Husserl’s Transcendental Turn as an Expression of Brentano’s Scholasticism

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It appears as a well-known fact that Edmund Husserl, in his later philosophy, fell victim to the sort of idealism unheard of since Berkeley. According to Roman Ingarden in *On the Motives which led Husserl to Transcendental Idealism*, for instance, only Husserl’s emphasis of the transcendence of the material object distinguishes his idealism from that of the Bishop’s.¹

In this paper, I posit that Husserl’s transcendental turn is not really a turn, and not really idealism; that is, it isn’t idealism in the sense of idealism that we tend to automatically dismiss as metaphysically unsatisfying. Rather, it is a logical inference of his taking seriously the distinction between mental and physical phenomena as presented in Brentano’s Scholastic-inspired statement of the intentionality of consciousness in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. (Husserl cites this definition in *Cartesian Meditations* §40 “Transition to the question of transcendental idealism”.) Certainly, Husserl makes some very questionable statements in *Ideas*; however, his subsequent work attempting to explain transcendental idealism should not be ignored. That is, we cannot (as Ingarden does) take *Ideas* as the authoritative source of Husserl’s concept of transcendental idealism. Later works suggest an interpretation that is more metaphysically satisfying (to borrow a phrase from Edith Stein). And what is evident in the later works is that Husserl does not see these explanations as revision; rather, his later statements are framed more as attempts to express himself correctly, and specifically Brentano’s reference to the Medieval philosophers, whom he credits with the concept of intentionality. That is not to say, however, that Husserl now has recourse to the same explanatory metaphysics as Aristotle and the Scholastics did. Husserl’s transcendental idealism, in the end, falls victim to another pitfall; he, in comparison to the Scholastic and Aristotelian concepts by which Brentano was inspired, reverses the relation of abstraction, which calls into question the intentional inexistence of the intentional object.

Husserl’s *Idea*-lism

“Idealism” is a scary word. It conjures up images of the Bishop Berkeley denying the existence of external reality and positing that the world exists only for someone, and that someone must be God. There are quite a few concepts involved in Berkeley’s idealism that are metaphysically unsatisfying, starting with this confident assertion in the inexistence of material reality, and ending with his attempt to resolve the difficulties that arise from this assertion with reference to the idea that we and all of our ideas are only ideas in the mind of a higher power that creates as it perceives.²

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² George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Johnathan Bennet, page. 1: “I seriously believe that there is no such thing as what philosophers call ‘material substance’; but if I were made to see anything absurd or sceptical in this, then I would have the same reason to renounce this belief as I think I have now to reject the contrary opinion.” Also page 51: “It is absolutely impossible, and a plain contradiction to suppose, that any unthinking being should exist without being perceived by a mind. And if this view is found to be
To associate Husserl’s idealism with the name of Berkeley casts shame on the discipline of phenomenology. Yet when Ingarden describes Husserl’s transcendental idealism, he claims that it is distinguished from Berkeley’s only through *emphasis*, a distinction which surely does not distance Husserl from Berkeley to a great enough extent:

By this emphasis on transcendence of material things in relation to the experiences of perceptions in which they are given, Husserl’s idealistic solution is different from other ‘idealisms’ e.g. that of Berkeley.

But this ‘transcendence’ does not seem satisfying. Rather, the way Ingarden frames Husserl’s idealism is as a kind of Berkeleyan idealism that, instead of making the material world non-existent, makes it transcendent. The metaphysics are unsatisfying because there doesn’t seem to be a way to differentiate between these two states of affairs, and we come away from Ingarden’s interpretation of Husserl thinking of the latter as a sort of jargony Berkeleyan.

Indeed, Husserl makes the statements upon which Ingarden chooses to focus his criticism. In *On the Motives*, Ingarden claims that, for Husserl, beyond consciousness the material world is nothing:

> the material things given in perception and thought in the cognitive acts superstructured over perception are not an autonomous (separate in relation to conscious experiences) sphere of autonomous being in itself; they are only something that exists in its essence “for” the conscious subject performing the perceptive acts. They are only intentional units of sense and beyond that “*ein Nichts*” (nothing).

Which is pretty much exactly what Husserl states in *Ideas*:

> On the other hand, the whole *spatiotemporal world*, which includes human being and the human Ego as subordinate single realities is, *according to its sense, a merely intentional being*, thus one has the merely secondary sense of a being for a consciousness. It is a being posited by consciousness in its experiences which, of essential necessity, can be determined and intuited only as belonging to motivated multiplicities of appearances: *beyond that* it is nothing.

