
The Phenomenological Theory of Being

'The Phenomenological Theory of Being: the Absolute Existence of Consciousness' is taken from Levinas's first book, *La théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Alcan), published in 1930. The book was subsequently reprinted by Vrin in 1963 and 1970 before being published in English in 1973 as *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, translated by André Orianne (Evanston: Northwestern University Press).

While agreeing to the inclusion of this chapter in *The Levinas Reader*, Levinas asked me to stress that such work is 'ancient history' for him today. It is true that it was produced almost sixty years ago while Levinas was still emerging from the shadow of his teachers, Husserl and Heidegger, and that in some ways it is still an apprentice piece. But it is of much more than merely historical interest: the book remains one of the best commentaries ever produced on Husserl's *Ideen I*, despite being written at a time when Husserl's philosophy was virtually unknown in France. In the late 1920s French philosophy was still dominated by the pre-war intuitionism of Bergson and the equally conservative rationalism of Brunschvicq, increasingly out of touch with the younger generation of philosophers who were being influenced by such writers as Proust and Valéry.

The need to distinguish Husserl's idealism from that of contemporary French idealists, therefore, together with the Heideggerian slant that Levinas himself brought to bear on his analysis of Husserl's 'intellectualism', condition the way in which Levinas concentrates on the absoluteness of consciousness. He examines how Husserl moves beyond Descartes's absolute *knowledge* of the existence of consciousness towards the absoluteness of consciousness itself, one that exists prior to reflection. Consciousness is a primary domain which thereafter enables us to speak of and understand such terms as subject and object. It is the dehistoricized nature of this phenomenological reduction which Levinas will eventually come to criticize. Though locating being in concrete life, Husserl gives himself 'the freedom of theory' Even in this early examination of how Husserlian phenomenology overcomes naturalistic ontology, therefore, we can see the beginnings of the 'difficult freedom' of Levinas's mature ethics.

For further discussion of this early work, one may usefully consult: R. Sokolowski, *The Formation of Husserl's Concept of Constitution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), which makes use of Levinas's interpretations; a review of *La théorie de l'intuition* by J. Héring published in the *Revue Philosophique de la France et de*

l'Etranger, CXIII (1932), nos 5–6, 474–81; and André Orianne's introduction to the English edition, which also stresses the translation policies adopted.

S.H.

If *to be* means to exist the way nature does, then everything which is given as refractory to the categories and to the mode of existence of nature will, as such, have no objectivity and will be, a priori and unavoidably, reduced to something natural. The characteristics of such objects will be reduced to purely subjective phenomena which, with their multifarious structure, are the products of natural causality. Let us illustrate this with an example. The beauty which is manifested in an aesthetic experience presents itself as belonging to the realm of objectivity. The beauty of a work of art is not simply a 'subjective feeling' occasioned by such and such properties of the work which, in itself, is beyond beauty or ugliness. *Aesthetic objects themselves are beautiful* – at least this is the intrinsic meaning of an aesthetic experience. But this object, value, or beauty, with its *sui generis* mode of existence, is incompatible with the categories applied to it by naturalism.¹ If it is granted that these categories are the only norms of reality, then naturalism, which attempts to reduce whatever is real in an aesthetic experience to such categories, could possibly preserve the meaning of such an experience, but this experience would still be considered as being intrinsically a psychological phenomenon in nature. As long as the naturalistic ontology is accepted, existence, including the existence of nature, is not determined by the meaning of life. Rather, life itself must, in order to exist, be conceived on the model of nature. That is, life must be integrated in causal chains and granted reality only inasmuch as it belongs to them. The intrinsic meaning of this experience would be only a property, a phenomenon among others. Faithful to its principle, naturalism reduces the meaning of acts of consciousness, no matter how original or irreducible,² to nature, which alone really exists. Naturalistic descriptions have a descriptive value, but they cannot be used to derive any assertion concerning the existence of values. Beauty, in our example, is real only *qua* psychological phenomenon within the causal course of nature. A descriptive psychology cannot by itself go beyond naturalism.

Therefore, in order to go conclusively beyond naturalism and all its consequences,³ it is not enough to appeal to descriptions which emphasize the particular character, irreducible to the naturalistic categories, of certain objects. It is necessary to dig deeper, down to the very meaning of the notion of being, and to show that the origin of all being, including that of

nature, is determined by the intrinsic meaning of conscious life and not the other way around. It is only then that the descriptions which deal with the intrinsic meaning of consciousness, descriptions which must be provided by intuition, will have more than a merely psychological value. On this depends the philosophical standing of intuition. It is not without reason that Husserl saw the main failing of the first edition of the *Logische Untersuchungen* in the fact that, in the introduction to Volume II, he had characterized phenomenology as descriptive psychology.⁴

We must therefore determine which theory of being may, negatively, detach itself from the naturalistic ideal of existence and may, positively, rely solely on the internal meaning of life.

