
Review of *The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl*

In this sprawling work, the first in a planned two-volume series, Mohanty dedicates a preface and 22 chapters to covering Husserl’s philosophical development from his earliest works on the philosophy of mathematics—arguing persuasively, along the way, that Husserl was never guilty of the sort of psychologism of which Frege so famously accused him—to the grandiose *Ideas I* of 1913. He dedicates six chapters to the *Logical Investigations*, four to *Ideas*, a dense chapter to Husserl’s formidable time-consciousness texts, a chapter to Husserl’s lectures on ethics and value-theory, and several chapters to lesser-known works. These latter, especially chapters 11 and 12, in which Mohanty guides us through the transformations in Husserl’s conceptions of intentionality, meaning, and consciousness between the *Investigations* and *Ideas*, might prove the most interesting for anyone already able to hum along to Husserl’s greatest hits, but who is perplexed at just how Husserl got from the apparent realism of the *Investigations* to the “transcendental idealism” of *Ideas*. I am still not entirely clear on the reasons underlying Husserl’s apparent change of mind in the period between these works, but Mohanty’s exposition makes the transition more intelligible than any I have yet encountered.

His handling of three controversial issues, however, deserves some commentary. The first is Husserl’s Platonism, especially with respect to meanings. While Mohanty remains, as always, faithful to the texts he takes on, and is even willing to claim that, according to Husserl, “There are general objects in much the same sense in which there are individual realities,” (p. 112) he periodically exhibits much of the same squeamishness as many other Husserl commentators when it comes to ascribing any sort of full-blown Platonism to Husserl. Since
Mohanty offers no refutation of Platonism, the motivations underlying this squeamishness remain obscure. In any case, most of his energies are devoted to questioning Husserl’s Platonism with respect to meanings. “There is no doubt,” he writes, “that on occasion Husserl speaks of meanings in an onto
cological mode.” (p. 98) But, he assures us, “their ideality is only “unity in multiplicity”; they are media of reference, not object (sic) of reference.” Later, after acknowledging that Husserl dedicates enormous energies to establishing the irreducibility of meanings to anything individual, he writes, “But their ontological irreducibility… nevertheless does not make them residents of a Platonic heaven. They are, despite their ideality, universals whose particularization are “matters” of intention acts… [M]eanings originate phenomenologically within the womb of intentional acts…” (p. 175)

Neither of these points, of course, entails anti-Platonism: a medium of reference can also be a Platonic object, and so can a universal whose particularizations are the matters of intentional acts. Moreover, meanings are not the only sorts of ideal objects that Husserl recognizes. There are also regional or material essences (redness, animality), formal essences (object, property), eidetic singularities (the number 2, logical forms), and everything else that is not individuated by time (p. 111). These are neither media of reference nor particularized in acts. And while Mohanty is aware that concepts or meanings are distinct from essences, he insists that they are “close relatives.” “Concepts have a tinge of subjectivity about them, essences are ontologically pure.” (p. 331) But that, whatever exactly it means, does not come close to explaining the differences between them, or showing how different they are. I’ll make no such attempt, except to say that the difference between the concept ‘number’ and the essence number is clearly revealed when one considers that (a) the concept ‘number’ is about something, while the essence number is not, and (b) unless some thinkers are numbers, nothing that possesses one possesses
the other. However closely they may be related, their difference surely consists in more than that
one has a “tinge of subjectivity” that the other lacks. And so, even if Mohanty’s toning down of
Husserl’s Platonism succeeds in the sphere of meanings, it is not at all obvious that it succeeds in
the case of those other relatives of theirs, which appear to be a bit more distant than Mohanty
would have us believe.