Given that this is intended as one of the fundamental tenets of transcendental phenomenology, it seems that Husserl is doomed to live in infamy with Bishop Berkeley. As early as 1918, however, i.e., just about the time Ingarden started publishing work explicitly criticizing the concept of transcendental idealism, Husserl seemed to have done some work toward correcting this ill-conceived association. Stein writes to Ingarden on June 24, 1918, that Husserl seems ready to “lay his cards on the table about idealism”, that he has

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4 Ibid, 32.
explained to her a sense of transcendental idealism that is “metaphysically satisfying”, though she notes that,

Much of what is presently in Ideen has to be composed differently, though in Husserl’s sense, if only he brings together what he has, and in a critical moment does not leave out of consideration something that necessarily belongs to the subject. (I think, for example, of the recasting of the concept of consciousness that results from a consideration of the constitution of consciousness—something you also wish.  

She doubts, in the letter, whether Husserl will ever be able to express his ideas as a synthesis, for “the Master is tired”; she characterizes Husserl as wanting to discuss every point in exacting detail without ever bringing them together. (The letter gives the impression that Husserl has gotten rather rambly.)

Still, Husserl continues to extol the virtues of transcendental idealism, if only it were to be understood correctly. This was, according to Ingarden, his purpose in writing the Cartesian Meditations, though Ingarden also claims that Husserl was never satisfied with the work. We can infer that Ingarden, too, was not satisfied with its content, as his criticisms of Husserl’s idealism continue well after the Meditations. Indeed, Ingarden seems rather dismissive of the work as a whole, stating in a footnote in On the Motives that:

These Meditations are known to have been occasioned by external circumstances, an invitation to lecture in Paris. Husserl was not satisfied with them. For many years after they were published in a French translation Husserl intended to publish them in German and worked on a new version which, as he wrote to me in a letter, was to become his main work. This work was to contain the elaboration of the totality of problems and fundamental theses of transcendental phenomenology. Unfortunately, this plan was never realized.

It’s unfortunate that the detractor’s of Husserl’s idealism continue to read him as he presents himself in Ideas, since there are hints in the Meditations as to how one can redeem transcendental idealism, at least to definitively separate it from the idealism of Berkeley. The more metaphysically satisfying interpretation of transcendental idealism, I posit, involves an incorporation of a version of the medieval concept of intentional existence to which Brentano refers. Husserl’s transcendental idealism, on the other hand, suffers exactly as much as it is being interpreted against a background of modern philosophy, a problem to which he himself contributes to the point of subsuming his putative redemption under the name Cartesian.

The Problem with Husserl and Modern Philosophy

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7 Ingarden, On the Motives, page 2 footnote.
Our interpretation of Husserl as a damnable idealist lies precisely in the overflow of concepts from modern philosophers, that remain as prejudices within contemporary philosophy. Two concepts in particular, against which Jeff Mitscherling provides an explicit argument in *Aesthetic Genesis* are the ideas that a substance is a kind of “stuff” and that concepts are something that we “have”. It is obvious that Berkeley exemplifies the latter concept in his assertions that ideas, i.e., things themselves, are ideas “in” a mind. Rather, ideas are not something we “have” in the sense of the mind as a bag of ideas, but things we think. Without the former assumption, that substances are kinds of stuff, we may not even assume that realism and idealism are opposed.

Ingarden, in the introduction to *Controversy over the Existence of the World*, traces the problem back to Descartes, who he says, “made a vital contribution toward generating the controversy over the existence of the world”.9 “Starting with him,” Ingarden continues,

and indeed through Berkeley, Hume, Kant, and the Neo-Kantian idealists, all the way to the transcendental idealists of our times, the conviction became increasingly more entrenched that not only does the problem of the existence and nature of the real world follow from epistemological reflections, but that at bottom it is itself an epistemological problem.10

Ingarden, essentially, is blaming Descartes and those working within the Cartesian framework, for rephrasing a metaphysical question as an epistemological one. Yet, when Ingarden states his presuppositions for embarking on the project of the book, he takes as his starting point the transcendental idealism of Husserl. Specifically, Ingarden takes as a starting point the presupposition that, “At least two realms of being are to be distinguished for individual entities: the realm of pure consciousness and the real world.”11 He points to Husserl’s distinction in the *Ideas* between the objects of the “real” world and the *irreal* intentional objects of consciousness. This problem, that of defining distinct mental and extramental realms, only one of which can be real, begins with Descartes and is present in both Husserl’s *Ideas* and Ingarden’s criticism of Husserl’s transcendental idealism as a whole. That is, Ingarden’s trouble with Husserl’s idealism remains a reaction to the *Ideas*, with which there are certainly problems, and resistant to Husserl’s attempt to reconcile those problems in *Cartesian Meditations*, to which Ingarden refers to in a footnote to his Introduction only to indicate that Husserl recognized the problems he is pointing towards and made some attempt to resolve them. The implication, given that Ingarden does not integrate the *Cartesian Meditations* into his exposition, is that the concepts therein remain entirely unsatisfactory. 

