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Remarks on the ‘Idea in the Kantian Sense’ in Husserl’s Phenomenology

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Introduction

In §143 of *Ideen I*, Husserl presents a famous thesis in his phenomenology of perception, according to which the adequate givenness of a thing in objective space and time is an “idea in the Kantian sense.” The aim of the present paper is to examine a common interpretation of that conception: what Husserl has in mind here is a Kantian regulative idea. In the first section, I shall introduce the basic problems concerning the conception. In the second section, I shall argue that it is not sufficient to consult Kant’s discussion of regulative ideas in the First Critique. In a concluding remark, I shall briefly suggest that it is the *Second* Critique that might give us a clue to the full picture of the conception.

I. Setting the Problem

To begin with, I shall give a picture of Husserl’s conception in so far as it is uncontroversial for most commentators. Through this, what is not obvious about the conception will be pointed out.

One of the most urgent problems in Husserl’s theory of perception is a tension between two claims: *the inadequacy of a finite process of perception*

and *direct realism*. According to Husserl, a finite process of perception of a thing is always insufficient to pertain to the adequate givenness of the thing. This makes Husserl uneasy to maintain his strong claim of direct realism which he emphasizes in *Ideen I* (cf. §§ 43, 90). How can he claim that a thing itself is, albeit inadequately, given in any perception? By virtue of what is a perception a perception *of* a thing itself rather than a veil of mere appearance? To argue for his position, Husserl has to admit that a subject, despite its *finitude*, always somehow anticipates the relevant infinite perceptual process.

Here, Husserl's conception in question plays an important role. Although the adequate givenness of a thing is accomplished only in an infinite process, "the idea of an infinity [...] is not itself an infinite" (Husserl [1913, 298]). It is the adequate givenness of such an *idea*, which is available even for finite beings, that makes a finite process a perception *of* a thing.

This is, however, only a half of the answer to the question. Even if the idea itself of an infinite process can be adequately given to finite beings, it does not have to be called an idea "in the Kantian sense." There must be a further reason for Husserl to appeal to Kant to dissolve the tension between the inadequacy of perception and direct realism.

In one respect, it is not surprising that Husserl mentions Kant in the present context. Kant characterizes a "transcendental" idea as that concept proper for pure reason (cf. KrV, A311/B368), "to which no congruent object can be given in the senses" (KrV, A327/B383). Thus for Kant the answer to the question whether ideas have their object is beyond the bounds of possible experience for finite rational beings (cf. KrV, A642/B670). This fits well to Husserl's claim that the adequate givenness of a thing cannot be accomplished in the experience of finite subjects. Then, *how* does an idea in the Kantian sense help Husserl with dissolving the tension?

II. Is the Adequate Givenness of a Thing a focus imaginarius?

There is a common interpretation of Husserl's notion in question: what Husserl has in mind here is a regulative idea in the Kantian sense (cf. Bernet [1979, 124, 129–31] and Luft [2007, 381]). In this section I shall show that

the common interpretation does not work well, because it does not provide a satisfactory solution to the problem just introduced.

In the First Critique, Kant famously argues that transcendental ideas do not constitute any knowledge of finite rational beings. Hence he claims that "reason is driven by a propensity of its nature to go beyond its use in experience" (KrV, A797/B825). This does not mean, however, that Kant dismisses pure reason in our theoretical endeavors such as natural sciences. Even though transcendental ideas have no corresponding objects within possible experience, pure reason functions as a "regulator" of our experience and thus as a heuristic concept for our scientific effort to discover the laws of nature (cf. KrV, A670–1/B698–9). According to Kant, reason can be employed in such a way that it guides us to organize our experience. So the transcendental idea of God, under the regulative employment, sets the ultimate goal---the systematic unity of the world---at which our scientific activity aims, but to which we can make only infinite approximations. Here, the systematic unity of the world is given as a problem to be tackled, and the principle of reason provides only a rule for such a trial (cf. KrV, 508–9/B536–7).

