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REPRESENTATION: RORTY vs. HUSSERL

1.

Richard Rorty in his recent book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,¹ offers a wide ranging critique of that version of modern philosophy which understands itself fundamentally as a theory of knowledge. He attacks analytic philosophy as well as phenomenology for falling into a sort of trap laid for us in the period of classical modern philosophy by most everyone from Descartes and Locke to Kant. I want to focus on just one element in Rorty's critique – namely, that there persists on virtually all philosophic fronts an unacceptable view of knowledge as mirror-like representation of the physical world. In particular, I want to argue that Edmund Husserl's phenomenology – one of Rorty's many targets – does not rely on such a representational theory of knowledge (specifically, of perception) and consequently does not fall to Rorty's criticism. Indeed, I want to suggest that Husserl's view (with certain suitable modifications) offers one of the few plausible approaches available to us in dealing with questions of human knowledge.

Let us begin by considering one of Rorty's pertinent comments:

The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations – some accurate, some not – and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods. Without the notion of the mind as mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have suggested itself. Without this latter notion, the strategy common to Descartes and Kant – getting more accurate representations by inspecting, repairing and polishing the mirror, so to speak – would not have made sense. Without this strategy in mind, recent claims that philosophy could consist of 'conceptual analysis' or 'phenomenological analysis' or 'explication of meanings' or examination of 'the logic of our language' or of 'the structure of the constituting activity of consciousness' would not have made sense.²

In numerous places Rorty makes it clear that it is Husserl's brand of "phenomenological analysis" that is particularly troublesome.

As a preliminary note, let me say that I take Rorty's mirror metaphor to be an important indicator of the brand of representational theories that he means to criticize. Given that metaphor, I take it that the following considerations are pertinent to such a view:

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(a) Perception involves a duality of objects: the physical object, on the one hand, and the mental representation or image of that object, on the other;

(b) The mental representation itself, and not the physical object, is the object that is perceived (thus, some recent discussions of representational theories in which one perceives the physical object itself *through* the representation – perhaps as one sees objects through dark glasses – are not relevant here);

(c) The representation is taken to resemble, to a greater or lesser degree, the object that it represents – hence the mirror metaphor.

I shall argue that Husserl denies any role in perception to mental representation of this sort, and focuses instead on our construction of perceptual *meanings* which are not to be understood as mirror images of reality.

2.

Let us turn to Husserl's view of the matter. First of all, one can cite Husserl's straightforward repudiation of such a representational theory of perception. In *Ideas* he says quite explicitly:

I perceive the thing, the object of nature, the tree there in the garden; that and nothing else is the real object of the perceiving 'intention.' A second immanent tree, or even an 'inner image' of the real tree that stands out there before me, is nowise given, and to suppose such a thing by way of assumption leads only to absurdity . . .³

There is, then, no mistaking Husserl's *intentions* in the matter. He explicitly rejects a mirror view of perception. Husserl offers several reasons for rejecting representational theories. I shall briefly sketch three of his arguments. My purpose, however, is not to give a detailed analysis and defense of those arguments, but rather to point out one distinctive theme running through them. This theme will provide the first element of a larger attack on representational theories of perception. While the various pieces of this broader attack are to be found in Husserl, he has not put them together in the form of an explicit and sustained argument. I shall attempt to do that in the following pages.

Let us begin, then, with the three explicit arguments. The first has a familiar tone. Husserl says that postulating a perceptual image in addition to the real physical object generates an infinite regress.⁴ His explanation of that claim can be unpacked in the following way: if in

perception I am aware of an image, I must also be aware of it *as an image* of something (viz., of a physical object); in order for that to be the case it must be possible for me to be aware of it in “a representational form of consciousness,” i.e., in relation to the physical object which it represents. To generate this representational form of consciousness, the perceiver must have access to the physical object as well as its image. But if representational theories are right, the physical object will once again have to be represented by an image, and that image in turn must be established *as an image* of the object, etc. Hence, an infinite regress and the inability, in principle, to ever establish the experienced object as a representation of a physical object.