Husserl, responding to Ingarden’s critique, instead refers to the new system of ontology he claims to provide a preface of in *Meditations*, as a “total revolution”. Were Ingarden only to understand the new way which, Husserl admits in the letter, dated

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10 Ibid., 30.
11 Ibid., 33.
12 Footnote 49, p. 36.
November 13, 1931, is not fully elucidated in *Cartesian Meditations*, he would no longer be able to interpret him under the old framework. The new phenomenology does have metaphysical implications, and (Husserl claims) Ingarden has not grasped them. He writes:

Admittedly, an actual systematic presentation and the outline of the further problematic—the system of a phenomenological metaphysics is not carried out there. But once raised up to the new ground, *you* would indeed understand what can and must be meant there, have the eyes to see for yourself. Then you *couldn’t* pursue ontology in the old way.\(^\text{13}\)

Husserl, however, despite his confidence that the new way of ontology is, in fact, revolutionary, still falls victim to the habit of doing things in the old way. The irony here is that in rejecting the old way, Husserl moves transcendental idealism closer to an even older way—rejecting some of the premises of modern philosophy, Husserl adopts instead some aspects of the Scholastic conception of intentionality, in order to resolve some of the problems with the opposition between realism and idealism, and to establish the unity of objects with objects of consciousness.

**Intentional Inexistence**

Brentano’s original statement of the distinction between mental and physical phenomena depends on a concept of “intentional inexistence”\(^\text{14}\). Husserl cites this definition in *Cartesian Meditations* §40 “Transition to the question of transcendental idealism”, as an example of how we might try to solve the problem of the relation of consciousness to the external world. He decides, in the end, that the question makes no sense. The world of consciousness and the external world “belong together essentially; and, as belonging together essentially, they are also concretely one”.\(^\text{15}\) It makes no sense to Husserl why we would try to establish the connection between them according to some “rigid law”. I believe this is a Scholastic revival. When Brentano refers to the Scholastics, he means to point toward the distinction made by Medieval scholars between the modes of being of the essence of a thing, which may have any of material, quidditive, or cognitive being. The problem being dealt with by Duns Scotus, for instance, as he grapples with the question of how a universal exists in *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*,\(^\text{16}\) is how the universal can exist as one and in the many, i.e., how the essence of a thing can be both in a thing and in thought and remain numerically identical (a consequence of Aristotle’s

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\(^{14}\) “Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity.” Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, trs. Rancurello, Terrell and McAlister [New York: Routledge, 2009], p. 68

\(^{15}\) Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 84.

\(^{16}\) VII.18 “Is a universal something in things?”
concept of the intelligible form somehow being present in the sensible form of an object\textsuperscript{17}). The answer is to attribute multiple modes of being to an essence (being in the thing and being in the intellect). As it is in the object, it is particular, and as it is in cognition, it is rendered universal, i.e., abstracted from the thing by the agent (active) intellect of Aristotle.

The numerical identity between the multiple modes of being of an essence is, I posit, what Husserl is thinking when he writes that the universe and our knowledge of it “belong together essentially; and as belonging together essentially, they are also concretely one”\textsuperscript{18}. It is a retention of Brentano’s (originally, Aristotelian) conception of the active intellect’s abstracting the object of consciousness from its material counterpart and thereby giving the intentional object the property of intentional inexistence. All this means is that the intentional object and its material counterpart are different in being—while the essence is in the material, the mind thinks of it as separate, i.e., \textit{as it is not}; without that distinction there would be no differentia defining the difference between physical and mental phenomena. The “inexistence” of the object of consciousness is only an \textit{intentional} inexistence, the result of intentionality’s taking a physical phenomenon and rendering it mental, and it does not follow from this specification that physical objects do not exist. As McCormick writes in \textit{Modernity, Aesthetics and the Bounds of Art}, Brentano owes this concept to Aquinas, whose theory of cognition is entirely Aristotelian.\textsuperscript{19} Husserl’s revision of Brentano’s concept of intentionality, such that he emphasizes the constitutive aspect of an intentional act, seems to eliminate the possibility of an external world, while the Scholastic concept of intentionality Brentano adopts does not.

