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THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF JUDGMENTS: HUSSERL VS. KANT

The present essay claims that the understanding of judgments in which they are construed as mental objects – as Kant appears to have believed – is mistaken and that the solution proposed by Husserl’s phenomenology is more satisfactory. An outline of the mentalist or conceptualist understanding of judgments is presented and some of the principal difficulties with this view are pointed out. Then, a brief sketch of Husserl’s proposal is offered and it is shown how it overcomes these difficulties. According to phenomenology judgments may be considered from both a subjective and an objective point of view. On the one hand, they are intentional activities of a cognitive agent; this is an account of their mode of existence in the subject. On the other hand, they are states of affairs as proposed; this is an account of their relationship to the world. Such an understanding of judgments requires as its foundation the principle of intentionality, absent in Kant, according to which the relationship between the mind and known objects is immediate. This principle may be held to be the first principle of phenomenology.

Let us suppose that our colleague has just entered the room and said, “It’s raining cats and dogs. If we want to arrive at the lecture on time, we had better leave a little earlier”. Suppose that, going along with what we have been told, we say to ourselves, “That’s the third day of rain in a row”, and instinctively go to fetch our raincoat and umbrella. What is it that has taken place? It would appear that at the suggestion of our colleague we have formulated the judgment “it is raining” and have acted upon it. Yet what precisely is the “judgment” that we have entertained and how does it “refer” to the state of affairs that is perceptually absent from us but is believed to obtain? What sort of objects are such empirical judgments? How and where do they exist? Phrasing the problem in classical philosophical terms, what is their ontological status?

It is the claim of the present essay that the understanding of judgments in which they are construed as mental objects of some sort, an understanding that is held, among others, by Kant, is mistaken and that the solution proposed by Husserl’s phenomenology offers a much more satisfactory account of their na-

ture.¹ In what follows, we shall first outline what the mentalist or conceptualist understanding of judgments consists of and point out some of the principal difficulties with this view; next, we shall briefly sketch Husserl's proposal and show how it overcomes these difficulties.

Phenomenology considers judgments from both a subjective and an objective point of view. On the one hand, they are intentional activities of a cognitive agent; on the other hand, they are states of affairs as proposed. The first is an account of their mode of existence in the subject; the second explains their relationship to the world. They are not quasi-substantial objects subsisting in the mind of the cognitive agent, capable because of this intimate relation to the mind of allowing it to "refer" to absent and distant objects. They are rather activities performed by him, although activities of a very special sort. They are intentional activities, which contain or present, in a manner proper to the modality of judgment, a part of the world. And so, the judgment "it is raining" is not an independent and persistent mental object. Subjectively speaking, the judgment is the intentional activity of judging that takes place when the words "it is raining" are articulated with understanding; as such, it exists only when the words are actually being thought. Objectively speaking, and this will prove to be the more proper sense of the judgment, the sense that it possesses in ordinary parlance, it is a state of affairs, e.g. that "it is raining", yet not as an articulation of how the world actually is, but as a claim or proposal about the world.

The above understanding of judgments requires as its foundation the principle of intentionality, which may arguably be held to be the first principle of phenomenology, according to which the relationship between the mind and known objects is immediate. This principle, or something analogous, is conspicuously absent in Kant and other adherents of what may be called the traditional view concerning judgments.

THE TRADITIONAL VIEW AND ITS SHORTCOMINGS

In his *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Robert Sokolowski makes the rather bold and far-reaching claim that one of the most sophisticated and valuable contributions of phenomenology to philosophy is its treatment of judgments and meanings.² In particular, he maintains that it is possible to do away with the view that judgments and, more generally, senses are mental entities and serve as intermediaries between the mind and things. His position, which has the character of an

¹ Due to its general character, the account presented here of necessity involves a significant simplification of themes developed by Husserl himself. It is difficult to do justice to the complexity of his thought in the short space and limited scope of this essay. I shall follow the interpretation of Husserl's thought presented by Robert Sokolowski in his various works, particularly in his *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

² *Introduction to Phenomenology*, pp. 98–99.