In an earlier section of *The Theory of Intuition* we tried to show how the world of physical science, whose absolute rights are proclaimed by the physicist, refers essentially to a series of subjective phenomena. We also emphasized that this relation to subjectivity must not be understood as a relation between container and contained, and that it would be premature to see here a new form of Berkeleian idealism. Nevertheless, some relation to subjectivity is inherent in the very meaning of these subjective phenomena. The different sides of a table that are successively discovered from different points of view in some way presuppose a consciousness capable of orienting itself. We will postpone the study of this relation,⁵ but all our analyses lead us to say, with Husserl, that 'the world of transcendent *res* necessarily depends on (*ist ange-wiesen an*) consciousness.'⁶

Someone may object that material things extend beyond the realm of our present perception. It belongs to their very essence to be more than what is intimated or revealed in a continuum of subjective aspects at the moment of perception. They are also there when we do not perceive them: they exist in themselves. Is it then possible to find a necessary connection between the mode of existing of material objects and a continuous series of 'subjective phenomena'?

Husserl recognizes that the independence from instantaneous perception exhibited by material things is not merely an illusion. But he thinks that he is able to account for this within the framework of a theory which puts external things in a necessary relation to consciousness.

The concept of consciousness includes more than the central sphere of awakened and active consciousness. Husserl is far from ignoring that – as has been perceived by Bergson and James – each moment of consciousness is surrounded by a halo, by fringes, or, in Husserl's terms, by *horizons*, which are, so to speak, in the margin of the central phenomenon:⁷ 'Each perception is an *ex-ception* (*jedes Erfassen ist ein Herausfassen*).'⁸ Cogitation makes the *cogitatum* its own by extracting it from a background which constantly accompanies it and which may become itself the object of an *Herausfassung*.⁹ In the latter case, what was originally kept in sight falls into

the background without totally disappearing from the field of consciousness. In a new *cogito*, 'the preceding *cogito* ceases to shine, falls in the darkness, but is still kept alive, although in a different manner.'¹⁰ It may remain, in certain cases, as the mere possibility of our going back to it, a possibility implicitly contained in each present moment.

The opposition between central and marginal consciousness is not proper to perception alone, and its manifestation in the guise of *Herausfassung* by one's attention is but a particular case of it. It can be found in all the acts of consciousness: acts of memory, imagination, pleasure, will, etc.¹¹ In the background of conscious life there is a multitude of cogitations. This background is not a vagueness beyond the reaches of analysis, a sort of fog within consciousness; it is a field already differentiated. One can distinguish in it various types of acts: acts of belief (the dawning of a genuine belief, a belief that precedes knowledge etc.),¹² of pleasure or displeasure, of desire, etc. Something like tentative acts are present before the acts themselves: tentative judgements, pleasure, desire, etc.¹³ There are even decisions of this type which are present 'before our accomplishment of a genuine *cogito*, before our ego becomes active by judging, being pleased, desiring or willing.'¹⁴

Without going into the details of this structure, we can oppose actual consciousness to the sphere of possibilities which are contained implicitly in the actual life of consciousness and form a not-yet-actualized or *potential* consciousness.¹⁵

With the help of the notion of actual and potential consciousness, we can understand the independence shown by the material world with respect to subjectivity. *It is an independence only with respect to actual consciousness.* The object which we do not have actually in sight does not disappear from consciousness. It is given potentially as the object of a possible actual consciousness. 'Horizons', as Husserl calls them, in the form of marginal phenomena or in the more indeterminate form of implicit possibilities of consciousness, accompany that which is given clearly and explicitly. We may let our sight wander around these horizons, illuminating certain aspects of them and letting others fall into darkness. *The property of the world of things of being 'in itself' means nothing else than this possibility of going back to the same thing and reidentifying it.*¹⁶ This conception is of even greater philosophical interest because the potential sphere does not belong to consciousness contingently but as a necessary part of its structure, and so does the possibility for the various moments of the potential sphere to become actual and to be, in turn, surrounded by potentialities. 'The flux of consciousness cannot be made of pure actuality.'¹⁷ It is necessary 'that a continuous and progressive chain of cogitations be always surrounded by a sphere of inactuality which is always ready to become actual.'¹⁸

In summary, the existence of an unperceived material thing can only be its capability of being perceived. This capability is not an empty possibility in the sense that everything that is not contradictory is possible; rather, it is a possibility¹⁹ which belongs to the very essence of consciousness. The existence of the totality of physical reality which forms the background of what is actually perceived represents the positive possibility of the appearance of subjective phenomena of a certain type, an appearance which can be anticipated to a certain extent through the meaning of that which is actually perceived.

