INTRODUCTION TO HUSSERL

(Moore, A. W.. The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics (pp. 432-435). Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition.)

2. The Phenomenological Reduction

We make sense of things. How? What are the relations between us and the things of which we make sense that allow for and/or contribute to our making sense of them? How are things given to us? Such are the questions that concern Husserl. Here are two pertinent quotations:

We have, on the one hand, the fact that all thought and knowledge have as their aim objects or states of affairs, which they putatively ‘hit’ in the sense that the ‘being-in-itself’ of these objects and states is supposedly shown forth … in a multitude of actual or possible meanings, or acts of thought. We have, further, the fact that all thought is ensouled by a thought-form which is subject to ideal laws, laws circumscribing the objectivity or ideality of knowledge in general. These facts … provoke questions like: How are we to understand the fact that the intrinsic being of objectivity becomes ‘presented’, ‘apprehended’ in knowledge, and so ends up by becoming subjective? What does it mean to say that the object has ‘being-in-itself’, and is ‘given’ in knowledge? How can the ideality of the universal qua concept or law enter the flux of real mental states and become an epistemic possession of the thinking person? What does the adæquatio rei et intellectus mean in various cases of knowledge …? (Investigations 1, Vol. II, Introduction, §2, emphasis in original).

How can experience as consciousness give or contact an object? How can experiences be mutually legitimated or corrected by means of each other, and not merely replace each other or confirm each other subjectively? … Why are the playing rules, so to speak, of consciousness not irrelevant for things? How is natural science to be comprehensible …, to the extent that it pretends at every step to posit and to know a nature that is in itself – in itself in opposition to the subjective flow of consciousness? (Philosophy, pp. 87–88)

Husserl’s fundamental idea is that, in the case of our scientific sense-making, indeed in the case of all our normal sense-making concerning things in space and time – all our ‘natural’ sense-making, as I shall call it – there is no prospect of our answering such questions, no prospect of our understanding what it is that we manage to do when we make such sense, by doing more of the same. Partly, he has in mind the threat of vicious circularity (Philosophy, pp. 88–89). But he also believes that our focus would be wrong if we tried to make sense of our natural sense-making by carrying on in the same vein. It is thus that Husserl urges on us what he calls ‘the phenomenological reduction’. This is a methodological tactic whereby we cease temporarily to engage in any natural sense-making. This leaves us free to reflect self-consciously on the sense-making itself. For us to cease to engage in any natural sense-making is not for us to call into question any of the beliefs that we have arrived at as a result of having engaged in it in the past, any of our ‘natural’ beliefs. Still less is it for us to replace any of these beliefs with others, something that in any case we could not wilfully do. It is for us to stop being concerned with ‘natural’ matters at all. We are to refuse to allow such a concern, and the miscellaneous beliefs with which it has so far furnished us, to inform this upper-level sense-making project. For example, many of us believe that the sun is an enormous ball of gas whose light takes approximately eight minutes to reach our eyeballs. And we have untold further beliefs that stand in various relations of entailment, justification, and the like to this belief. But to make sense of our conception of the sun we are to ‘bracket’ all of these beliefs. We are to reflect instead on the beliefs themselves, and on what their significance for us is; on what they come to for us. How do our various beliefs about sunshine, say, never mind for the time being sunshine itself, relate to that familiar glare that each of us experiences when standing outdoors (as we suppose) on a bright summer’s day? And what is the exact intrinsic nature of the experience itself, never mind for the time being the facts about light and sight that occasion it?

Here is how Husserl himself characterizes such bracketing:

[It is] an epoché of all participation in the cognitions of the objective sciences, an epoché of any critical position-taking which is interested in their truth or falsity, even any position on their guiding idea of an objective knowledge of the world…. Within this epoché, however, neither the sciences nor the scientists have disappeared for us who practice the epoché…. [It is just that] we do not function as sharing [their] interests, as coworkers, etc. (Crisis, §35) When we pursue natural science, we carry out reflexions ordered in accord with the logic of experience…. At the phenomenological standpoint, … we ‘place in brackets’ what has been carried out, ‘we do not associate these theses’ with our new inquiries; instead of … carrying them out, we carry out acts of reflexion directed towards them…. We now live entirely in such acts of the second level. (Ideas I, §50, emphasis in original)

And here is how he justifies its implementation:

How can the pregivenness of the life-world become a universal subject of investigation in its own right? Clearly, only through a total change of the natural attitude, such that we no longer live, as heretofore, as human beings within natural existence, constantly effecting the validity of the pregiven world; rather, we must constantly deny ourselves this. Only in this way can we arrive at the transformed and novel subject of investigation, 'pregivenness of the world as such’: the world purely and exclusively as – and in respect to how – it has meaning and ontic validity, and continually attains these in new forms, in our conscious life…. What is required, then, is … a completely unique, universal epoché. (Crisis, §39, emphasis in original)

The temporary transformation of the ‘natural attitude’ to which Husserl refers here is the temporary suspension of all natural sense-making in favour of reflection on that very sense-making. It brings into focus how things are given to us: the appearance of things, the significance of things.