Reply to Heffernan

Walter Hopp

George Heffernan has accurately characterized my main argument, and has identified several places in which it could be developed further. I believe, however, that one of his principal objections to my account is mistaken, and that his own claims regarding the nature of phenomenological evidence go far beyond anything Husserl himself seems to have admitted.

According to Heffernan, my account of agent- and method-fallibility is “onesidedly noetic.” (14) In particular, I have not sufficiently elaborated on the critical role that the objects of consciousness play in determining the extent to which a given method is fallible or epistemizing with respect to them. Heffernan argues that, once the role of objectivities is given its due, we will be forced to recognize more sources of fallibility than those I have discussed. As he puts argues,

After all, the chief leitmotif in Husserl’s phenomenology of evidence is that evidence is at least as much a function of the object(ivity) as it is an achievement of the agent or a yield of the method. This too suggests that there may also be evidence-fallibility. (14)

And since evidence-fallibility is rooted or grounded in object-indeterminacy, which Heffernan characterizes as a source of fallibility in its own right (26), this suggests that we must recognize it too.

I am in agreement with Heffernan with respect to the first point. Whether a given method—that is, a certain type of mental act or series of acts—is capable of laying hold of a given object with evidence surely depends on the nature of the object in question. It
is because the method of consulting horoscopes is what it is, and because the nature of the future is what it is, that the former is a poor method for bringing the latter to knowledge. That a certain method does or does not produce evidence concerning some subject matter is no brute fact, nor is it grounded solely on some “internal” features of the method itself or the social norms governing its application, but depends essentially upon the character of the object in question. Of course some methods may be universally unreliable, but that too depends on some universal feature of objects. Despite my failure to elaborate on this sufficiently, this is built into the account of method-fallibility: methods are fallible or not only relative to certain subject matters or objects. Where I disagree with Heffernan is in his contention that we need to recognize forms of fallibility beyond method- and agent-fallibility. Rather, I will argue that evidence-fallibility and object-indeterminacy are reducible to method-fallibility and agent-fallibility.

Let us turn, then, to Heffernan’s account. Heffernan characterizes evidence-fallibility as follows:

An evidence E is evidence-fallible with respect to some object (or objectivity) O if performing the mental acts prescribed by E does not result in warranted beliefs about O. (9)

Interestingly, an evidence that is not evidence-fallible is “warrant generating or epistemizing,” (9) which means that it is one which is capable of generating beliefs about an object with a high degree of warrant. That, of course, is almost exactly how I characterized a method that is not method-fallible, which means that evidence-fallibility and method-fallibility have the same contraries. Evidence-fallibility is “rooted” or “grounded” in object-indeterminacy, which Heffernan characterizes as follows:
An object (or objectivity) $O$ is *object-indeterminate* with respect to some thinker $T$ if $T$ is incapable or barely capable of performing the mental acts prescribed by $O$. (9)

One question I have concerning this notion is this: which of the many acts that can intend an object does the object prescribe? We can think of an object emptily. We can perceive it. We can perceive it more or less adequately. We can submit it to scientific scrutiny. Without specifying which of these acts the object prescribes, the notion of object-indeterminacy will itself be indeterminate, yielding no unambiguous answer to the question of whether or not $O$ is indeterminate for $T$. Presumably what the object prescribes are those acts in which it comes to optimal givenness. At any rate, I will henceforth understand this to be the case: an object is object-indeterminate for $T$ to the degree that $T$ is incapable or barely capable of performing the acts in which $O$ is given with evidence.