To say that it [the material object] is there, means that starting from the present perceptions, with their effectively apprehended background, some sequence of possible perceptions lead to those sets of perceptions in which the object could appear and be perceived.²⁰

So far we have spoken of the existence of the physical objects relative to consciousness. Now we want to make clearer another character of their existence. Not only is their existence relative to a multiplicity of aspects in which they are intimated but, moreover, these aspects never exhaust things: by right, their number is infinite. The aspects which we see at any given moment always indicate further aspects, and so on. Things are never known in their totality; an essential character of our perception of them is that of being inadequate.²¹

A material thing refers to a double relativity. On the one hand, a thing is relative to consciousness – to say that it exists is to say that it meets consciousness.²² On the other hand, since the sequence of subjective phenomena is never completed, existence remains relative to the degree of completion of the sequence of ‘phenomena’, and further experience may, in principle, falsify and reduce to a hallucination what had seemed to be acquired by a preceding perception.²³

This characterization of the existence of material things is meant by Husserl to be only temporary, so its definitive elaboration is one of the main problems of phenomenology.²⁴ Yet it allows us to understand how, as Husserl says, ‘the existence of *transcendent objects*²⁵ is purely phenomenal’,²⁶ how ‘the existence of a thing is never necessarily required by its mode of being given but is always in a certain way contingent’,²⁷ and also how ‘all that is given of a thing in person could also not exist.’²⁸ Finally, it allows us to understand Husserl’s assertion concerning ‘the dubitable character of transcendent perception’.²⁹

It is obvious that this thesis does not assert that there is something doubtful about the perception of the world and that it is not opposed to the naive and natural attitude of the man who lives in the existing world. *It is*

not a sceptical thesis. It does not deny the value of external perception³⁰ by asserting its illusory character, its inadequation to genuine being. Such a sceptical thesis would not express a specifically philosophical attitude. While taken a stand opposite to that of the naive attitude, it would still leave us on the same level as that of naive life, since then philosophy would merely deny everything which is asserted in the natural attitude. We would be discussing the existence or the non-existence of the world, but we would still presuppose an unclarified concept of existence. We would fail to question this concept or we would rely implicitly on a pretheoretical non-critical concept of existence.

The novelty of the analyses which we have just described is precisely that, instead of making assertions about the certain or uncertain existence of things, they are asserting theses concerning the *very mode of existence of external things*, and this puts the problem on a new level. We could formulate the result of our analyses in the following way: the existence of material things contains in itself a nothingness, a possibility of not-being. This does not mean that things do not exist but that their mode of existing contains precisely the possible negation of itself.³¹ This negation is not merely a characteristic of knowledge, as if we were only saying that knowledge of the physical world can never posit with certainty the existence of the world. Instead, one must take this possible negation as a constitutive element of the very existence of things.³²

To avoid any misunderstanding, we must add that the contingency of material things that we assert here should not be taken to mean that existence is not included in the essence of material things, as it is in the essence of God, according to the famous ontological argument. The negation or contingency, which is inherent in existence, expresses no more than the duality of how external things reveal themselves and exist. This duality consists in the facts that a being is intimated, but it is intimated in an infinite sequence of subjective phenomena; that the existence of things is assimilated to the concordance of those phenomena, but this concordance is not necessary; hence, the claim of things to exist is relative to those phenomena which, at any moment, may become discordant. *Contingency, here, is not a relation between the essence and the existence of an object but a determination of the existence itself.* The purely phenomenal character of the existence of external things which Kant determines by opposition to the 'things in themselves' appears here as an internal determination of this existence.

Furthermore, if *contingency* had to be understood here by opposition to the necessity of the ontological argument, then the necessity of the existence of consciousness, which we shall study presently and which is opposed to the contingency of the physical world in Husserl's philosophy, would have

to be understood in the sense of the ontological argument. But Husserl denies this explicitly.³³

Nothing is granted to the sceptics. On the contrary, the origin and the true reasons for the mistakes of a scepticism are explained. In the relative character of the existence of material things we find the foundation of scepticism. Scepticism created a chasm by hypostatizing as *being in itself* the claim of the subjective phenomena, to existence, while calling *knowledge* these same subjective phenomena, in the flux of their becoming. Noticing that the intimated thing is, in principle, inadequate to the phenomena which constitute it, scepticism seems to find the right to assert that we do not know being and that we are constantly misled by our senses. But scepticism is precisely so called because it does not recognize the value of being to what we know and is guided by an idea of being which expresses the existence of things in only one way, the way in which things claim to transcend the phenomena which constitute them. The great interest of Husserl's conception then seems to be his starting point (the phenomenological starting point *par excellence*): to have tried to locate the existence of external things, not in their opposition to what they are for consciousness, but in the aspect under which they are present in concrete conscious life. What exists for us, what we consider as existing is not a reality hidden behind phenomena that appear as images or signs of this reality.³⁴ The world of phenomena itself makes up the being of our concrete life. It is a world of phenomena that have no clearly defined limits and are not mathematically precise; they are full of 'almost' and 'so to speak', obeying the vague laws that are expressed by the word 'normality'.³⁵