axiom of phenomenology, is that no such mediation is necessary because the mind has direct access to the world and to the things in it. This view is an immediate consequence of the principle of intentionality.³

Kant is probably the single thinker to whom Husserl is most indebted intellectually. As regards the nature of judgment, however, Sokolowski places him in opposition to Husserl. He includes Kant among thinkers who hold the “traditional” view concerning the status of intelligible objects. Kant is not alone in this camp; he is accompanied, Sokolowski points out, by as diverse an entourage of figures as medieval thinkers – no one is named explicitly – Descartes, and the British Empiricists, most notably Hobbes and Locke. In our days, he adds, cognitive scientists and many philosophers of language tend to see judgments in this manner.⁴

The traditional view is a dynamic picture gallery model of cognition: judgments are mental or conceptual objects, possessing an almost thing-like character, and the mind is their container.⁵ The world and the mind are two fundamentally distinct domains; one contains real material objects, the other is populated by mental objects. In the process of sensual cognition mental objects come into existence “in” the mind. Once “in” the mind, such objects acquire a life of their own; they can, for example, be arbitrarily recombined by the imagination to produce new mental objects, which need not “correspond” to anything in the “real” world. These cognitive mental objects exist in the mind in a manner analogous to that in which material things exist in the world. Ordinary experience inclines us to regard the material world as a collection of physical objects having independent substantial existence. We can turn to particular objects whenever we wish. Furthermore, we believe that they do not cease to exist when we turn our attention away from them, that they are always there for us to return to them. In like fashion, the mind is believed to be a container for judgments. As mental objects, they have a quasi-substantial nature. They persist in the mind and, even though they tend to fade away with time, they do have a kind of independent existence. When we are not exercising judgments, they patiently hang in the corridors of our mind, somewhat in the way that pictures hang in a gallery, waiting for us to return to them.

One troublesome consequence of such an understanding of the mind and judgments is the egocentric predicament.⁶ If a radical distinction is drawn between the mind and the world, as two separate containers for their respective objects, and if mental objects are construed as fundamentally or ontologically different – i.e. different in their very being – from those that exist in the world, then one can easily be forced into a position that theoretically denies any con-

³ John Drummond makes essentially the same point, though his argument differs from that of Sokolowski and is formulated in terms of the Husserlian noema. See “An Abstract Consideration: De-Ontologizing the Noema”, in *The Phenomenology of the Noema*, J.J. Drummond and L. Embree (eds.), Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992, pp. 89–109.

⁴ *Introduction to Phenomenology*, p. 98.

⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 9.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

nection between the two worlds, even though practice tells us that this cannot be right. One is left with an “inside” and an “outside”, without any theoretical account of how the ontological chasm between them is to be bridged.

The egocentric predicament, in turn, is only one step away from relativism.⁷ If the mind and the world are cut off from one another and if no natural bridge can theoretically be shown to exist between them, then we are also deprived of an account of a community of judgments. Each individual mind is then left with its own private judgments.

Nevertheless, it would seem that at the same time we cannot do without judgments as distinct objects of *some* sort. As Sokolowski points out, the issue of truth seems to require the existence of something like judgments as separate objects.⁸ Our common experience of truth and falsity forces us, as it were, to speak of a correspondence or agreement between something that is in the mind, a judgment, and something that is in the world, a state of affairs. There must then be some object in us, and the only possible candidate seems to be the judgment, which corresponds or fails to correspond to worldly states of affairs.

Yet in spite of the apparent need for judgments, there seem to be serious difficulties in explaining exactly what they are and how they fulfill their function of intermediaries. The judgment understood as a mental entity is a purely theoretical postulate. Ordinary experience seems to require it, yet it is not something that we ever experience directly. Physical things can be perceived directly and thereby described accurately. In a picture gallery, we are aware of moving from one actual object to another, and each object can be experienced explicitly as a distinct entity. We seem unable to do anything of the sort with judgments: we cannot look at a judgment directly and report what we see. Sokolowski gives the following vivid expression of the problem:

And yet, although we seem forced to posit meanings and judgments as mental or conceptual things, such things turn out to be philosophically embarrassing and perplexing. We never directly experience them. They are postulated as something we cannot do without, but no one has ever seen one of them. They are theoretical constructs rather than familiar entities. They are postulated, not given, and they are postulated because we think we cannot explain knowledge and truth without them. How do they exist? What sort of entities are they? Are they in the mind or in some sort of third realm between the mind and the world? How do they do their work of referring us to objects? How many of them do we have? Do they come into actual existence and then go out of it, moving from virtual to actual and back to virtual again, as we call them up? They seem to be duplicates of the things and states of affairs outside us; why do we need to posit them? But how can we avoid doing so? Propositions and meanings as mental or representational entities seem to be a *pis aller*, a *cul de sac*, an *aporia*. We are boxed into them by philosophical confusions.⁹

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

HUSSERL'S PROPOSAL I: INTENTIONAL ACTIVITIES

How do the ideas developed by Husserl help to clarify what judgments are? The main conceptual tool that he introduces is the principle of intentionality. It is difficult to overemphasize the philosophical importance of this principle. At the same time, it ought to be noted that, precisely because it has the character of a principle, it is not susceptible to direct demonstration: it must be introduced inductively and its validity can be shown by its success in explaining the phenomena and by the philosophically disastrous consequences of attempts to deny it, of which the egocentric predicament is an eminent example.

According to the principle of intentionality, objects of our awareness are available to us directly, without any need for mediating entities. This holds for all of the cognitive modalities: external sense perception and its internal variants of memory, imagination, and anticipation; it also holds for the intellectual cognitive modalities: simple signitive cognition via words and concepts and, of particular interest to us, categorial cognition via sentences and judgments.

In all of the above cases the respective object is available immediately to the mind: the perceived object, the remembered, imagined, or anticipated object, the simple intelligible object that is signified by a word, and the state of affairs, the complex intelligible object that is expressed in a judgment. And so, for example, when we are experiencing something visually, it is the seen thing itself that is given to us, not its representation, not an impression produced by the real thing, which is itself taken to be beyond our perception but somehow causally responsible for it. Turning to the internal sensible modalities, the remembered object is not a copy of the sensible object, existing in the mind of the cognitive agent. It is not a new object at all; it is the very same object that was given earlier to sense experience and is now available through a new modality. The difference between sensation and recollection is not one of object, but of the manner in which one and the same object is given to experience.

Perception and recollection, then, do not involve an intermediate object between the mind and the real perceived object or the remembered object. Furthermore, neither of them itself constitutes such a mental object. Perception itself is not an entity existing in the mind of the cognitive subject, to which he turns when perceiving. Likewise, recollection itself is not a quasi-substantial being to which someone turns in remembering. They are both activities through which their respective objects are given. To be sure, they are activities *of* the mind and in this sense they inhere in the mind, yet this does not make them mental objects and it does not mean that their objects are in the mind. Their objects are in the world. The world is precisely the sum or, better, the context of what is experienced sensibly and later remembered. Generally speaking, it is the world that is the object of those activities.

When recalling sensible objects, we do not therefore turn to a stored mental image of the previously perceived object. The dynamic picture gallery is not an appropriate model for recollection; a more suitable model is a habit, such as that

of playing a musical instrument. Recollection is the reenactment, in a new modality, of a previously performed activity, just as a musician reenacts a musical piece that he has learned to play. What is stored in the mind, then, is not the perceived object, but the activity of perceiving the object, or the ability to perform that activity. In recollection this activity is replayed, as it were, in a new key.

Intentionality eliminates the need for a Kantian thing-in-itself and turns his phenomena into the appearances of real things, given to us directly when we experience them sensually. Real things are given to us precisely through their appearances. In consequence, there is only one world, the world that we experience through the external senses. The sensible experience of this world is the basis for intellectual cognition, through which the mind recognizes structure in what has been perceived.