Mohanty does agree that Husserl insists upon the objectivity of ideal entities. However,
“he still leaves it unclear whether… this ‘objectivity’ coincides with extramental reality or not.”
(p. 113) As Mohanty points out, reality and objectivity are not the same thing, according to
Husserl. And this, he says, “clearly” implies that either (a) reality is a “stronger mode of being
than mere objectivity, and that he is satisfied with being assured of the latter” or (b) that by
“reality” Husserl means “real being,” that is, existence in time, as opposed to ideal being, in
which case ideal being is “all that he can have.” (p. 113) That is, in insisting upon their
objectivity, Husserl could mean that ideal entities have a weaker mode of being that realities, or
that it is simply nonsensical to attribute real (individual) being to them. (There is another
possibility that Mohanty does not consider, and that is that objectivity is a stronger mode of
being than mere reality.) However, as far as I am aware, Husserl does not make any claims
about one mode of being being “stronger” than another in the Investigations. The closest he
comes to that is in his theory of the essential dependence of some objects on others. But this
theory does not gauge anything’s strength of being, if we want to call it that, by where it stands
with respect to minds, but by the dependence relations it bears to whatever it is dependent upon,
which could just as well be mental or non-mental. And that leaves us with the claim, no doubt
correct and fully compatible with Platonism, that universals are not realities because they do not
have real (individual) being.
There is one rather serious obstacle confronting anyone who, like me, thinks that Husserl is a Platonist, and that is that Husserl denies, in both the *Investigations* and the *Ideas*, that he is a Platonist. “…Husserl distinguishes between a “metaphysical” and a “psychological” hypostatization of universals, and unequivocally rejects both.” (p. 113; also see *LI* II, sec. 7) Exactly so. The position Husserl labels “Platonic realism” maintains that “the Species really exists externally to thought,” (*LI* II, sec. 7, p. 350) and Husserl leaves its “misunderstandings” aside as having been “long disposed of.” (*LI* II, sec. 7, p. 351) Here, however, we again confront the ambiguity in the term ‘real’. As Mohanty puts it, “Both positions are absurd if by ‘real’ is meant ‘individual-this-there,’ and, of course, an ideal entity cannot be an individual.” (p. 114) Husserl’s rejection of ideal objects as individual-this-theres is perfectly compatible with a very robust Platonism, in the sense in which we understand that position. Mohanty continues, however, to suggest that such a position could not be what Husserl is attacking: “But most certainly, a Platonist does not assert real existence in this sense of universals, so the question still remains open.” (p. 114)

And yet I am convinced that Husserl was attacking just such a position, and that the issue is not at all open. It is easy to see, from Husserl’s discussion of Locke’s general triangle (*LI* II, sec. 11), what Husserl finds objectionable about hypostatizing universals. Locke’s general triangle, recall, represents all triangles, a fact which leads Locke to conclude that it “must be neither oblique nor rectangle, neither equilateral, equicrural, nor scalenon; but all and none of these at once.” (*Locke, Essay IV.vii.9, p. 596) Husserl objects that in hypostatizing triangularity, Locke absurdly treats it as though it were itself a triangle, and thereby arrives at a monstrosity that has only the general properties of a triangle, but none of the specific differences. Anticipating Russell, he writes, “It is absurd to treat a concept’s content as the same concept’s
object, or to include a concept’s content in its own conceptual extension.” (LI II, sec. 11, p. 360)

This objection says nothing whatsoever about psychological hypostatizing, but of hypostatizing as such—such a triangle would be no less absurd if it were “external” than if it were mental.

And Plato, at some point in his career, appears to have held that Ideas can be predicated of themselves, that is, that they fall under themselves as instances—a claim which is necessary to generate the famous Third Man argument. That is, it appears Husserl understood “Platonic realism” to consist of two claims: (a) universals, including meanings, have being independently of minds of any type, and (b) they are “real” in the sense that they themselves are among the instances of the (real) things lying within their extensions. His rejection of (b) is plain enough, and that means that he rejects Platonic realism in the sense in which he means it—a view that was “disposed of,” in just this way, by Lotze. And yet his endorsement of (a) is equally obvious, which means that he accepts Platonism in the sense in which everyone else means it.