We can perceive how, with such an attitude, one can go beyond any philosophy which thinks it must start from the theory of knowledge, as a study of our faculty of knowing, in order to see whether and how a subject can reach being. Any theory of knowledge presupposes, indeed, the existence of an object and of a subject that must come in contact with each other. Knowledge is then defined as this contact, and this always leaves the problem of determining whether knowledge does not falsify the being which it presents to the subject. But this problem is exposed as fictitious once we understand that the origin of the very idea of 'an object' is to be found in the concrete life of a subject; that a subject is not a substance in need of a bridge, namely, knowledge, in order to reach an object, but that the secret of its subjectivity is its being present in front of objects. The modes of appearing of things are not, therefore, characters which are superimposed on existing things by the process of consciousness; they make up the very existence of things.

Until now, however, we have proceeded negatively. We have shown that existence does not necessarily mean existence in the manner of things and

that the existence of things in some way refers back to the existence of consciousness. What meaning does the being of consciousness have? How can it be positively determined? We must clarify these matters in order to reach the very heart of Husserl's ontology.

The fundamental intuition of Husserlian philosophy consists of attributing absolute existence to concrete conscious life and transforming the very notion of conscious life. This conscious life, which has an absolute existence, cannot be the same as what is meant by consciousness in Berkeleyian idealism, a sort of closed world which has in fact the same type of existence as that of things. Conscious life must be described as life in the presence of transcendent beings. It must be understood that when we speak of the absolute existence of consciousness, when we assert that the external world is solely constituted by consciousness, we do not fall back into Berkeleyianism; rather, we are going back to a more original phenomenon of existence that alone makes possible the subject and object of traditional philosophy. Those two terms are only abstractions based on the concrete phenomenon which is expressed by the Husserlian concept of consciousness.

We shall first describe the absolute character of the existence of consciousness and then show³⁶ how this existence consists in being intentional. It will then follow that consciousness is the origin of all being and that the latter is determined by the intrinsic meaning of the former. Thus we shall be in a position to understand how the study of conscious life, when understood in a certain way, may have a philosophical value.³⁷

To determine the essence of consciousness, Husserl starts from the totality of those phenomena which are included in the Cartesian *cogito*.

We are taking as a starting point 'consciousness' in the pregnant sense of the term, in the sense which first comes to mind and which can be most easily expressed as the Cartesian *cogito*, as 'I think' As we know, Descartes understood the *cogito* in a wide sense, in such a way as to include any state such as: 'I perceive, I remember, I imagine, I judge, I desire, I want' and, similarly, all analogous ego states (*Icherlebnisse*) in their innumerable successive formations.³⁸

Those states of life, those *Erlebnisse*, do not form a region of reality which is simply beside the world of nature.³⁹ It is only in terms of 'empty categories'⁴⁰ that we may use the word 'being' with respect to both the world of things and the world of consciousness. The *Erlebnisse* have a different mode of existence. We insist on this from the beginning. 'Consciousness has in itself its proper being. It constitutes a region of being original in principle.'⁴¹ Elsewhere, Husserl says, even more explicitly,

'There emerges an essential and fundamental difference between *being qua consciousness* and *being qua thing*.'⁴² 'In this way is intimated a difference in principle between the *modes of existence* of consciousness and of reality, the most important difference that there is.'⁴³

If we concentrate on the manner in which consciousness is revealed to reflective insight, we shall notice that, in the perception of consciousness or reflection (*immanent* perception, in Husserl's terminology), there is no duality between what is revealed and what is only intimated, as in external, transcendent perception.⁴⁴ 'Ein Erlebnis schattet sich nicht ab.'⁴⁵ 'For any being in this region it is nonsense to speak of appearance (*erscheinen*) or of representation by *Abschattungen*.'⁴⁶

Psychical being, being as 'phenomenon', is in principle not a unity that could be experienced in several separate perceptions as individually identical, not even in perceptions of the same subject. In the psychical sphere there is, in other words, no distinction between appearance and being, and if nature is a being that appears in appearances, still appearances themselves (which the psychologist certainly looks upon as psychical) do not constitute a being which itself appears by means of appearances lying behind it.⁴⁷

The flux of consciousness is always given in immanent perception as something absolute, something which is what it is, and not as an object which is anticipated on the basis of a sequence of phenomena which may further contradict or destroy one another and consequently disappoint our expectations. Unlike the perception of external things, immanent perception is adequate.

The perception of an *Erlebnis* is a direct vision (*schlichtes Erschauen*) of something which is given (or could be given) in perception as something absolute and not as that which is identical in many *Abschattungen*. . . A feeling does not appear through *Abschattungen*. Whenever I consider it I have something absolute which has no sides that could be presented once in one way, once in another.⁴⁸

That they may always turn out to be nothing is a characteristic of the existence of material things and is alien to a being which is revealed directly rather than in a sequence of *Abschattungen*. 'In this absolute sphere there is no room for discordance⁴⁹ or mere appearance, or for the possibility of being something else.'⁵⁰ It is a sphere of absolute position.'⁵¹ The analysis of immanent perception leads us to the absolute position of consciousness, to the impossibility of denying its existence.

