

Husserl and Russell, 1911–1913

Nikolay Milkov, Bielefeld, Germany

0. Preliminary: Why Husserl and Russell from 1911–1913?

Phenomenology is usually defined as a theory of intentionality, and Husserl is considered a theorist of meaning. This explains why, when he is compared with analytic philosophers at all, this is done with respect to Frege. In particular, a parallel is drawn between Frege's distinction between sense and meaning and Husserl's distinction between *noema* and object. There is a long tradition of such studies, started by Dagfinn Føllesdal in 1969 and continued by J. N. Mohanty, Michael Dummett and Claire Ortiz Hill. The problem with this approach is that "Husserl repeatedly states loud and clear that what he is trying to do is to find the basis of our conceptual world in *immediate experience*" (Hintikka 1995, 82), whereas Frege is anything but a philosopher of immediate experience. That was what the Cambridge philosophers Moore and especially Russell were.

This explains why I am going to examine here the relatedness between Husserl and Russell. Without any doubt, the two philosophers have much in common. Indeed, what both Husserl and Russell "were in the first place trying to do was to see what the cash value of the abstract theories of physics and mathematics was in terms of what is actually given to us." (ibid., 95)

Russell's philosophy, however, is so many-faceted that we must first specify which Russell we are going to compare to Husserl here. It is, above all, not the Russell of *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903), in which he was much influenced by Peano and Frege. In this connection it might be useful to recall that Russell's philosophy became roughly Fregean only after August 1900, when he developed his Theory of Denoting. Until then, in his first drafts of the *Principles*, Russell, not unlike his friend Moore, was a strict mereologist. With the introduction of his Theory of Descriptions in 1905, however, Russell made a step towards restoring his old mereologism. (See Milkov 2003, 84f.) His new philosophical programme was best elaborated (in many cases, together with Wittgenstein) in 1911–3, and was also articulated in *Our Knowledge* (1914) and in various papers later published in *Mysticism and Logic* (1918). Unfortunately, the few attempts to compare Russell's philosophy with that of Husserl (Hill 1991) discuss the Russell of 1903–5, but not of 1911–13, or of 1899–August 1900.

By the same token, the years 1911–13 were decisive for the development of Husserl's phenomenology. In *Philosophy as a Strict Science* (1911) and in *Ideas I* (1913) he developed in full the conception of eidetic reduction and introduced the concept of *noema*.

In what follows, I shall demonstrate striking similarities between the conceptions of the two philosophers in these years. These have been divided into five sections.

1. Essences (Phenomena) / Logical Forms

(a) *Russell*. In 1911–13 Russell believed that philosophy investigates logical forms of facts and propositions – it is not interested in the logical form of language alone. The task of philosophy is to discover and *describe* the logical

form of space and time, of perception, of judgment. (Russell 1918, 85) Similarly, according to Husserl of this period, the task of philosophy is to describe phenomena, or essences. We can call the analysis of phenomena/essences eidetic intuition (*Wesensschau*).

Russell claimed further that the contemplation of the logical forms is a "direct vision of [an] abstract truth upon which the possibility of philosophical knowledge depends" (Russell 1914, 243). This is a "direct philosophical vision" of very abstract truths (ibid., 245). In *Analysis of Mind* Russell speaks of a "direct contemplation of facts" which discards language (Russell 1921, 212).

Two points are of special interest here: (i) It was precisely in connection with his theory of forms that Russell developed the conception that philosophy is nothing but *logical analysis*: we can discover logical forms only in a process of logical analysis. (ii) It was the theory of forms that called into being Russell's programme for piecemeal philosophy which was called *analytic*: "By concentrating attention upon the investigation of logical forms, it becomes possible at last for philosophy to deal with its problems piecemeal, and to obtain, as the sciences do, such partial and probably not wholly correct results as subsequent investigation can utilize even while it supplements and improves them." (Russell 1918, 85)

(b) *Husserl*. In his *Philosophy as a Strict Science* (1911) Husserl declared himself against both naturalism and relativism. On this point he was of one accord with Russell in the period from 1911–13 (and Wittgenstein from his "Notes on Logic", 1913). That Russell, the author of the manifesto "On Scientific Method in Philosophy", was against relativism, goes without saying. But he was also against naturalism: philosophy must be a discipline which lies beyond the natural sciences. (Russell 1914, 240). In a like manner, Husserl claimed that we must not discuss consciousness in terms of physics – we must not "*bething*" (*verdinglichen*) it.

Similarly to Russell's logical forms which, according to him, do not lie in Euclidean but in logical space, Husserl's essences, or phenomena, have no substantial unity, no real properties, not real parts, no causality, and experience no changes. (Husserl 1911, § 49) In this realm, there is no difference between appearance and reality. "A thing is what it is and remains identical for ever."

2. Eidetic Reduction / Logical Analysis

Parallel to Russell's notion of logical analysis mentioned above, in *Ideen I* Husserl developed the method of eidetic reduction. Eidetic reduction moves from concrete phenomena to eidetic abstraction. It is achieved in a process of "bracketing" or "suspending" the natural attitude.

The same applies to Russell's method of analysis. It starts from concrete, complex and vague data. In the process of analysis, these data are seen to be "growing at each stage more abstract, more refined, more difficult to apprehend" (Russell 1914, 245, 190), until we discover the logical form. (Incidentally, in *Philosophy as a Strict Science* Husserl often spoke of an *analysis of essences*, made by

the “phenomenological analyst”, instead of eidetic reduction.)