Husserl’s second argument: If we do not perceive real physical objects but only representations of them, then there is “no *essential difference* between the transcendent and immanent.”⁵ I take it that a basic assumption here, following partially from his first argument, would be that on a representational view every object of our experience would be an immanent object. Thus we would never be in a position to distinguish the immanent from the transcendent since we would have no access to the latter. Husserl argues that we *do*, however, have good experiential grounds on which to distinguish between the immanent and the transcendent. The latter, unlike the former, can be experienced *only* by way of their spatial and/or temporal perspectives – i.e., *partially* – while the former can be given all at once and completely.⁶ Further, the unfolding of the perspectives of transcendent objects is in “systematic, strictly ordered ways, in each direction endlessly, and always dominated throughout by some unity of meaning.”⁷ On Husserl’s view, none of this is required for immanent objects. In sum, representational theories of perception entail an inability on our part to distinguish experientially between immanent and transcendent objects; however, we do have experiential grounds on which we distinguish between the two. Therefore, representational theories of perception must be false.

A third argument Husserl offers against a representational theory of perception is that we have clear experiential evidence that some of our modes of consciousness are representational in character, and perceptual experience is not among them. Husserl cites “remembrance and fancy” as two representational modes of consciousness. In these cases, he suggests, we can be aware of an immanent object (an “image or sign”), *experience it as a representation* of something else, and we can be aware of a second object which is represented by the immanent one.

Clearly, he says, this is not what we experience in perception. We are not aware of either an immanent object nor of a second, represented, object.

This argument is related to the first but has quite a different focus. It maintains, in effect, that we have good evidence that representational forms of consciousness show themselves quite clearly to be just that. Perception, on the other hand, does no such thing.

As I said earlier, I shall not attend to the details of these arguments. My concern is with one important and distinctive strain that runs through each of them: the determining evidence on the question of how we perceive the world must be *phenomenological*, i.e., one must be able to cite some element(s) in perceptual experience itself that supports the claim that perception is representational in character. This move on Husserl's part is merely one way of making explicit his "first methodological principle," or as he calls it, "principle of all principles":

I... must neither make nor go on accepting any judgment as scientific *that I have not derived from evidence*, from 'experiences' in which the affairs and affair-complexes in question are present to me as '*they themselves*'.⁸

This move on Husserl's part may seem shocking to some. After all, few things are more commonly accepted among philosophers than the claim that things often are not quite what they *appear* to be. So defenders of representational theories of perception may well object to this central methodological point. They may want to argue that perception may not be *experienced* as representational, but it is nonetheless possible to establish its representational character less directly, on the basis of arguments that do not depend on experiential evidence.

In an effort to deal with this objection, to construct a response to it from Husserl, and to highlight a second piece of his broader attack on representational theories, it will be necessary to digress for a bit and to examine one of the pivotal ways in which Husserl broke with some important epistemological views held by classical modern philosophy.

As a preliminary to examining Husserl's position here, it is important to make explicit what I take to be one of the central assumptions that generates the sort of representational theories of perception that concern Rorty. It is the assumption that there is some sort of "gulf" that separates consciousness from the physical world. As a consequence of that gulf, it is supposed that consciousness requires (and can generate) something like a mental representation that can legitimately be found

on the consciousness-side of the gulf, and that can somehow stand proxy for things from the other side. Husserl rejects just such an assumption.

The foundations for Husserl's view are to be found, I think, in a criticism that he levels at Descartes' attempts to provide arguments in support of traditional realism, i.e., arguments in support of the existence of a reality that is independent of consciousness. (Such arguments would be relevant, of course, to the defense of representational theories of perception that claim to have good arguments that can be used to show that physical objects do exist – physical objects that cannot themselves ever appear in perceptual experience.) Husserl argues, in fact, that Descartes' arguments for realism are useless. Let us look more closely at his critique.

Early in *Cartesian Meditations* Husserl points out that Descartes, having made precisely the right start for philosophy with his *cogito*, unfortunately became uncritical and made use of at least three highly debatable presuppositions. These were (i) the notion of substance, (ii) the principle of causality, and (iii) the use of the deductive method.⁹ That the first two of these can be seriously called into question has been amply demonstrated by David Hume. The third has received less attention, but it provides important insights into Husserl's claim that deductive arguments in support of realism are useless. It is this third Cartesian presupposition that will be of interest to us.

There have been several criticisms leveled at deductive reasoning. Among them, there is the familiar claim that it produces no genuinely new knowledge – if one knows that the premises are true, one in a sense also knows that the conclusions are true. It is merely a matter of making things explicit.