When reflective perception is directed toward my *Erlebnis*, what is perceived

is an absolute *self* (*absolute Selbst*), the existence of which cannot, in principle, be denied; that is, it is in principle impossible to suppose that it does not exist. To say of an *Erlebnis* given in such a way that it does not exist would be nonsense.⁵²

We seem to be in the presence of the Cartesian *cogito*; there is no doubt about the relationship between the two ideas, and Husserl realizes it.

We shall return to the connections that can be found between Husserl's attitude and that of the Cartesian *cogito*, but let us say now that by stretching the connection too far, one could distort the most original thought of the German philosopher. Indeed, for Husserl, the absoluteness of consciousness means more than the indubitability of internal perception. This absoluteness does not concern only the truths pertaining to consciousness and their certainty but also the very existence of consciousness itself. To posit as absolute the existence of consciousness means more than the fact that it is absurd to doubt it.

It is important to show that Husserl has done more than render comprehensible the absolute evidence of the *cogito* by appealing to the fact that internal perception is adequate. For Husserl, it is the absoluteness of consciousness itself which makes possible an adequate perception. The absolute evidence of the *cogito* is founded on the mode of being of consciousness. 'Only for the ego, and for the flux of experience in its relation to itself, do we find this exceptional situation; only here there is, and there must be, something like immanent perception.'⁵³

It is not only as object of reflection that consciousness, being given adequately, necessarily exists; the meaning of its existence consists precisely in not existing as an object of reflection only. Conscious life exists even when it is not an object of reflection. 'What is perceived in it [in reflection] is precisely characterized as not having existence and duration in perception only, but as having been already there before becoming object of perception.'⁵⁴ Here, the existence of consciousness reveals its independence with respect to internal perception, as opposed to external objects, whose very existence refers us back to consciousness.⁵⁵ It is no longer a reflection on consciousness that constitutes its existence; the former is made possible by the latter.

Furthermore, we have wondered whether the assertion that consciousness has an absolute existence remains, for Husserl, a mere thesis that he does not attempt to clarify. Indeed, we cannot say that the clarification of the meaning of this absoluteness has ever been attempted explicitly by Husserl. This is certainly one of the most serious gaps in his theory. He will study the notion of existence proper to the various regions of being; but, in the case of consciousness, back to which all regions refer, he will assert only

its absolute existence.⁵⁶ And yet it seems to us that there is at least the beginning of an analysis which goes in that direction. Husserl characterizes the existence of consciousness and its independence from reflection by saying that consciousness 'is ready to be perceived (*Wahrnehmungsbereit*).'⁵⁷ But for external objects, according to their mode of existing, to be ready to be perceived always means to be already in some way an object of consciousness – if only implicitly, as a part of the horizon of an actual perception.⁵⁸ Consciousness, on the other hand, is ready to be perceived in a quite different manner. For consciousness, to be perceivable does not mean to be already an object of consciousness but, more precisely, to exist in this special manner which is opposed to the mode of presence of objects to subjects. Consciousness is ready to be perceived 'through the simple modality of its existence . . . for the ego to which it belongs.'⁵⁹ This possibility of being perceived, a possibility which is inherent in the very existence of consciousness, derives, according to another text, from the fact that 'all *Erlebnisse* are conscious.'⁶⁰ *Erlebnisse* are conscious. They know themselves in some manner, but this consciousness is not analogous to the perception of external objects or even to the immanent perception of reflection. Indeed, we also learn, and we can only make a note of it, that the existence of those experiences is equivalent to their being 'constituted in the immanent consciousness of time'⁶¹ 'The consciousness of time functions as perceptive consciousness.'⁶² But Husserl adds:

This universal (*allumfassende*) consciousness of time is obviously not a continuous perception, in the pregnant sense of the term. In other words, it is obviously not a continuous internal reflection for which *Erlebnisse* would be objects, *posited* in the specific meaning of the term and apprehended as existing.⁶³

The specific mode of existence of consciousness – its absoluteness and its independence from reflection – consists in its existing for itself, prior to being taken in any way as an object by reflection. Consciousness exists in such a way that it is constantly present to itself.

All real *Erlebnisse*, *qua* existing and present, or, as we could also say, *qua* temporal unity constituted in the phenomenological consciousness of time, carry in some sense, in themselves, their character of being *in a way analogous to perceived objects*.⁶⁴

But that the 'existence of *Erlebnisse*'⁶⁵ is in principle conscious does not mean that conscious life exists and then becomes conscious of itself. 'It is certainly an absurdity to speak of a content of which we are "unconscious",

one of which we are conscious only later.⁶⁶ Consciousness constitutes the very being of *Erlebnisse*. From this we understand the great importance of the phenomenological investigations on the constitution of immanent time.