While Husserl attempts to reduce the force of his statements in \textit{Ideas} to that effect, his revisions to phenomenology apparent in the \textit{Cartesian Meditations}, while explicitly claiming that he is not subject to criticisms of old-style idealism, still ground the entirety of reality in the transcendental ego. That is, while he seems to revise his earlier bold statements about the existence of the external world to fall more in line with Brentano’s Scholasticism, he still comes off as a proto-Cartesian, only replacing Descartes’ cogito with the transcendental ego. He claims, at the end of the \textit{Meditations}, that while we lose the world by performing the \textit{epoché}, we subsequently regain it through “universal self-examination.”\textsuperscript{20}

Husserl has, with his emphasis on the grounding of everything within the transcendental ego, in fact reversed the Aristotelian concept of cognition, carried through Aquinas and the Scholastics through to Brentano’s concept of intentionality. Specifically, he reverses what it is that is abstracted from what in the act of cognition. For Aristotle and Aquinas, the universal is abstracted from the \textit{phantasmata} to become an object of thought; objects of thought, therefore, are dependent on the existence of things, i.e., these things that cause the \textit{phantasmata, from which} we abstract. Husserl, on the other hand, in the fifth meditation, characterizes the process of abstraction as beginning with one’s own

\textsuperscript{17} Aristotle, \textit{De Anima} 431b12-17: “The so-called abstract objects the mind thinks just as, in the case of the snub, one might think of it \textit{qua} snub and not separately, but if anyone actually thought of it \textit{qua} hollow he would think of it without the flesh in which it is embodied: it is thus that the mind when it is thinking the objects of mathematics thinks of them as separate though they are not separate.”


\textsuperscript{19} See the eight articles on “How the Soul While United to the Body Understands Corporeal Things Beneath It” in \textit{Summa Theologiae}.

\textsuperscript{20} Husserl, \textit{Cartesian Meditations}, p. 157.
experience, from which we might abstract both an objective world as well as other subjects. Beginning in the “transcendental attitude”, we abstract (according to Husserl) an objective world by delimiting it from “what is peculiarly my own”\textsuperscript{21}. That is, we take the world, determine whatever it is that is uniquely ours, and thereby discover the differentiae between the subject and its world. Since the world is constituted by consciousness, the objective world, for Husserl, is an abstraction from the acts of consciousness. This is a reversal of Brentano’s Scholastic/Aristotelian view of cognition, where objects suitable to thought are abstracted from a world. In thinking of an object in an objective reality as opposed to an intentional object, we are thinking of objects \textit{as they are not}, for Husserl; that is, as objects \textit{not of consciousness}.

That is how particulars, those things that exist in the world and constitute nature, have only a secondary existence for Husserl.\textsuperscript{22} The objects (as intentional object) is a “transcendental clue” whereby we may become aware of the preconditions of its existence. Without the transcendental ego existing as a precondition, they would not be objects, an object being an abstraction from an object-for-us, i.e., through objectivation. Husserl, in reversing the direction of abstraction, now cannot appeal to the mere intentional inexistence of the objects of consciousness in order not to preclude the existence of a world. The world itself, as abstracted, would be what is intentionally inexistnet. Working out what this means, however, results in a more metaphysically satisfying concept of transcendental idealism.

For both Husserl and the Scholastics, so-called real and ideal objects are unified, that according to which they are unified differs. While the abstracted essence of an object, for the Scholastics, has an intentional inexistence (in the sense that its inexistence is just a result of its being abstracted from an existent object), Husserl cannot appeal to the same notion in the same way. Husserl attempts to resolve the realism-idealism debate by unifying the real and ideal realms; both of these realms, he claims are existent. However, they are also both products of a transcendental subjectivity. He writes that, “Precisely thereby every sort of existent itself, real or ideal, becomes understandable as a ‘product’ of transcendental subjectivity, a product constituted in just that [i.e., knowledge] performance.”\textsuperscript{23} While the Scholastic would attribute intentional inexistence to the intentional essence, i.e., that which is abstracted from the world, Husserl’s reversal of what is abstracted from what would attribute intentional inexistence to the objective world itself. Husserl’s notion of the secondary existence of nature is a reflection of this reversal, but a secondary existence, like intentional inexistence, does not preclude existence.

### Conclusion

Husserl’s solution to the realism-idealism problem, I maintain, is more metaphysically satisfying than Ingarden’s evaluation suggests. The object and the object of consciousness have some metaphysical concept to explain their unification, which moves Husserl’s idealism well-beyond that of the modern period. Husserl is, in the \textit{Meditations}, no longer

\textsuperscript{21} Husserl, \textit{Cartesian Meditations}, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{22} “Natural being is a realm whose existential status \textit{[Seinsgeltung]} is secondary; it continually presupposes the realm of transcendental being.” Husserl, \textit{Cartesian Meditations}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{23} Husserl, \textit{Cartesian Meditations}, p. 85.
emphasizing the irreality of the intentional object. At the same time, the foundation of everything that exists is still the subject, transcendental as it may be. Still, the fact that the objective world is abstracted from the acts of consciousness does not preclude its existence, and this is true to exactly the same extent that to abstract a universal from a particular, in the Scholastic conception of abstraction, does not preclude its existence.

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