A second familiar criticism is that deduction frequently presupposes induction – one could know the truth of the first premise (e.g., All men are mortal) only as a consequence of wide experience of particular cases. These latter can never generate more than a probable generalization. Thus, deductive conclusions don't carry the certainty to which they lay claim.

Husserl's criticism is somewhat different and more subtle than either of these, although its general intent is not unrelated to them. His general critique of Descartes' use of the deductive method is broader than the aspect with which I am here concerned.¹⁰ For purposes of this paper I shall focus on his criticism of the applicability of the method in

one particular case, i.e., in proofs for the existence of external reality.¹¹

Although Husserl does not formulate his argument in a concise and straightforward way, I think that it can be sifted out of the texts without doing any violence to his intentions.¹² If I read him accurately, the argument should look something like the following: (i) The validity of a deductive argument rests on certain basic assumptions including the applicability of the law of excluded middle to the premises and to the conclusion of the argument. (ii) The applicability of the law of excluded middle rests on assumptions about the decidability-in-principle of the truth or falsehood of premises and conclusion. (iii) Decidability, in its turn, rests on the assumption that each of the premises and the conclusion are well-formed judgments. (iv) That the premises and the conclusion are well-formed judgments rests on two further assumptions: first, that the judgments are syntactically well-formed; second, that the elements referred to in the judgment “have something to do with each other.” (Thus, a syntactically well-formed judgment like “This color plus one equals three” is not decidably true or false, i.e., not subject to the law of excluded middle, because the “elements” in the judgment are mismatched, their union in the judgment lacks semantic sense. Judgments of this sort are not candidates for inclusion in deductive arguments.) (v) But knowledge about which elements *can* be meaningfully combined in a judgment such that it is decidably true or false is, ultimately, knowledge derived from experience of what we take to be the real world. (vi) Decisions, therefore, about which judgments are candidates for inclusion in deductive arguments presuppose knowledge of what we take to be the real world. (vii) Thus, deductive arguments purporting to justify knowledge of the real external world rely, from the start, on the possession of just such knowledge.

After making explicit the whole chain of assumptions, Husserl concludes that the use of deductive argument tacitly relies on assumptions about individuals, properties, and relations, and how these can be combined meaningfully in a judgment. It assumes, that is, that we already have some knowledge about the world to which Descartes is trying to argue. Husserl doesn't put his point quite this way, but it amounts to the claim that Descartes' use of deductive arguments to prove that we can have justified knowledge of the physical world is viciously circular.

It is important to note that Husserl's criticism does not relate to the form of the deductive argument itself. It is more fundamental than that

and is, as a consequence, generalizable to other sorts of arguments for traditional realism. The judgments of any valid argument will be subject to the same constraints as those governing judgments in deductive inferences. This conclusion carries important implications for the claims from representational theorists that there are arguments that can establish the existence of objects – physical transcendent objects – that are distinct from the objects that we experience in perception. Like Descartes, the representational theorist must begin with immanent objects (the only objects to which he has access), and construct an argument to show that quite a distinct kind of reality also exists. Like Descartes, his arguments will either be circular or will carry him no further than the mental objects with which he began. I shall return to this point.

3.

At this stage it is important to be clear about the consequences of Husserl's rejection of Cartesian arguments for realism. One point to be made in this connection is a negative one; namely, that it does not follow that Husserl rejected realism itself. Husserl's real concern is, I think, to show that one simply cannot *argue* to knowledge about a real world that is conceived of as being totally isolable from consciousness. On Husserl's view our judgments are from the outset bound up with experience of what we take to be that real world. On such a view we are simply not capable of thinking ourselves to a sufficient distance from the real world such that arguing back to it would be necessary or even possible. However, this is not to say that the real world is to be identified with our experience, nor does it commit Husserl to a version of idealism that would suppose that what we take to be the real world is a product of our own thought processes. He says, for example:

... external Objects too are originally there for us only in our subjective experiencing. But they present themselves in it as Objects already factually existent beforehand ... and only entering into our experiencing. They are not there for us like thought-formations ... as coming from our own thinking activity and fashioned by it purely ... In other words: Physical things are given beforehand to active living as objects originally other than the Ego's own; they are given from outside.¹³

It seems clear, then, that Husserl espoused realism. But a crucial difference arises between traditional Cartesian realism and the sort of

realism to which Husserl's view leads – a view that I shall call *relational realism*.