To summarize: consciousness presents itself as a sphere of absolute existence. This absolute existence not only expresses the indubitable character of the *cogito* but also, *qua* positive determination of the very being of consciousness, founds the possibility of an indubitable *cogito*.

It is in this, we believe, that Husserl's conception of the *cogito* differs from Descartes's. For Descartes, indeed, the distinction between thought and space is, above all, a distinction between two types of knowledge, one absolutely certain, the other doubtful. There may be many reasons in favour of the truths that I can formulate, but they are never incontrovertible because, by its very nature, our sensibility is subject to error. The analysis of sensibility by Descartes exposes as relative and fallible what we assert on the basis of our senses. This analysis, however, is not presented as an analysis of the being of sensible things, but as an analysis of knowledge, that is, of the channels that put a subject in contact with being.

From among those doubtful truths there is, for Descartes, one that is privileged, namely, the *cogito*; but it is only one privileged piece of knowledge among others, a sort of axiom from which all the others should be deduced. 'The soul is easier to know than the body.' Because of the force of its certainty, knowledge of the soul is superior to knowledge of the body. One can then understand that, after the *cogito*, Descartes intends to deduce from the existence of consciousness that of God and of the external world. Descartes does not go back to the source of the evidence of the *cogito*; he does not search for its root in the being of consciousness which renders this evidence possible. For him, the meaning of existence is not a problem. He is probably led by the idea that to exist means always and everywhere the same thing, and he then simply wants to show that the external world exists just as he has shown that consciousness exists. For Husserl, the necessary existence of consciousness does not follow from the *cogito*; rather, this necessary existence is none other than an existence that allows a *cogito*. The *cogito* is not merely a means to attain a first certainty so as to deduce the existence of the world outside the *cogito*. What is interesting is the mode of existence of the *cogito*, the type of original existence that characterizes it. Hence Descartes is still on the grounds of dogmatic philosophy, if we call 'dogmatic' a philosophy that begins with an unclarified idea of existence borrowed from the existence of hypostatized external things and then applies this type of existence to all the regions of being. For such a philosophy, the question is not to know what it is to be, but to know whether such and such an object exists. Against such a theory, scepticism has an easy task when it reduces the totality of being to appearance: if we admit that to exist

is to exist in the manner of things, then we are forced to admit that such an existence is always problematic. Of course, the novelty of Cartesian philosophy consists in wanting to go beyond scepticism by abandoning the idea of existence conceived on the model of external things. If what appears does not exist, we are at least certain that the act of appearing exists. But Descartes did not follow his discovery to the end. Once he had reached, in consciousness, a domain of absolute existence, he did not see that the term 'existence' is used there with a quite different meaning from the one it has when applied to the world of spatial things. He interpreted the former on the model of the latter. The soul, for Descartes, is a substance which has an existence parallel to that of extended substances and is distinguished from them solely by the certainty we have of its existence. The specific character of the *cogito* is not understood by Descartes as the internal character of the substantiality of consciousness.

This is where Husserl has made progress. The evidence of the *cogito* is grounded on the mode of existence of consciousness in the same way that appearing characterizes the very being of external things. The difference between those two modes of knowing is not limited to their degree of certainty: it is a difference in nature. An abyss separates the adequation of internal perception and the non-adequation of external perception. Husserl's step forward beyond Descartes consists in not separating the knowledge of an object – or, more generally, the mode of appearing of an object in our life – from its being; it consists of seeing the mode of its being known as the expression and the characteristic of its mode of being. This is why, in Husserl's philosophy, there is for the first time a possibility of passing from and through the theory of knowledge to the theory of being. The latter will consist of directly studying the essence of beings that are revealed to consciousness, and of studying the modes of existence in the different regions of objects. Let us say, incidentally, that with the idea of a different existence for external things and for consciousness, there arises the very possibility of different modes of existence.

We have tried to characterize the absolute existence of consciousness by indicating the conscious character of *Erlebnisse*, the character by virtue of which they are always present to themselves. This absolute existence should not be understood as it would be in an 'ontological argument'.

Husserl explicitly states that, for him, the existence of consciousness is simply factual. 'Clearly, the necessity of the existence of each actual *Erlebnis* is not a pure essential necessity, i.e., a pure eidetic⁶⁷ particularization of an eidetic law. It is a factual necessity.'⁶⁸ The *Seinsnotwendigkeit* of consciousness must mean something quite different from an existence that follows necessarily from an essence. It concerns not the fact that consciousness exists but the mode of its existence. It does not mean that consciousness

necessarily exists but that inasmuch as it exists its existence does not contain the possibility of its not-being which is the characteristic of spatial existence. *To exist*, in the case of consciousness, does not mean *to be perceived* in a series of subjective phenomena, but *to be* continuously present to itself, which is what the term 'consciousness' expresses.