As numbers… neither spring forth nor vanish with the act of enumeration, and as the endless number-series thus represents an objectively fixed set of general objects, sharply delimited by an ideal law, which no one can either add to or take away from, so it is with the ideal unities of pure logic, with its concepts, propositions, truths, or in other words, with its meanings. They are an ideally closed set of general objects, to which being thought or being expressed are alike contingent. (LI I, sec. 35, p. 333)

Could one hope for a more unambiguous resolution of Mohanty’s misgivings concerning their “extramental reality” than this?

Turning to the second controversial topic, let us consider what Mohanty has to say concerning nature of the noema. In the Logical Investigations, Husserl depicts intentionality in
terms of the intrinsic features of acts (matter, quality, and intuitive fullness), which together combine to determine which object is meant and how it is meant, whether it is merely presented, judged about, desired, and so forth, and the degree to which it presented intuitively or merely signitively. The object itself is, in the majority of cases, no part or moment of an act, and need not even exist. This tidy picture is complicated enormously by the time of Ideas, wherein Husserl explains intentionality in terms of noetic-noematic correlation. The story on the side of the act remains much as it was in the Investigations, with noetic features and hyletic data corresponding to matter, quality, and fullness, and Husserl still admits, as he does throughout his career, that we are conscious, directly, of things like trees and houses as objects. But a new entity, introduced as early as 1905, now takes center stage: the noema. “Perception… has its noema, most basically its perceptual sense, i.e., the perceived as perceived (das Wahrgenommene as solches).” (Ideas I, sec. 88, p. 214) This is true of every kind of act: judging has its judged as such, liking its liked as such, and so forth. When we perform the phenomenological reductions, we bracket or cease positing the entire natural world, including, say, the tree that I perceive. Nevertheless, Husserl writes, “a relation between perceiving and perceived… remains left over.” (Ideas I, sec. 88, 215) The “perceived,” in this case, is the noema: the tree is bracketed, but the “tree” remains left over. This “tree” is not the tree, as Husserl explains:

The tree simpliciter, the physical thing belonging to Nature, is nothing less than (nichts weniger als) this perceived tree as perceived… The tree simpliciter can burn up, be resolved into chemical elements, etc. But the sense (Sinn)… cannot burn up; it has no chemical elements, no forces, no real properties.” (Ideas I, sec. 89, p. 216)
Mohanty explains the situation as follows: “The world as naively posited, will—in the epoché—die in order to live as a noematic structure within purified transcendental consciousness.” (p. 381) Somehow, then, the noema of an act is its object, precisely as it is intended in that act, and which, in virtue of the phenomenological reduction, undergoes some sort of radical transformation. “The real object transformed into ‘real object’ will reappear as a component of the noema.” (p. 381)

It is unclear just how literally we are to take Mohanty’s remarks here. How can anything in the world be transformed, by a change of our attitude no less, from something that consists of chemical elements and real properties into something that does not? If that sort of change, effected in that sort of way, is impossible, as it surely is, then whatever lives on after the epoché is not the real object. Unfortunately, however, Mohanty offers us a clue that his talk of the transformation of the real object is not just a manner of speaking. He writes that, as of *Ideas*, “there still remains the problem of dissolving the distinction between the object and the ‘object’,” (p. 373) a problem which, we are led to believe, actually has a solution. But even before seeing how the (dis)solution in question plays out—presumably in Mohanty’s next installment—I am skeptical about its possibility. Husserl assures us, in section 128 of *Ideas I*, that all noemata fall under the same highest genus. But, as he points out, not all objects do.¹

Numbers, chairs, and the flow of consciousness do not all fall under a common material-ontological region. Insofar as something that belongs under a highest material or regional genus does so essentially—there is no question of transforming a football game into a shovel, for instance, or dissolving the distinction between them—to “dissolve” the distinction between a

1 “…[W]e notice that while objects simpliciter (understood in the unmodified sense) stand under fundamentally different highest genera, all object-senses and all noemas taken completely, no matter how different they may be otherwise, are of essential necessity of one single highest genus.” (*Ideas I*, sec. 128, 307)
noema and some entity that stands under a different highest genus would constitute the
dissolution of one of those objects themselves. And there is little doubt that the dissolution
Mohanty adumbrates will work in favor of noemata and against trees.