Given those characterizations, Kant's conceptions of regulative ideas would appear to fit well to Husserl's claim in *Ideen I*. For Husserl also holds that the idea of a thing involves a rule for the adequate givenness of the thing (cf. Husserl [1913, §§ 144, 149, 150]). It is fairly tempting to compare Husserl's conception of things with Kantian regulative idea, of course with some corrections or adjustments if needed.

The situation, however, is not that simple; Husserl explicitly refutes one of Kant's characterizations of regulative ideas, which seems to be essential for the philosopher from Königsberg. According to Kant, the goal set by a regulative idea is a *focus imaginarius*, namely an *imaginary* point lying outside of all possible experience (cf. KrV, A644/B672). In a manuscript in 1908, Husserl asks whether transcendence is a *focus imaginarius* and give a negative answer, writing: "the thing is not a fiction at all" (1950ff, XXXVI, 30). If a transcendent thing is a fiction, we would have to say that in fact there is no such a thing.¹ This consequence is unacceptable for Husserl.²

The conclusion that the adequate givenness of a thing is not a *focus imaginarius* can also be drawn if one considers two major claims of Husserl in *Ideen I*. First, Husserl characterizes our natural attitude in terms of a "gen-

eral thesis,” namely the implicit belief in the existence of the ready-made world of things (cf. § 30). The general thesis always lies behind our finite perception. Second, Husserl claims that nothing is lost from the natural attitude by phenomenological *epoché* (cf. § 32). Any feature of the natural attitude, including the general thesis, must somehow be kept in phenomenological descriptions, even though it is “neutralized.” Now, if a thing’s being given adequately were an *imaginary* point, it would lead to the claim that, from a phenomenological point of view, the general thesis involved in the finite perceptual process turns out to be a useful fiction. Such a claim, however, is nothing but a revision of the natural attitude. Taking something as a fiction has the mode of non-positing imagination, which is incompatible with the mode of positing involved in perception. For Husserl, to render a positing act into a non-positing one is not to neutralize it, even if there is something similar between these two operations (cf. § 112). Therefore, the common interpretation faces a serious problem.

There is yet another problem for the common interpretation. Kant claims that transcendental ideas are immanent only in the practical employment of reason, which is sharply distinguished from the regulative one (cf. KpV, 135; KrV, A328/B384–5, A808/B836, A819/B847). Only in our practical attitude is the belief in the objects of transcendental ideas constitutive (cf. Wood [1970, 150–1]). As already shown, however, Husserl explicitly admits that the adequate givenness of a thing as an idea can be adequately given. Accordingly, for him what makes our endless approximations to things possible is immanent to each finite perception.³ Thus, it is difficult to say that for

¹. It must be noted that Husserl’s understanding of Kant might be mistaken. According to Wood [1970, 148], Kant would not claim that a transcendental idea is a fiction and that there is no such a thing that corresponds to it; it is also beyond our knowledge to claim that the object of the idea does not exist. In the present paper I do not pursue this problem further, because what is at issue here is not whether Husserl understands Kant correctly, but how he actually does it.

². The same view is maintained in the later Husserl, e.g. when he claims that the idea of the objective world is neither a phantasy nor a mode of “as if” in § 49 of *Cartesianische Meditationen*.

³. See Husserl’s discussion on “the determinable X” as the innermost moment of noema in §131 of *Ideen I*. As Drummond [1990, 154] argues, Husserl regards the determinable X as the condition of possibility of the endless approximation to the adequate givenness of a relevant thing.

Husserl the adequate givenness of a thing is a regulative idea. To keep the common interpretation, one would have to hold the view that Husserl terribly misses the point of Kant.

III. A Concluding Remark

Given a widely shared view on Husserl, namely that he is not so good at history of philosophy, it might be tempting to buy the view just mentioned. But, such a kind of interpretation that makes a philosopher weaker and smaller is bit too cheap. It would be permissible only if the investigation on remaining possibilities turns out to be mistaken. So, in conclusion, I shall suggest another possibility for the interpretation: for Husserl the adequate givenness of a thing is a *postulate of pure practical reason* in Kantian sense.

