

Husserl's Lifeworld and the Priority of the Manifest Image



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Abstract

Is Husserlian phenomenology committed to scientific instrumentalism? I find two different domains of science in Husserl: the “world of science” which is founded on the lifeworld, and the “physical substratum” of the lifeworld. The former is only instrumental; the latter allows for genuine scientific discovery.

- 1 Introduction: Manifest and Scientific Images
- 2 The Lifeworld
- 3 Two Domains of Science
- 4 Non-Instrumentalism and the Physical Substratum of the Lifeworld

Eddington sits down at two tables,

- 1 One of them “familiar [...] from earliest years”, an object of “that environment which I call the world”
- 2 The other is “mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed.”
(Eddington 1928, ixf.)

Manifest and Scientific Images in Conflict

Sellars (1963) diagnosed a conceptual conflict between these **manifest** and **scientific** images.

Three reactions:

POS Only the scientific table is real. (Positivist)

INST Only the manifest table is real. (Instrumentalist)

REC The contradiction is only apparent. (Reconciliatory)

Husserl and other phenomenologists hold a version of

PRIM The lifeworld is prior to the world of natural science

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The Lifeworld as a Structure of Anticipations about the World

- The “general posit world” is the most general background assumption that there is a real world.
- A concrete lifeworld **LW** contains a subject’s more specifically structured anticipations about such a world
- My concern is with physical nature as it appears in the lifeworld
- Restricted to this case, the additional structure is due to acts that represent a content “real physical thing”
- Such acts are “acts of posit” or “positings”

Positing Physical Things

What does it mean to posit a physical thing – to represent an object as **real**?

- Two questions about positing physical things:
 - 1 What is the objectual sense – distinguishing apples from pears (and poems)
 - 2 What is the existential sense – distinguishing apparent apples from real apples
- A proposal to group these layers of sense:
 - 1 Direct Passivity: anticipations about how an object affects me
 - 2 Indirect Passivity: anticipations about how an object affects others
 - 3 Typicality Horizons: normal environments, sizes, etc.
 - 4 Affordances and Values: interpretations about possibilities for actions.
 - 5 Particular History: interpretation that the particular object has a causal history
 - 6 Symbolic Significance: e.g. the apple as the symbol of original sin in Christianity
- All layers combine into the objectual sense of a posited thing
- Only a disappointment of 1.-2. disappoints the **existential** sense of a physical thing

The Existential Sense of a Physical Thing

- The move from “apparent existence” to “existence” is made by extending the scope of fulfilled anticipations
 - 1 from actual to possible courses of experience in benign conditions
 - 2 from actual to all possible subjects
- I suggest to tentatively summarize this as:

Existence as Ideal Fulfilment (WIP)

A physical thing x exists, when in the possible courses of perceptual experience in optimal conditions, it would appear to an intersubjective community (of existing and possible egos) that at least some of us can be bodily affected by x .

Shared Lifeworlds

- Communities of different sizes can share lifeworlds.
- This can be understood in terms of “stripping off” layers of sense in the object-positis
- With more layers of sense stripped off, the posited objects can be shared between larger groups
- Example: A dog and I can look at the same £5 note.
- But our shared lifeworld does not contain financial value
- The notion of a shared lifeworld allows for a natural transition to Husserl’s “physical substratum” of the lifeworld

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The Physical Substratum of the Lifeworld

- In *Phenomenological Psychology*, the domain of science is opened up by a twofold **abstraction** from the lifeworld (Husserl [1925] 1968, 118f., 123).
- The stripped off layers of sense are
 - 1 psychologically relative
 - 2 culturally relative
- On my reading, this is equivalent to considering physical things in a lifeworld that can be shared between all possible subjects

The Idealized World of Science

- Contrast this with the world of science that Husserl discusses in the *Crisis*
- The world of science discussed there is based on idealization: the interpretation of determinable physical things as symbols for determinate ideal entities

Instrumentalism about the Idealized World of Science

This idealized world of science cannot exist in the same sense as physical things of the lifeworld:

- 1 The existential sense of physical things in the lifeworld is determined by synthesized passive layers of sense
- 2 Scientific idealization is an interpreting apprehension, not a form of synthesis.
- 3 Entities introduced in scientific theories have no passive layers of sense (implication of 2.)
- 4 Therefore: Idealized objects of the scientific world cannot have the same existential sense as physical objects in the lifeworld
- 5 This rules out (REC)
- 6 A denial of (POS) then leads to (INSTR) about the idealized world of science

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Imperceptible Particles in the Physical Substratum

- We are not interested in a contingent lifeworld that has been constituted, but what a rational subject should take to exist in the light of scientific theory and experiment
- It is often rational to posit objects without a basis in one's own perception: e.g. landmarks in far away countries
- A rational subject has to endorse also posits that it even in principle cannot perceive directly
- This allows to give a metaphysical, not just an instrumentalist role, to scientific experimentation
- Scientific Experiments can motivate assumptions about the objects that superior egos would posit
- Such posits are determinations of the physical substratum of the lifeworld

Imperceptible Particles in the Physical Substratum (Example)

- Consider a perfectly transparent ball that is too hot to touch directly
- Touching it with gloves motivates the assumption that a possible being could touch it directly
- The general idea is that this transfers to more complex experimental situations
- In manipulating charges with an electron beam, it is evident to the experimenting scientist that he is producing real changes, subject to his will
- The mediacy of these experiences appears contingent. One could imagine the laboratory devices to merge with the body of the experimenting scientist, or to be replaced by an organic equivalent
- Even if no such merging actually appears, its apparent possibility motivates the assumption, that there are superior egos for which the existential sense of individual electrons can be fulfilled

The Idealized World of Science Remains Idealized

- Physical things for superior egos are still connected to possible sensory experience and thus have open horizons of further determinations
- The categorial distinction between determinable physical things of the lifeworld and idealized physical things remains intact
- But through motivating assumptions about superior egos, science can lead to genuine metaphysical discovery
- Therefore, this is a form of reconciliation (REC) in response to Sellars' problem.

Thank you for your attention

Slides are available at `gboes.github.io`

Any comments are highly appreciated, also at any time via

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