Husserl says a great deal else about the noema to which Mohanty devotes some, but
considerably less, attention. As often as Husserl characterizes it as the perceived or judged “as
such,” he also characterizes it as a having a meaning (Sinn) that itself is about something. “Each
noema,” Husserl writes, “has a ‘content’, that is to say, its ‘sense’, and is related through it to
‘its’ object.” (Ideas I, sec. 129, p. 309) This passage, along with the many that harmonize with
it, provides the basis for the “Fregean” interpretation of the noema, whose most prominent
defenders include Dagfinn Føllesdal, David Woodruff Smith, and Ronald McIntyre. And it
certainly presents a stumbling block to any view that would dissolve the difference between
noemata and objects. On this view, the noema is not the object, nor is it what’s left of the object
after some impossible transformations of it have taken effect, but is something akin to a Fregean
sense. It mediates the relation between mental acts and their objects. Mohanty, however, has
very little to say about this interpretation, except that its advocates “focus on the conceptual
noema, that is, the noema of acts of thinking,” (p. 383) an interpretation which “fits easily into
acts of thinking which are also linguistically expressible, and which conform to some of
Husserl’s own formulations in Ideas I, but either misses or misconstrues others.” (p. 383)
Mohanty does not tell us just which of Husserl’s formulations this interpretation misses or
misconstrues, or how it does so. But what little criticism he does offer is misdirected. In the first
place, Smith and McIntyre do not focus solely on acts of thinking, but are equally concerned
with acts of perception. Second, one of the main theses of this view concerns the role of the
noema within the nexus of intentionality. It is unclear why a conceptual noema would play a
different role in connecting an act of consciousness with its object than any other noema does. If the conceptual noema is a mediator rather than an about-which of acts of conceiving, why would not a perceptual noema be a mediator rather than an about-which of acts of perceiving?

Every interpreter who wishes to make some sense of the noema must go beyond Husserl’s own claims about it, and Mohanty is no different. Indeed, by the end of his discussion Mohanty distinguishes four different types of noemata: psychological, logical, the noema as a semantic function, and the transcendental, which is the problematic “object as it appears within the epoché.” (pp. 383-4) He does not, however, elaborate on these conceptions, and so we are left to guess what the full significance of this four-fold distinction might be. One of its merits, Mohanty seems to suggest, is that it provides a distinct subject matter that the various competing interpretations of the noema can each be right about—Smith and McIntyre, for instance, allegedly get the logical noema right, but miss the full noema. Nevertheless, I find it hard to believe that Husserl, with his famous fondness for distinctions, would have failed to make any of those distinctions, as appears to be the case, if his conception of the noema genuinely lent itself to such a treatment, and somewhat disappointing that Mohanty did not spell out the philosophical significance of these distinctions.

The final topic, by no means unrelated to the previous two, is Mohanty’s treatment of Husserl’s brand of idealism, and, in particular, on the line of thinking that runs from sections 33 to 55 of Ideas I. The fundamental difference between pure consciousness and everything natural, we learn, is that pure consciousness is immanent, and can be given absolutely, whereas natural objects are transcendent to consciousness and can only be given inadequately or partially (sec. 42). Corresponding to these modes of givenness are degrees of evidence (sec. 46): immanent perception is indubitable or absolute, while transcendent perception is only presumptive—a
distinction, that, according to Mohanty, is an ontological one. (p. 352) Indeed, we learn (sec. 43) that the distinction between what is immanent and transcendent holds for any possible consciousness, even God’s. The distinction between modes of givenness, then, amounts to a basic ontological distinction: consciousness has an “absolute” being, while transcendent objects have a “merely phenomenal” being. (sec. 44) Husserl proceeds to argue that the natural world is a “correlate” of consciousness (sec. 47), and that the belief in a world of essentially imperceptible and unknowable things in themselves is absurd. (sec. 48) Consciousness, we discover, has “Absolute Being” and can survive the obliteration of the world (sec. 49), while transcendent nature has a relative, dependent being—the being of a mere correlate. “Reality, that of the thing taken singly as also that of the whole world, essentially lacks independence.” (sec. 50) “The existence of what is natural cannot condition the existence of consciousness since it arises as the correlate of consciousness; it is only in so far as it constitutes itself within ordered organizations of consciousness.” (sec. 51) As Mohanty expresses the matter, “All realities—or real unities—are unities of meaning. Meanings are conferred by consciousness.” (p. 356; also see secs. 54-5 of Ideas I.) Husserl, finally, assures us that he does not dissolve the world, but has merely corrected an absurd “interpretation” of it. (sec. 55)