I believe these notions are in fact reducible to method- and agent-fallibility—that they are, in fact, my own notions, only noematically expressed. Heffernan, however, clearly does not, since he argues that there are epistemic phenomena that cannot be accounted for in terms of agent- and method-fallibility. Heffernan offers as an example a football referee who, despite being both “perfectly agent-infallible and method-infallible in the perfect game sense” (9) does not have what it takes to “call[] the game in a way that reliably reflects the phenomena on the field.” (9) What explains this fact is that those phenomena are object-indeterminate for the referee, and, therefore, the evidences he has are fallible with respect to those phenomena.
It seems to me that the inability of the referee to call the game adequately can be fully explained on my own terms. If he is agent-fallible with respect to the method that is in fact required of football referees, or if he is agent-fallible with respect to the very different method of reliably acquiring knowledge of the phenomenon on the field, then his fallibility is at least partially due to his own agent-fallibility. If, on the other hand, he is agent-reliable with respect to the method in fact required of referees, which I will henceforth assume, then it is the fallibility of that method itself that explains his fallibility. His inability to acquire comprehensive knowledge of the facts on the ground is due to the fact that the facts in question cannot be reliably and exhaustively apprehended by means of the mental (and physical) acts that the method prescribes, in which case that method is surely not, as Heffernan says, “method-infallible.”

Of course, the method in fact employed by football referees might be perfectly unobjectionable along some other dimension than that of reliably producing knowledge—in a “game sense,” for instance—but that does not entail that it is epistemically method-infallible. Competence, consciousness, and conscientiousness may be enough to enable one to referee football games according to the method prescribed by the game as we know it, but they will not reveal things occurring behind one’s head, and so will not jointly constitute an ideal way of acquiring knowledge of the antics of the players on the field. There are other ends to which methods might be put than the acquisition of knowledge, and many considerations—practical, political, aesthetic, moral—that might prompt us to adopt less method-reliable methods in certain contexts. Indeed, it’s difficult to think of very many human contexts in which the most method-reliable methods are preferable, all things considered. But evaluating methods by how
well they bring about those other ends is not what my notion of method-fallibility was meant to do. That the method employed in football refereeing is the most desirable, all things considered, may be true, but it is not the best way of acquiring knowledge of what is going on in the game, and is therefore method-fallible according to my characterization.

In light of the fact that method-fallibility and evidence-fallibility explain the same phenomena, and have the same opposites, I am rather confident that they are at bottom identical. This becomes apparent when we consider the question: in virtue of what is a method M fallible with respect to some subject matter (or object) O? The answer, surely, will be that the mental acts that M prescribes—seeing, deducing, guessing, or whatever—do not enable one to acquire evidence of a suitable sort concerning O, which in turn will be due to the nature of both the method itself and the object concerned. And a method M will be epistemizing with respect to O only if anyone who carries out the mental acts it prescribes will acquire evidence concerning O. The evidential value, and therefore the degree of evidence-fallibility, of a mental state S directed upon O—the nature and degree of the evidence concerning O that S produces—is fully determined by the nature of the method M that S instantiates and the nature of O.

With respect to object-indeterminacy, things are a little less clear, but it seems to me that it reduces to a combination of agent- and method-fallibility. To say that an object O is indeterminate for T is to say that T cannot perform the acts in which O is given with evidence. I take it as evident, and as fully compatible with Husserl’s own conception of intentionality, that for any object O, there is some method M such that mental acts instantiating M lay hold of O with evidence. Accordingly, if T cannot lay hold of O with
evidence, that is because there is some method M that T cannot carry out, which entails that T is agent-fallible with respect to M. The converse is, it is true, not the case: if T is agent-fallible with respect to M it does not follow that there is some object O which is object-indeterminate for T, since there might be some other method M* with respect to which T is agent-reliable and which is itself epistemizing with respect to O. The following, however, seems undeniable:

If T is agent-fallible with respect to M, then either (a) there is some object O that is indeterminate for T, or, if not, then (b) there is some other method M* which is such that (i) T is agent-reliable with respect to M*

and (ii) M* is epistemizing with respect to O.