The principle of intentionality may now also be applied to judgments. Judgment is analogous to perception and recollection; it too is an activity and it has its proper object. The object that is made available through it is the categorial object or the state of affairs. Like the sensible object, the state of affairs exists in the world: the world consists not only of sensible objects, but also of categorial objects. Such an object, however, is not capable of being perceived by the external senses, for it is not a sensible object, but is rather a structure that is present *in* sensible objects. Its experience, therefore, requires sensible objects and sense perception, but involves an object and a faculty that are distinct from both of them. And so, for example, while sensible rain can be perceived and can be remembered, the state of affairs “it is raining” cannot.

As in the case of sense perception and its modal variants, the object of judgment is also available immediately to the mind. When a judgment is carried out in the sensible presence of the whole that contains the state of affairs, no internal object is created, just as no internal representation or impression comes into existence during sense perception. Rather, there takes place the recognition of the presence in what is perceived of the structure which is the state of affairs. Indeed, judgment in this case is precisely the recognition of the structure. When looking outside the window, one has a visual experience and within what one is seeing one recognizes the structure “it is raining”. No mental object is at work as an intermediary and no such object seems required.

Furthermore, in addition to the fact that judgment does not involve a third entity apart from the cognitive subject (his mind) and the state of affairs in the world that is its object, judgment itself is not such a quasi-substantial entity abiding in the mind. It is an activity of a cognitive agent through which its object, the state of affairs, is given. Like perception and recollection, as an activity of the mind it inheres in the mind, but it does not for that reason become a mental object, nor do its objects turn into mental objects. It is an intentional activity of the cognitive agent and its objects are in the world, even as they are and continue to be available only in and through the judgment.

To use a metaphor, the principle of intentionality applied to judgments means that, rather than being internal pictures that give us access to things in the

world, judgments are more like windows that open directly upon the world itself. Thus, when we carry out the judgment “it is raining” and then go to fetch our umbrella, it is the world itself, the fact that it is raining, that is made available to us. Our attention is turned to a part of the world, not to a mental object which we call a judgment and which is to give us access to a world that is otherwise beyond us. No; it is rather the case that the world itself, a part of it, is made present to us directly in and through the judgment when we think “it is raining”.

As Sokolowski points out, one of the reasons for postulating judgments as mental objects in the first place was the need to account for our ability to think about objects, states of affairs, that are absent.¹⁰ One case of this is intellectual memory. Treating the judgment as an activity makes it possible for the phenomenon of intellectual memory to be accounted for in a manner analogous to that in which sensible memory is explained. If recollection in general can be understood as the reenactment in a different mode of a previously performed intentional activity, then intellectual memory is the ability to carry out a repetition of a previous activity of judging. The previously experienced state of affairs becomes present because the activity carries with it that state of affairs as its object. This object, however, is an object in the world, not in the mind, just as in the case of a judgment performed in the actual sensible presence of the embodied state of affairs the categorial object is in the world.

HUSSERL'S PROPOSAL II: STATES OF AFFAIRS AS PROPOSED

Yet the above account of the judgment is incomplete. It does not represent fully what is usually understood by a judgment, for we customarily have in mind not so much the subjective aspect, the activity of judging, but the objective one, the state of affairs contained in or expressed by it. Furthermore, a judgment ought to be capable of possessing logical value, the quality of being either true or false; a judgment as an intentional activity is neither true nor false. If, in our search for something that might satisfy these requirements, we turn to the object of the judgment so characterized, the simple state of affairs in the world, we find that it too is not the sort of thing which can be either true or false, for a state of affairs is not a semantic object but an ontological one. As such an object, it can at most possess ontological truth.

The phenomenological understanding of a judgment, according to which it is a state of affairs as proposed, attempts to remedy the above difficulties and to supplement the understanding of judgment as an intentional activity. It is based upon a distinction between two attitudes that can be adopted toward a state of affairs, the ontic or direct attitude and the apophantic or propositional attitude. In

¹⁰ *Introduction to Phenomenology*, pp. 97–98.

the former, the state of affairs expressed is accompanied by the conviction or belief that it obtains in the world. It is a fact. This happens, for example, when we think “it is raining” and go to fetch our umbrella. In the apophantic attitude, by contrast, the state of affairs is expressed in a way that in itself is neutral to whether it obtains or not. It is here that the judgment as a state of affairs as proposed appears.

