective space and time? Where else would we situate it at moments of dull consciousness? The question is here not how the I before the sleep appears to be the same I as the one after the sleep; that can become obvious through its memories, habitualities, motivations and general comprehension of the world. The question is how the I after the sleep can assume that there was an I during the sleep and that it is the same as this I. I already suggested that a reference to a body may be needed for this. I now wish to suggest that we will for this need to situate ourselves as abiding in an objective time, this is an intersubjectively constituted time with something like hours and days.

⁹ See page 160 [209] in Edmund Husserl. *Phenomenological Psychology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977).

That's the first question. Now the second.

- (2) When Husserl says that all *Erlebnisse* will be tied in a different total state of consciousness, he also means that experienced contents will constantly reorganize themselves. Similar memories of the same event will for example never be the same because they will be informed by a new context. My question is whether these experienced contents would reorganize themselves in this way if we did not already have the idea of being one person with one particular history that stretches itself out through a time of days and years. Even when we understand that the time in which our memory-contents are presented to us does not match the objective time, a question remains. When Marcel bites in a Madeleine and past experiences come to mind, could this then be made possible by his awareness of the fact that he has one diachronically unfolding life? Could this be necessary to motivate him to turn to past experiences so as to make sense of current experiences?

Further elaboration upon this could point out that the one identity I have is not derived from some kind of unity of consciousness, but that the reverse might be true. I.e., that the unity of consciousness may only come about because I know that I have one identity.

Another argument in favour of this, is the following. When someone asks me whether I was as tired last week as I am now, then I will first have to reconstruct where and when I was last week, as well as what I did, to then recall what I felt. I don't seem to have an immediate access to this previous feeling of tiredness. So when I want to know something about myself, I cannot just rewind my consciousness like I rewind movie. To get access to a previous conscious state I will need to refer to a world that is not just in my consciousness, but is physical and intersubjectively shared.

IV. Recapitulation

So far the arguments for my hypothesis and against Husserl's. To recapitulate: I elaborated on and contested Husserl's claim that we could apprehend a subject as aware of being a diachronic I without assuming that this subject finds itself in an intersubjective realm of understanding and is aware of its place in an intersubjectively shared space and time.

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