While Mohanty does an excellent job presenting the argument, it is rather remarkable that Mohanty neither criticizes it nor considers alternative interpretations of it. Beginning with the latter point, some critics (e.g., Ameriks) have argued that in characterizing consciousness as absolute and the transcendent as relative, Husserl is simply referring to their modes of givenness. The philosophical appeal of this interpretation is clear: after all, it would seem that the inability of a transcendent object to be completely given in an act of consciousness lies precisely in the fact that there is more to it than consciousness makes of it. There are, to be sure, difficulties with
this interpretation, but given the centrality of the issue of idealism, both within Husserl
scholarship and as a general matter of philosophical interest, it would have been nice to see
Mohanty take it up.

Moreover, there are interpretive challenges for the idealist reading as well. For one thing,
one must saddle Husserl with a conspicuously fallacious argument. From the fact that pure
consciousness is given absolutely and transcendent objects are given inadequately, that this
difference in modes of givenness is grounded in some ontological difference between the two,
and that there are no essentially unknowable, Kantian things in themselves, it does not follow
that the ontological difference in question is that experiences have Absolute Being while
transcendent objects only have relative or dependent being. There are other plausible ontological
grounds of these differing modes of givenness: the fact that transcendent objects are spatial, and
are partially individuated by the inconceivably vast causal nexuses in which they stand, are just
two promising candidates.

And then there is the sheer philosophical, indeed phenomenological, implausibility of the
brand of idealism Husserl allegedly endorses. The term ‘meaning’ is, as things stand, already
hopelessly vague. But to claim that everything from propositions to bears is a meaning or a unity
of meanings deprives it of all, well, meaning. Moreover, on any meaningful conception of
meaning whatsoever, a bear just is not a unity of meanings; it is, and is intended as, a unity of
claws and teeth and hunger and ferocity, and those are not meanings. And the difference
between a bear, thus intended, and a unity of meanings is so vast, so categorical, that any theory
according to which a bear is a unity of meanings is really a theory according to which there are
no bears. Just as I am not prepared to learn that football games are penguins, or that promises
are photons, so I am not prepared to learn that a bear is a unity of meanings, a noema, or
anything of that ilk. The claim, then, that an idealism of this sort leaves things like bears just as they are, only correcting a certain “interpretation” of them, is disingenuous at best. It resembles Berkeley’s own claims that his views are not at odds with common sense, when in fact to reduce things like bears to either “ideas” or unities of meaning is to convict common sense—that is, consciousness itself in its overwhelmingly predominant shape and form—of error so massive and systematic that we can only pronounce it delusional. All of this, I think, provides at least some reason to rethink the admittedly natural understanding of Husserl’s idealism that Mohanty provides, or, barring that, to take Husserl to task for perpetrating such a doctrine.

Despite these criticisms—and no systematic account of Husserl’s position on any of the aforementioned issues would be uncontroversial—I have found Mohanty’s book to be one of the most enlightening pieces of secondary literature I have ever encountered, on Husserl or anyone else. What I take to be its shortcomings are more than compensated for by its merits. Mohanty’s book provides a clear and coherent picture of Husserl’s philosophical development—much more clear and coherent than anything Husserl himself provides—informe by all of the relevant texts, punctuated by well-placed criticisms, and animated throughout by a healthy concern with whether what Husserl says is actually true. I eagerly await the next volume.

Walter Hopp
Boston University
References