It was in fact the ontic attitude that was the object of our considerations in the previous section. Yet it must be emphasized that it contains no judgment in the sense that interests us at present. To be sure, there is an activity, but again, this is not what is ordinarily meant by a judgment. A judgment such, as something that can be true or false, is absent. When speaking of a judgment in the ordinary sense, one has in mind an object, and the only object present here is the state of affairs or the categorial object believed to be in the world.

In the apophantic attitude a judgment as a semantic object appears. This attitude, however, is not a reflective one and its object must be distinguished from one that arises through reflection. In order to make this distinction clearer, however, it is necessary to consider the nature of an object according to phenomenology.

An important aspect of the principle of intentionality is the understanding of an object that it implies. An object is a correlate of an activity of the mind and is precisely that toward which the attention of a cognitive agent is explicitly directed. In the ontic attitude attention is directed toward a state of affairs that holds in the world; this state of affairs, therefore, is its object and is the only object to be found in this attitude. The activity by means of which this takes place indeed exists, but it is not strictly speaking an object in the above sense, for it is not itself that toward which attention is directed. It is rather the very directing of attention.

A judgment as an object of reflection becomes present through an additional and distinct activity of objectification, which takes place when attention is turned explicitly to the activity of judging. This is, for example, what took place in the previous section, when we described and analyzed judgment philosophically. Yet in such a reflective attitude the object of the analyzed judgment is no longer our immediate object. It is not present to us directly and explicitly. Entering the philosophical attitude involves a shift of attention from a state of affairs in the world to the activity by means of which that state of affairs is given. Now insofar as every cognitive activity is intentional and therefore necessarily involves its proper object, turning to the activity of judging does not entail a complete turning away from the object of that activity. The state of affairs continues to be implicitly present in the objectified judgment as its inseparable part.

The above reflective attitude, however, differs from the propositional or apophantic attitude as Husserl understands it. The latter involves a different shift of attention which makes present a judgment in the ordinary semantic sense, as something which explicitly involves a state of affairs and yet admits of verification and hence of being true or false.

The nature of the shift of attitude that gives rise to a judgment as a state of affairs as proposed may best be seen by considering an illustration.¹¹ Let us return to the situation in which our colleague has told us that it is raining. Instead of immediately entering the ontic attitude – or perhaps shortly after having entered it – in which we simply and naively go along with what we have been told and think that it is indeed raining, we might notice something that makes us pause: let us suppose our colleague tells us that he has been outside, but we note that his shoes are not wet, or suppose something in what he says does not add up and leads us to think that he might be mistaken, or suppose we find that something in his behavior that inclines us to suspect that he is deceiving us or simply trying to pull our leg. Our next thought might be “but is it really raining?” At this moment our attitude toward the state of affairs changes. The same state of affairs, “it is raining”, is still present to us in the sense that our attention is directed toward it, but the belief that it obtains has been suspended. We have not yet judged the contrary, that it is not raining: we are in a state of uncertainty, intermediate between belief and disbelief. What was earlier taken to be a state of affairs in the world – in principle capable of being experienced directly – is now taken to be merely what someone says or claims about the world. More generally, removing the reference to an actual or potential speaker, it can be said to be simply what is proposed. We have then a claim, a proposal: i.e. a proposition.

The difference between the two attitudes can also be seen in the difference between the following two enuntiations of a cognitive agent:

- (1) “It is raining”
- (2) “‘It is raining’ is true”

In (1) we have a judgment in the sense of an activity of judging, that is, of the directing of the mind to a categorial object. One who says or thinks (1) without additional qualifications believes that it is in fact raining. No judgment as an object is present. In (2) we also have a judgment in the sense of an activity of judging, of saying something about something: that A is true, where A stands for “it is raining”. Yet the “it is raining” in the second statement differs from that in the first. One who has finished saying the word “raining” in the second sentence, in spite of material identity of what has been articulated, has said something different from his counterpart who has finished saying sentence (1). The “it is raining” in the second sentence is not accompanied on the part of the one who articulates it by the conviction that it is in fact raining. Indeed, it is precisely this lack of belief that makes it possible for the addition of “is true” to make any sense at all. Yet this means that the “it is raining” in the second sentence is a different sort of thing than in the first. Phenomenology maintains that it is a judgment in the sense of a state of affairs as proposed, in which the relationship to a concrete empirical object has been nullified internally, and can therefore be attributed to it externally. It contains and expresses a state of affairs, but

¹¹ The illustration presented here is adaptation of an example provided by Sokolowski. See *Introduction to Phenomenology*, pp. 99–101.

does not include a commitment regarding whether the same state of affairs can be encountered in an actual and particular empirical object.