Proponents of traditional realism, like Descartes, have concerned themselves with attempts to demonstrate the existence and the putative properties of transcendent objects that are totally separable from consciousness. They rarely put it quite this way, but the context in which the discussion takes place is construed as including only external objects themselves. Husserl, on the other hand, is at pains to argue that such a context is an abstraction. Pure, totally independent objects can't really exist for us. Our wondering about them, our discussing them, makes them necessarily objects of some sort of experience. Raising the philosophical question about the real world puts that world into relation with consciousness, and that relation to consciousness simply cannot be bypassed. This does not make the existence of the world dependent on consciousness, as Berkeley would have it. But it does make the notion of a world totally separated from consciousness a useless abstraction, as Dewey would have it.

Husserl's criticism of Cartesian realism, then, is really two-sided: (i) Consciousness with its judgments, arguments, etc., cannot be totally isolated from the experienced world which sets some of the limits for those judgments, arguments, etc., and (ii) the real world, *as an object of philosophic inquiry*, cannot be totally isolated from consciousness which is the inescapable source of that inquiry. Husserl's well-known conclusion is that consciousness and the world form an indissoluble partnership from the very start of any philosophical inquiry. Either, by itself, is an abstraction. The field to be explored is neither consciousness alone nor the world alone, but the intersection of the two, the field of experience.

Thus, not only can we not separate ourselves sufficiently from the real, transcendent world to be able to argue our way back to it, but the only world to which we could argue is the world to which we already have access in experience.

This leads to a second conclusion to be drawn from Husserl's critique of Descartes: viz., if Husserl supports some version of realism, but he denies the possibility of separating consciousness from the real world, then it is clear that he means to deny the existence of any significant sort of gulf separating the two. The denial of such a gulf eliminates one of the reasons for postulating the necessity for the mediation of mental

representations in our coming to know the real world. That is, Husserl denies one of the prime motivating assumptions that generates representational theories of knowledge.

A third conclusion relates most directly to Husserl's three explicit arguments against representational theories of perception and to a likely objection to those arguments. As I pointed out earlier, Husserl's arguments rest on his distinctive assumption that if perception is representational, then we ought to *experience* it as representational. We don't. Therefore, . . . The objection to Husserl's position will very likely grant that we don't experience perception as a representational mode of consciousness, but will claim that there are surely other, less direct, ways of arguing that it *is* representational regardless of how it *appears* to us.

Husserl's quarrel with Descartes over deductive proofs for the existence of a transcendent world is relevant here. If Husserl's argument can reasonably be generalized beyond deductive forms of argument – and I see no reason to reject such a generalization – then it would follow that any argument for transcendent objects that begins without access to transcendent reality will ultimately be circular. Representational theories of the sort with which we are concerned in this paper must do just that. They must begin with a mental object, an immanent object, and argue to the existence of a transcendent object that is itself not available to experience. Every part of the argument that relates to the transcendent side will have to make assumptions about the nature of that transcendent, assumptions that imply previous knowledge of it.

Earlier I spoke of constructing a larger, distinctively Husserlian attack on representational theories of perception. We now have the necessary pieces, and the argument looks something like this:

An examination of perceptual experience itself yields no experiential evidence that the perceived object is a representation of something other than itself, something that we do not perceive.

If, ignoring this lack of evidence, we *assume* that the perceived object is nonetheless a *representation* that resembles an unperceived transcendent object, there are no noncircular arguments that can be used to justify that assumption.

Therefore, in the absence of appropriate experiential evidence and of noncircular arguments to justify the claim that perception is represen-

tational, one is justified in concluding – on the basis of the experiential evidence that *is* available – that perception is not representational in character.

4.

A defender of the representational view of perception will likely want to raise an objection of the following sort: One can readily agree with Husserl that perceptual experience doesn't simply show itself unequivocally as representational. Further, arguments of the type with which Husserl is concerned may indeed turn out to be circular. But the real support for representational theories comes from quite a different quarter. One examines perceptual experience and discovers that there are variations in the sense information available to different perceivers, errors in perceptual judgments, illusions, etc. One concludes from this lack of uniformity and veridicality that perceptual experience must involve something other than direct contact with the physical world. One adopts the most fruitful of the available hypotheses, viz., that we perceive representations that resemble, to some degree, their causes. As a consequence, Husserl's arguments are irrelevant to the real issues.