Now we can understand how Husserl could meet the objection raised by Hering in *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse*. Hering's objection concerns the impossibility of passing from the indubitability of the *cogito* to the assertion of its necessary existence. 'Indeed,' says Hering,

in this case the fact in question derives its indubitability not from the idea of the *cogito* (as is the case for the ideal existence of an essence or in the case of the actual existence of God for the ontologists) but from the particularly favourable situation of the observer. So Paul could perfectly well imagine a world in which the consciousness of Pierre would not exist.⁶⁹

Hering is perfectly right in saying that the existence of the *cogito* does not have the same meaning as 'the existence of God for the ontologists', since, as we have tried to show, Husserl himself admits this. However, if the necessity of consciousness is, according to our interpretation, a characteristic of the mode and not of the fact of its existence, one can no longer appeal to its privileged situation which allows it to reflect upon itself, in order to dispute the necessary character of the existence of consciousness. The possibility of such a *privileged situation* is precisely what characterizes the existence of consciousness. In the being of consciousness is founded the very possibility of reflection. 'Only for the ego and for the flux of experience in its relation to itself, do we find this exceptional situation; only here there is, and there must be, something like immanent perception.'⁷⁰

The analyses of the existence which is proper to external things and to consciousness have not shown, as a superficial reading of Husserl's works could lead one to believe, that only consciousness exists and that the external world does not. Both exist, but according to two different modes.

However, we must now emphasize a certain primacy of consciousness which is crucial for the whole of Husserl's philosophy and which, above all, is vital for understanding the function and the place of intuition in his system. Consciousness exists absolutely; this is guaranteed by every moment of its existence.⁷¹ But to say that consciousness, in the concrete totality of its course, carries with it the guarantee of its being amounts to saying that existence should not be looked for somewhere behind it, but that, with all the wealth of its details and meanderings, it is itself being, and that it is here that the notion of existence must be sought. Husserl's assertion in § 49 of *Ideen* that consciousness '*nulla re indiget ad existendum*' does not, we believe, mean anything else. It is in this primacy of conscious

life that naturalism is definitively superseded. Its last objection against that for which the intrinsic meaning of our conscious life bears witness could consist, as we have shown, in presenting all that life means as a purely subjective phenomenon incapable of saying anything about *being*. We have tried to establish that the norm of being used by naturalism does not apply to all beings, and that consciousness exists in a different way. Furthermore, our analyses have shown that the existence of consciousness is absolute and that consciousness carries in itself the guarantee of its being, while the being of naturalism returns back to consciousness, which it presupposes as its source. Only consciousness can make intelligible to us the meaning of the being of the world which is a certain mode of meeting consciousness or of appearing to it.⁷² The world of nature, from which naturalism derives its notion of existence, only exists itself in the measure in which it enters the life of consciousness.⁷³ But, precisely, because concrete life contains in different manners different regions of objects, *to be* does not mean the same thing for each of those regions. Their proper mode of being met by, or constituted for, consciousness must become the object of philosophy, and, as we shall see, it must, according to Husserl, constitute philosophy's central problem.⁷⁴

However, by presenting the idea of a sphere which is the origin of all beings and prompts us to transform the very concept of being, seeing it no longer as the idea of substance but as that of subjectivity, do we not fall back into a form of Berkeleian idealism where to be contained in consciousness is the total measure of reality?

It is clear enough from our previous considerations that we are not dealing here with an idealism for which the assertion of the purely phenomenal existence of the external world means a devaluation of it. The external world exists, it is what it is, and to see it as being only a phenomenon is to clarify the sense of its existence; it is to show, after having looked at the life in which it is given, what its mode of occurring in life is.⁷⁵

There is another matter which separates Husserlian idealism from that of someone like Berkeley. For Husserl, it is not a matter of reducing the world of spatial objects to contents of consciousness,⁷⁶ and in fact of attributing to these contents the mode of existence of the material objects which have been drowned in them. On the contrary, the point is to show – and we have indefatigably emphasized it – that the sphere to which all existence refers back has a specific manner of existing. This specific existence lets us surmise that we are not in the presence here of a subject opposed to an object, of a being which is antithetical to objects and, for that reason, is precisely on the same level as them. For Husserl, consciousness is a primary domain which alone renders possible and comprehensible an 'object' and a 'subject', terms that are already derivative.

It is in this last point that the main difference between Husserl and

Berkeleyan idealism lies. Consciousness for Husserl and consciousness for British empiricism (highly tainted with naturalism) have nothing in common but the name. So far we have characterized the existence of the absolute sphere of life as *consciousness*, i.e., as existing by being, prior to any reflection, present to itself. But we still must establish a characteristic of the other structural elements of consciousness, which are as important as the first.