As already mentioned, the practical employment of reason also plays a positive and absolutely important role in Kant's critical philosophy. Here the objects of transcendental ideas are considered to be postulated as objects of moral faith, not as objects of knowledge. Practical reason, Kant argues, makes it possible for us to presuppose what cannot be known because of the bounds of theoretical reason. In this sense the practical reason has the primacy over theoretical reason (cf. KpV, 121). Kant's argument cannot be dealt with in detail here. Instead, I shall just give a brief and a bit crude outline of the possible interpretation of Husserl, according to which a thing is a Kantian postulate of pure practical reason, with reference to some textual evidences.

One of the most important textual supports for the interpretation I suggest is found in a letter of Husserl to Cassirer. In that letter, Husserl regards the postulate of pure practical reason as "the greatest of all the Kantian discoveries" (1994, V, 6).⁴ True, the letter was written in 1925, 12 years after the publication of *Ideen I*. But one can claim that, at least *de facto*, Husserl's phenomenology of perception in 1913 fits better to the suggested interpretation.

⁴ The importance of Kant's postulates in Husserl's (later) thought, which is once pointed out by Iso Kern, is recently further elaborated by Luft [2007, 383–6], even though he subscribes the common interpretation of Husserl's idea in Kantian sense. See above.

For the suggested interpretation, there are two reasons in its favor. *First*, to repeat, the suggested interpretation enables us to save Husserl's claim that the idea of the adequate givenness of things is immanent to every perception. *Second*, it also makes Husserl's change of view more intelligible. In the lecture in 1907, Husserl rejects the (Neo-Kantian) idea that a thing is given in infinite progression and that a thing is nothing but an infinite task (cf. 1950ff, XVI, 138–9). According to Husserl, an unattainable infinite task cannot be obligatory for us finite beings. In *Ideen I*, however, Husserl no longer dismisses the idea of an infinite task. So there must be a reason for Husserl's move made between 1907 and 1913. The common interpretation fails to provide a good reason for that. If the adequate givenness of a thing were a regulative idea and thus an imaginary fiction, there would be no rational ground for us to try to attain it. On the contrary, the suggested interpretation makes it possible that we have good reason to pursue the adequate givenness of a thing, even though it is an idea in the Kantian sense. For the thing itself is somehow *given* in a finite and insufficient perceptual process otherwise than merely in the mode of knowledge, namely as a postulate of the perceiver's *practical* engagement with the world.

What is important here is the fact that Husserl adopts a concept taken from Kant's practical philosophy within the *theoretical* (or usually so-called) context; Perception matters for Husserl because it gives rise to a cognition by justifying an assertion. In this sense, for Husserl *theoretical philosophy is also practical philosophy in a wider sense of the word*. Such a view, which lies already in (some parts of) *Ideen I*, is made more explicit in the later Husserl. In *Erfahrung und Urteil*, he claims that "all the reason is at the same time practical reason, and the same is also true of logical reason" [1939, 373].

At last I should like to point out that that fact might make it possible to avoid the following potential difficulty for the suggested interpretation. As Wood [1970, 151–2] observes, Kant's true conception of the practical postulates (God and immortality) is discovered only by a consideration of his detailed account of moral faith. This observation would also be important for the suggested interpretation of Husserl. Unfortunately, however, there is no counterpart of Kant's *Religion* in Husserl's published works. Furthermore, we have no counterpart even for the Second Critique. Then, one might object that the suggested interpretation is mistakenly putting marginal and minor

issues for Husserl into the centre. To such an objection it can be replied that we have several works on theoretical philosophy in his later period, for instance *Formale und transzendente Logik*, in which he at least deals with problems in practical terminology such as will, effort etc.. So we might construe Husserl's detailed account of moral faith from these works and related manuscripts. This will be one of the further tasks for the suggested interpretation.

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