In response, there are several points to be made. First, and very briefly, the objection does nothing to alter the central claim of the paper – that Rorty is mistaken in supposing that Husserl holds a representational view. Secondly, and more to the point, one can use the Husserlian view of perception to argue that the representational hypothesis may not be the most fruitful or even the best available hypothesis to account for errors, illusions, variations in data, etc. There are two elements in the Husserlian view that allow one to account for these factors and still avoid the difficulties attendant on representational theories. These two elements are (i) the spatial and temporal partiality of perception and (ii) the construction of what Husserl calls the perceptual *noema*.

On Husserl's view we experience some limited set of spatial and/or temporal perspectives of an object/event. We normally recognize a "governing" structure and make educated estimates of what the rest must be like. Perceptual judgments are most often about the whole, but are made on the basis of partial evidence. Hence, the room for error. Further, the particular spatio-temporal perspectives available to one person will differ from the set available to others simply in virtue of

varying locations in space and in time of different perceivers. One may see the penny from an angle that gives only the edge, another may see it from an angle which allows its circular shape to appear. There is a clear sense in which these partial perspectives do *represent* the whole object, but that sense of representation is markedly different from the sense operating in the theories under consideration in this paper. On the Husserlian view the part that represents the whole is not an object that is distinct from the real physical object; it is not an immanent, mental object. The perceived part does not stand "between" consciousness and the physical world. Hence, one is not troubled by the difficulties attendant on attempts to argue from the immanent to the transcendent, from the image to the original. There are no chasms to be bridged.

Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, for Husserl the process of perceiving involves the process of generating perceptual *meaning* (perceptual *noema*). This latter is a process by which the information from the perceived object is melded with a complex set of elements in consciousness – concepts, memories, expectations, needs, feelings, etc. The process allows for mismatching in a variety of ways and thus for misinterpretation of objects and events. A crucial point here is that Husserl's version of realism is not naive realism. He does not see consciousness as passive in relation to the world, simply mirroring objects and events. Rather, the perceiving consciousness actively interprets, integrates, etc.; it is, as a consequence, vulnerable to error of various sorts. Once again, the perceptual meaning that is formed can be seen as a representation. However, it is, again, a representation in quite a different sense from that suggested by the mirror metaphor. It is, first of all, not simply an *image* of an object. It is a *meaning*, i.e., a complex of sense information, personal memories, feelings, intersecting concepts, etc. That is to say, it is an interpretation of the object, a placing of the object within the context of one's own experience. Secondly, the meaning is not itself the object that we perceive; it does not stand between consciousness and the world, replacing the latter. It is, rather, a product of our perceptual commerce with that world. So the function of perceptual meaning is not at all the function called for by a representational theory of perception.

Returning to the objection, it seems that one can take account of the various factors that have motivated claims about representation in perception without in fact hypothesizing mental representations as the objects that we perceive.

5.

Given Husserl's rejection of a mirror theory of perception, let us look more closely at his positive theory of knowledge. We have already established one of its most important starting points: any philosophical inquiry into human knowledge must consider, equally and simultaneously, both consciousness and the world. This is the position that I have called *relational realism*.

What remains to be spelled out is the character of the relationship between consciousness and the world of transcendent objects. For Husserl this will entail a rethinking of the very notion of transcendent reality.

The view that Husserl rejects has a long history in philosophic thought; it treats transcendent objects simply as objects that are independent of being thought about or known. In this context, transcendent objects are imagined as being on the far side of that gulf that is supposed to separate them from consciousness. The philosopher who is sufficiently impressed by the possibility of perceptual error, as Descartes was, is wont to begin his philosophical analysis on the consciousness side of that gulf, discover there a collection of "ideas" or mental representations of some sort, and then look for some way to certify the validity of those mental representations (e.g., by way of a God who would not deceive). This view of the relationship between consciousness and transcendent reality was, of course, in full currency in the writings of Descartes. The possibility of having knowledge of the real, transcendent world rested on the possibility of constructing some sort of guarantee for the representational validity of the contents of consciousness.