Unlike the shift between the ontic attitude and the attitude that reflects upon it, the shift between the ontic and the apophantic attitude does not involve a change of object. In the former case, the two attitudes involve two objects; the first is the state of affairs, the second is the activity of being cognitively directed to that state of affairs. The ontic and apophantic attitudes, however, possess the same object, a given state of affairs. The difference between them lies precisely in the attitude that is taken toward the state of affairs.

Now a state of affairs or a categorial object is an object of the understanding. Such an object is the structure of a complex empirical or sensible object. It is therefore taken by default, as it were, to be the structure of an actual empirical object, i.e. one that is being experienced or can be experienced: the ontic attitude is the one that is spontaneously adopted. However, the structure as such, as a form, does not require the existence of an actual empirical object in order to maintain its identity as an object of the understanding. It can be grasped by the mind even in the absence of such an object. The sentence “it is raining”, therefore, taken in its default mode, means that it is actually raining, that the state of affairs presented by it actually obtains and can be experienced empirically. Yet the structure that it presents, “it is raining”, is available to the mind, i.e. is capable of being understood, regardless of whether it obtains or not. In the ontic attitude, the state of affairs is taken as presenting a reality; a categorial structure or form is presented precisely as the form of an empirical object. By contrast, in the apophantic attitude, the same state of affairs is seen as presenting only an intelligible appearance, a categorial form in detachment from any particular empirical object. And this is what a judgment is, a state of affairs taken as just appearance.

CONCLUSION

Let us consider finally how Husserl’s proposal might resolve the difficulties present in the traditional understanding of the judgment. As regards their relationship to the mind, judgments are not mental entities that represent the world external to the mind. They are not like images in a picture gallery. If we insist upon employing a simile, they are more like windows that open directly upon the world. Even this comparison is limited, though its utility consists chiefly in underlining the fact that judgments give direct and original access to the world. They are not derivative forms of cognition that make available a state of affairs that is better experienced in some more fundamental way. The judgment is the only way to have access to states of affairs. The comparison fails in that a window also suggests an entity. More accurately, a judgment is rather an intentional activity, which, precisely because it is intentional, presents and in a sense contains the categorial object or state of affairs.

The above remarks apply to both the ontic and the apophantic attitudes. In both we are dealing with intentional activities inhering in the mind of the cognitive agent. The distinction between these two attitudes makes it possible to understand the judgment in an objective sense. The intentional direction toward an object in the ontic attitude is accompanied by a belief, the conviction that the object actually exists. This conviction can be put out of action; when this takes place, we enter the apophantic attitude, in which the state of affairs is given as a claim, proposal, or proposition, as something with which we do not identify, though we do understand it. This understanding, or rather the understood object, without identification or conviction, is what the judgment is.

The above account of judgment is especially attractive because of the explanation of truth that follows from it. Truth does not have to be explained as a philosophically embarrassing correspondence, as Sokolowski puts it, between two heterogeneous objects, between a mental entity whose nature is by no means clear and a physical state of things in the world. Instead, the correspondence is between two states of affairs, between a state of affairs that is presented or proposed in a judgment – without conviction or belief regarding its reality – and a state of affairs in the world – the one that one turns to empirically when going to the thing itself about which the judgment purportedly is in order to verify it. The comparison or correspondence in this case is homogeneous, for it takes place between two objects of the same sort, two states of affairs: one that is given directly to sense experience and another that is supposed, proposed, or claimed to be exist and hence to be capable of being experience sensually.

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