NOTES

- 1 Edmund Husserl, 'Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie', in *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, I (Halle, 1913), § 152. Henceforth abbreviated as *Ideen*.
- 2 *Ibid.*, § 19.
- 3 Concerning the motives which led Husserl to criticize and go beyond naturalism, see *ibid.* §18.
- 4 Husserl, 'Bericht über deutsche Schriften zur Logik in den Jahren 1895–99', *Archiv für systematische Philosophie*, X (1903), 397–400; *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay (New York: Humanities, 1970); *Ideen*, §49.
- 5 See *Theory of Intuition*, ch. 3.
- 6 *Ideen*, § 49.
- 7 We shall see later how, despite the 'continuity' of the various moments of consciousness and despite those fringes which make impossible any exact delimitation of psychic life, Husserl has not condemned the intellect. See *Theory of Intuition*, ch. 6.
- 8 *Ideen*, §35.
- 9 *Ibid.* § 113.
- 10 *Ibid.* §115.
- 11 *Ibid.* § 35.
- 12 *Ibid.* § 115.
- 13 *Ibid.* § 84.
- 14 *Ibid.* § 115.
- 15 *Ibid.* § 35.
- 16 *Ibid.* § 45; § 47
- 17 *Ibid.* § 35.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Concerning the distinction of various types of possibility, see *ibid.*, § 140.
- 20 *Ibid.*, § 45. Aron Gurwitsch, 'La Philosophie phénoménologique en Allemagne,' *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, XXXV, (1928), no. 4 illuminates very well the role of *potentiality* in Husserlian idealism.
- 21 See *Ideen*, § 3; § 44; § 138; and *passim*.
- 22 *Ibid.*, § 50.
- 23 *Ibid.*, § 46; § 138.
- 24 *Ibid.*, § 55; § 96.

- 25 The term *transcendent* means, for Husserl, everything which is not a constitutive part of the flux of consciousness (ibid. § 38). Hence, it means mainly material objects.
- 26 Ibid., § 44.
- 27 Ibid., § 46.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 See ibid., § 32; and especially § 55.
- 31 Ibid., § 46; § 49; § 138.
- 32 Ibid., § 44. The mode of perception of a thing depends on the thing's 'specific meaning'
- 33 Ibid., § 46.
- 34 Ibid., § 43.
- 35 This notion of normality is introduced in ibid. § 44.
- 36 See *The Theory of Intuition*, ch. 3.
- 37 See ibid., ch. 7.
- 38 *Ideen*, § 34. See also § 28. The concept of consciousness here does not yet include the potential sphere. This is why Husserl speaks of consciousness 'in the pregnant sense of the term'
- 39 Ibid., § 39; § 49.
- 40 Ibid., § 49; § 76.
- 41 Ibid., § 33, (my italics).
- 42 Ibid., § 42.
- 43 Ibid., (my italics); see also § 35.
- 44 For this terminology, see ibid. § 38.
- 45 Ibid., § 42; § 44.
- 46 Ibid., and § 49.
- 47 'Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft' in *Logos*, I (1910), (trans. Quentin Lauer, in *Edmund Husserl: Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 312.
- 48 *Ideen*, § 44.
- 49 *Discordance* may take place between successive phenomena which constitute the appearance of a material thing: the sequence of phenomena which intimate a 'man' may be contradicted by the rest of the experience, which shows that it was a tree taken to be a man. This possibility – that the perceived object is, in truth, *something else* (that, in our example, the man is actually a tree) – is essentially inherent in the way external things appear.
- 50 See preceding note.
- 51 *Ideen*, § 46.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ibid. See also, in § 45, an expression such as 'zur Seinsart der Erlebnisses gehört es', etc. Similarly, § 79: 'Jede Seinsart hat wesensmässig ihre Gegebenheitsweisen'. See also ibid., § 111.
- 54 Ibid., § 45.
- 55 Ibid., § 38. Concerning the notions of 'dependent' and 'independent', see *The Theory of Intuition*, pp. 109ff.

- 56 See *The Theory of Intuition*, especially ch. 7.
57 *Ideen*, § 45.
58 See above.
59 *Ideen*, § 45.
60 *Ibid.*
61 *Ibid.* § 113.
62 *Ibid.*
63 *Ibid.*
64 *Ibid.*; see also § 114; § 118.
65 *Ibid.*, § 45.
66 'Husserls Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins', ed. Martin Heidegger, in *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, X, Halle, 1928. Translated by James S. Churchill as *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1947), p. 472.
67 Concerning this term, see *The Theory of Intuition*, p. 104.
68 *Ideen*, § 46.
69 Jean Hering, *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse* (Paris: Alcan, 1925), p. 85.
70 *Ideen*, § 46.
71 *Ibid.*
72 *Ibid.* § 76.
73 *Ibid.*, § 47
74 See *The Theory of Intuition*, ch. 7 and Conclusion.
75 *Ideen*, § 55.
76 *Ibid.*, § 98.

Translated by André Orianne