For Husserl and other phenomenologists after him there is an importantly different sense of the transcendent. A transcendent object for Husserl is an object which is, by definition, always *more than* any of our experiences of it.¹⁴ For him transcendent objects are not objects separated from consciousness by some metaphysical or epistemological chasm. They are, rather, objects that extend beyond any given human experience of them but are not to be looked for totally outside that experience. That is to say, any human experience of a transcendent object is always incomplete, but it is nonetheless an experience of that object. In Husserl's phenomenology, then, the model for transcendence and our experience of it is the *part-whole* model and not the *far-side-of-the-chasm* model. This way of understanding transcendent reality is, of

course, quite consistent with Husserl's rejection of arguments for traditional realism. If one cannot distance oneself totally from the transcendent in order to argue back to it, then clearly the transcendent cannot be understood as being on the far side of some epistemological chasm. We are immersed in it right at the outset.

Having established the fact that Husserl's model for transcendency differs significantly from the model that functions in traditional realism, it might be helpful to look briefly at the light this sheds on his use of the term "idea." In the context of perception Husserl's use of "idea" introduces an interesting reversal that has, I think, occasioned some misunderstanding. In the past, philosophers have spoken of ideas as being the sorts of things that mediate our experiences of real objects, i.e., mental representations of things. Husserl rejects this view and turns it on its head. On his account, since our experience of transcendent objects is always and necessarily partial, Husserl speaks of the *whole* experienced object as "an idea,"¹⁵ presumably because such a total experience of anything is impossible to actualize. Our experience is of part of the object; our grasp of what the whole experienced object would be like is by way of an idea. Bringing the contrast into full focus, one might say: my idea of the whole is mediated by my experience of the real part.

From the foregoing I conclude that Husserl's theory of knowledge is not a mirror-like representational theory and to that extent it is not fair game for Rorty's criticism. It follows from this, I think, that Husserl is also not concerned with traditional problems of explanation or justification in relation to mental representations. His position amounts to a rejection of the whole framework within which traditional epistemological problems were formulated.

6.

Early in the paper I quoted Rorty's claim that the method of phenomenological analysis (among other methods) "would not have made sense" without making assumptions about the representational character of knowledge. I have tried to show that that claim may spring from a misunderstanding of the character of Husserl's phenomenology. Let me comment briefly on just what phenomenology – rejecting the representational framework – takes itself to be doing. I shall focus on just one aspect of the method, viz., its attempt to sift out necessary

conditions for meaning-assignment in human experience. This includes, among other things, uncovering the necessary conditions for our interpreting a piece of our experience as a perception of transcendent objects, i.e., as leading to knowledge of the real world.

We have seen that, on Husserl's view, it is impossible to put consciousness at a sufficient distance from transcendent reality such that it could argue its way back to knowledge of that reality. If he is right, then human consciousness is inextricably related to transcendent reality at the outset of any philosophic inquiry.

But consciousness is also related to a variety of other sorts of objects – remembered things, imagined things, wished-for things, etc. These, too, resist being abstracted from their relation to consciousness. If none of the things we experience can be set apart and known to be what it is independently of its relation to consciousness, then how can one distinguish between transcendent things and imagined or wished-for things? To revert to an earlier metaphor, if one can't place transcendent objects on the far side of a "chasm" and imagined objects on the consciousness side of that chasm, how can one distinguish satisfactorily between the real and the imagined? I think that the method of phenomenological analysis was designed to deal with precisely this sort of question.

Whatever metaphysical or epistemological views one holds, it is an indisputable fact that we divide our experiences into various "sorts" – some count as perceivings, some as imaginings, etc. If Husserl's critique of traditional realism is right, then we are not in a position to distinguish among these sorts of experiences on the traditional grounds, e.g., that perceiving involves objects that exist independently of consciousness and imagining involves objects that have only dependent existence. We must look for other grounds on which to make such a distinction, and these other grounds must be found in the relational context. This means, among other things, that the grounds will involve both consciousness and its objects, rather than focusing exclusively on the objects alone as traditional realism had done. This bi-valent area in which consciousness relates to objects is the proper domain for meaning-assignment.