Husserl claimed that in order to reach phenomena, we make thought experiments in a process called *imaginative variation*. We try to imagine, for example, a thought without language, and we find out that this is impossible. In this way we examine and correct our eidetic intuition by confronting its results with reality. (see § 5)

In similar vein, Russell used thought experiments, examining with their help the strength of philosophical theories, deliberately confronting them with philosophical puzzles and paradoxes. (see Ryle 1979, 16–17) The objective was to see whether the suggested theories discovered true philosophical forms or not.

3. Examined Philosophy

Robert Sokolowski defines phenomenology as “reason’s self-discovery in the presence of intelligible objects” (Sokolowski 2000, 4); it criticizes the naivety of the pre-reflexive thinking. In this sense the phenomenological attitude is different from the natural attitude.

This definition strongly recalls Russell’s rendition of the new – analytic – philosophy as producing theses and theories which bear examination through counter-arguments. Analytic philosophy is philosophy which has been examined by reason. It is a philosophy which uses “the harmonizing meditation of reason, which tests our beliefs by their mutual compatibility, and examines, in doubtful cases, the possible sources of error on the one side and on the other.” (Russell 1918, 17) This is a procedure of “scientific restraint and balance” (*ibid.*, 20).

My point here is that the objective of this “harmonizing mediation of reason” is to eliminate the confusion of the (Husserl’s) “natural attitude”. It can do this in two alternative ways. (1) Following some a priori logical form / essences: this was the way of Husserl and Russell from 1911–13. (2) As a result of the work of something akin to “Occam’s razor”. This second point was quite clearly articulated by Gilbert Ryle, who emphasized that conceptual analyses which make up the method of the Oxford analytic philosophy are something like a phenomenology without Husserlian essences (see Ryle 1958): and – I should like to add – like Russell’s analytic philosophy without his theory of forms.

4. Taxonomy of Mental Acts

This is the only point at which we can track down Husserl’s, albeit indirect, influence on Russell.

When talking about the history of analytic philosophy, Moore’s lectures *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, initially delivered in 1910/11, are often neglected. This is a pity. In fact, they deeply influenced the epistemological scheme which Russell advanced in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), *Theory of Knowledge* (1913), *Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914) and “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism” (1917/18). This fact is interesting for our study since Moore’s lectures, in their turn, were arguably influenced by Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* – through a book of August Messer’s, *Empfindung und Denken* (1908), which Moore reviewed for *Mind* in 1910, and which was nothing but a summary of Husserl’s book. (see Milkov 2004) In particular, Moore admired Husserl–Messer’s “attempt to classify all the kinds of elements which may occur as constituents of mental

phenomena” (Moore 1910, 395). Moreover, Moore followed Husserl in accepting that there are a variety of mental acts – supposing, judging, fearing, hoping, desiring, liking, disliking – which, in turn, are subdivisions of three great classes: cognitive acts, emotional acts, and acts of will. In *Theory of Knowledge* (1913) Russell, for his part, claimed that there are different mental acts – judging, feeling, willing and desiring. Mental acts of diverse types are cases of different cognitive relations, every one of which has its own logical form. (Russell 1984, 125 ff.)

5. Aspects and Profiles

We can make a phenomenological analysis of the immediate experience of the absolutely given by using the example of the perception of a cube. When we see a cube what is given is an aspect of the cube in which the presently visible sides are surrounded by a halo of potentially visible but actually absent sides. The other sides are also given, but as absent. Perception, therefore, involves layers of presentation, both actual and potential.

So, we perceive (1) the six sides of the cube. (2) Every one of these sides can be given in different ways. In this way we see different *aspects* of the cube. The aspects are objective. (3) One and the same aspect can be seen in different profiles (*Abschattungen*), or sketches. A profile is temporally individuated – a momentary presentation of the object. It is private.

In *Our Knowledge* Russell advances a theory of perception of the given that strongly recalls that of Husserl. According to the latter, the world is full of infinitely many perspectives / aspects. Perspectives are objective. They are mutually related. Perspectives can be perceived, or they can remain unperceived. The perceived perspectives are private.

A common-sense object, at this moment, is a system of aspects. This means that the aspects are real, whereas the thing itself can be seen as either a logical construction from the aspects, or as an entity inferred from them. So every aspect of a thing is a member of two different classes of aspects: (1) The various aspects of the *thing*; (2) The perspective of which the given *aspect* is a member. The physicist classifies aspects in the first way, the psychologist in the second.

In his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein elaborated this theory further. According to him now, not only facts and propositions have forms; objects have forms too. More precisely, objects are concatenations of forms. However, at any specific moment, only one of the object’s forms occurs in the actual state of affairs. This means that we can never know the object as a whole but only a part of it (only one of its aspects, if we want to speak with Husserl and Russell). Different combinations of the object’s forms constitute different states of affairs. This means that the forms (aspects) of objects are nothing but possibilities of object’s occurring in states of affairs. We can paraphrase Husserl’s claim that we perceive ordinary things as one aspect of them, surrounded by a halo of their potentially visible aspects, in a Tractarian idiom by saying that we see the object in one its forms but we know that it is a concatenation of forms.

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