What this shows is that, once the facts are fixed concerning T’s agent-fallibility or reliability with respect to every method, and the facts are fixed concerning the method-fallibility or reliability of those methods with respect to objects—and those facts, I take it, are fixed by T’s psychological makeup and the eidetic laws concerning methods and their evidential worth relative to objects—then all the facts are fixed concerning the object-indeterminacy of any given object O relative to T. So, while there is a clear sense in which my account is one-sidedly noetic, and while Heffernan’s own formulations bring out the role that objects play in determining the evidential worth of our cognition more clearly, I am fairly confident that there is nothing that my own notions, properly explicated, fail to explain that Heffernan’s own notions do.

I now turn to Heffernan’s claims concerning the nature of phenomenological evidence. He writes,
Hopp has usually selected those passages from Husserl’s works which make it sound as if the normal case of evidence there were the ideal of adequation, whereas it is by no means clear that this normative concept is also the dominant concept of evidence in Husserl’s writings. (14)

After detailing the development of Husserl’s conception of evidence, however, it emerges that “in the end object-determinacy is an ideal surely to be pursued but hardly to be realized and evidence-fallibility is a reality certainly to be avoided but scarcely to be eliminated.” (25) Indeed, he goes so far to say that “The phenomenology of evidence has no tolerance for the notion that evidence assures “infallibility” to any epistemic agent employing any epistemological method.” (26) This includes, of course, the phenomenological method itself, which “yields the kind of relatively fallible evidence that the subject matter to which it is applied is capable of yielding, none better and none worse.” (28)

First, I do not think that the phenomenology of evidence does show that there is no infallibility to be had; indeed, I think it’s rather easy to be had. Think, for instance, of propositions like ‘Red isn’t middle-C’ or ‘Something exists.’ Examples like this might be dismissed as “trivial,” but it is important to bear in mind that it is their obviousness itself that prompts us to regard them as trivial. Contra Wittgenstein, who confuses the question of whether a statement (for instance, ‘I know that I am in pain’) is meaningful with the question of whether there are circumstances in which someone would bother uttering it, knowing that p does not entail that it is possible to doubt whether p. And even if one balks at the claim that they can be infallibly known by someone, somewhere, they are certainly much more evident than the claim that all evidence is fallible. Not only is
this claim very far from evident, but of the various doctrines that Heffernan summons to support it—Gödel’s results, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, the Gettier Problem, Quine’s Indeterminacy of Translation, and Davidson’s Indeterminacy of Interpretation—the first three do not provide any support whatsoever for the claim, and the latter two are grounded in a deeply anti-mentalistic conception of linguistic meaning whose falsity seems, to me at least, far more evident than its truth.

Second, it is true that I have depicted Husserl as holding that the ideal of adequation is what the phenomenological method is capable of yielding, and that Heffernan’s more comprehensive survey of Husserl’s writings casts this claim into serious doubt. And I am perfectly comfortable with the claim that phenomenology does not yield infallible results, at least not across the broad spectrum of subject matters that the science is charged with investigating. Clearly, it seems to me, an assertion like ‘There are \( n \) essential features of perceptual consciousness, and here they are…’ could never be as evident for us as ‘I am currently aware of something.’ But I do think that Husserl believed, throughout his career, that phenomenological inquiry is at least as, and very probably more, method-reliable with respect to the essential features of consciousness than, say, “external” perception is with respect to empirical objects. That we seem to be so much better at knowing about the latter than about the former still cries out for an explanation. And if that explanation is grounded in the evidence-fallibility of phenomenological evidences—that is, in the method-fallibility of phenomenological inquiry—then Husserl’s own conception of phenomenology requires radical revision. That may be so. All I have attempted to establish is that it is perfectly possible to reconcile Husserl’s belief that phenomenological inquiry properly performed yields
insights which, though not infallible, apodictic, adequate, or absolute, possess a very high grade of warrant, with the claim that we are fallible phenomenologists. But we must at least admit that if our fallibility is grounded in the nature of phenomenological evidence itself rather than, to borrow Heffernan’s phrase, our own imbecility, then Husserl is simply wrong about phenomenology and the sort of evidence it yields, even if he ultimately abandoned the idea that adequate and infallible evidence is achievable.

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