What, then, are the sorts of conditions that motivate us to distinguish among sorts of experiences, that motivate us to assign one meaning rather than another to an experience? It seems that one takes a particular experience to be a perceptual experience (i.e., one will, in

some sense, "assign" it the meaning "perceptual experience") when some specifiable set of conditions is met. For example, when I have an experience that I take to be the perception of an apple, there is an expectation that I could experience further spatial and temporal aspects of the apple by walking around it or by returning to see it again tomorrow; there is some sense that what I experience is law-governed in such a way that I cannot arbitrarily alter it, etc. On the other hand, when I imagine an apple, a different set of conditions is met. I am quite capable of altering it at will, I know that I need not walk around it to see the other side, etc. The former set of conditions is part of what motivates the meaning-assignment "perceived apple," the latter set is part of what motivates the meaning-assignment "imagined apple." Notice that in both cases the governing conditions include consciousness as well as its object. One is not simply inspecting a mental mirror.

In all cases I may, of course, be mistaken in the meaning I assign a given experience. But in Husserl's view, what I cannot be mistaken about is the sorts of conditions that lead to a particular sort of meaning assignment. The method of phenomenological analysis is a method of looking carefully at experience in an effort to discover the characteristics that are peculiar to each *sort* of experience. Isolating those peculiar or identifying characteristics is the business of sifting out conditions for meaning-assignment, or to use Husserl's infelicitous terminology, it is the business of sifting out "essences."

'Essence', of course, can no longer be understood as a set of essential properties of some independent object – nor even, as Rorty puts it "... pure formal aspects of the world ..."¹⁶ Essences are necessary conditions for meaning-assignment, and meaning-assignment is always a bi-valent matter, involving both consciousness and the world.

The business of phenomenological analysis, then, is not to examine our mental representations of the world, nor to polish or repair our mental mirror. Rather, it aims at sorting out *types* of conscious experience and the governing conditions that attend our meaning-assignments for each of these types. Such analysis will tell us something about how we distinguish cases of imagining from cases of remembering. It will also tell us something about how we distinguish each of these from cases of perceiving. Insight into the conditions governing perceptual experience gives us, at the same time, insight into the limits within which a transcendent world can be known. On Husserl's view, those limits include no mention of mental mirrors or mental images.

It strikes me that Rorty is right in thinking that knowledge ought not to be understood on a mirror-like representational model. He is mistaken, however, in thinking that Husserl would disagree. Husserl has provided not only an important argument against representational theories of perception, but also one of the more promising positive alternatives to such a theory of knowledge. If Husserl's critique of Descartes and traditional realism is right – and I think that it is – then something like the phenomenological approach seems to be our best bet for making sense of human experience.

Husserl's particular way of using the method surely raises some significant problems. For example, his view of consciousness is couched in purely mental terms and excludes (or at least overlooks) any consideration of meaning-assignment by way of bodily action. Or again, his separation of consciousness and language creates an artificial threat of solipsism. Nonetheless, his basic insights with respect to perceptual realism remain compelling.

NOTES

- ¹ Richard Rorty: 1979, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ³ Edmund Husserl: 1962, *Ideas*, I, transl. by W. R. Boyce Gibson, London, p. 243.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- ⁶ Recent psychological experiments that suggest that we can “rotate” mental images and “scan” them need not count against Husserl here. His point is that it is *essential* to the perceiving of transcendent objects that they be experienced perspectively, partially. It is not essential to immanent objects that they be scanned or be treated as if they have perspectives.
- ⁷ Husserl, *Ideas*, p. 125.
- ⁸ Edmund Husserl: 1970, *Cartesian Meditations*, transl. by Dorion Cairns, The Hague, p. 13.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 7.
- ¹⁰ Husserl suggests in *Cartesian Meditations* that the validity of the method itself cannot be assumed without careful investigation (p. 7ff).
- ¹¹ Whether or not Husserl's interpretation of Descartes is historically justified is a separate matter. His point can be made equally well, I think, with respect to *any* argument which supposes that the real world is the sort of thing to which one can or must argue.
- ¹² Edmund Husserl: 1969, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, Part II, Chapters 4 and 5, transl. by Dorion Cairns, The Hague.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 166, 232ff.; also, for an extended discussion of his views on the appropriate way to approach questions about our knowledge of transcendent objects, see Husserl's *The Idea of Phenomenology*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1973, Lectures II and III.

¹⁵ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p. 61ff.

¹⁶ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 167.

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