

HUSSERLIAN ONTOLOGY OF CULTURAL OBJECTS

RAÚL ITURRINO MONTES

In this paper, after making a rather schematic and partial presentation of Husserl's idea of regional ontologies (1), we expound some regional categories commanding the sphere of cultural objects, of which ideality is more closely examined (2). Finally, a critical remark is made concerning Karl Popper's theory of ideality and understanding in the human sciences (3). It is acknowledged that we here only *announce* aspects of the phenomenological analysis of cultural objects which deserve separate and detailed treatment.

1

According to Husserl, "any science has a sphere of objects and tries to attain a theory of that sphere. Theory is its result. But it is scientific reason which creates such results, while the sphere itself is created by the experiencing reason".¹ The empirical sciences, therefore, presuppose an articulation of the objects of experience into spheres. Objects belong to a given sphere on the basis of comparability and to different ones on the basis of differentiability. This in turn involves viewpoints and criteria in the light of which comparability and differentiability among objects obtain. The explicitation of such criteria cannot be made, of course, prior to the existence of the sciences but, as Landgrebe puts it, only upon "...reflection on the conditions under which the objects of experience have already become the topic of multiple sciences referred thereto; that is to say, a reflection on the a priori presuppositions of the scientific thematization of the world".² Now such criteria are at work already in experience, for the latter exhibits a structuration of objects into fields. But then experience itself presupposes, rather than yields, knowledge of the criteria for the division of objects into fields

¹ Edmund Husserl, *Formale und Transzendente Logik*, *Husserliana* Bd. XVII (den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 239. My translation.

² Ludwig Landgrebe, "Seinsregionen und regionale Ontologien in Husserls Phänomenologie", in *Der Weg der Phänomenologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963), p. 146.

and regions. Those criteria, then, must be regarded as an a priori of experience, and thus of empirical science, in the Kantian sense of being both independent from and necessary for experience.

When made explicit, those viewpoints and criteria prove to be the common properties essential to the objects composing a region or sub-region, that is to say, the properties whose presence in an object bestows upon it its identity as an object of a certain kind and without which it would belong to another kind or region of objects. The essential properties of the objects of a region, "translated into thought", are the regional categories. According to Landgrebe, whom we follow in this introductory exposition, "contained in these concepts are the a priori presuppositions under which a manifold or experiential existents can, in general, be grasped in a manner sufficiently homogeneous as to allow them to become the subject-matter of a science".³ Or as Husserl says, "they express the features *peculiar* to the regional essence, or express in eidetic generality what must belong a priori and synthetically to an individual object of the region. The application of such (not purely logical) concepts to given individuals is apodeictic and unconditionally necessary, and regulated, moreover, through the regional axioms".⁴

As the result of the systematic search after the regional categories of the different classes of objects, regional ontologies arise, formal and material. The factual sciences are subjected to such ontologies. They are subjected to eidetic formal ontology because they have to proceed according to formal principles as specified by formal logic, which is a formal ontology. But then every factual science is also subjected to its corresponding material regional ontology, for as Husserl says in *Ideas I*, any fact implies a certain material essential content and every eidetic truth inherent in the pure essences enclosed in the content provides a law to which every singular factual case, but also every possible case, is subjected.

Regional ontologies, with their categories which express essential traits of a maximum generality for a class or sub-class of objects, correspond to all the factual sciences, hence also to the cultural sciences, including the social sciences and the humanities. Thus the task arises of developing a regional ontology of the class of objects called cultural objects. Its categories would make explicit aspects of the eidos of the region, an eidos which represents, as it were, the necessary material form for all the objects of the region, that is to say, for all the objects of the class of cultural objects in this case. We forego in this paper the problem of sub-regional categories which would

³ Ibid., pp. 144-145.

⁴ E. Husserl, *Ideas I*, trans. by W. R. Boyce Gibson (London: Collier MacMillan Ltd., 1969), p. 70.

express the invariant traits of the objects of a cultural sub-region, for instance, the sub-region "religious object", the sub-region "aesthetic object", etc.

Those aspects, in the form of essential predicables, must apply to cultural objects so that other secondary and relative determinations, to be expressed by the sub-regional categories, may apply to them as well; also, they are the a priori criteria for the demarcation of a field of objects as the subject-matter of a group of disciplines, namely, the factual cultural sciences.

Now we submit that, mainly in *Phenomenological Psychology* and, specially, in *Experience and Judgment*, Husserl himself took some steps in the development of such a discipline. In this paper, after mentioning some regional categories which determine the mode of being of cultural objects in general, we shall examine somewhat more closely one of them, namely, ideality.

2

One first category may be called "subjective reference", wholly absent in the case of natural objects.

A natural thing can be analysed. By analysing it, one encounters properties which were perhaps hidden to a *prima facie* inspection. But they are thing-like qualities as well. A cultural object,⁵ on the other hand, has a necessary reference to a subject or to a community of subjects, in whose teleological activity the cultural object has originated. This reference is borne out by the characterization of cultural objects as "expressions". This does not mean that a cultural object necessarily involves a teleologically guided transformation of a prime matter, although that is usually the case.

When saying this, we do so from the point of view of the natural attitude. As seen from the transcendental attitude, even a natural object is constituted in receptivity by consciousness, and thus it has a necessary subjective reference. But it belongs to the very sense of the natural object just having a being in itself, apart from any subjective conditioning.

⁵ I have already availed myself of this description of the cultural object in my article on Dilthey ("Constitutive and Methodological Understanding in the Philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey", *Ceiba* 16, 1987: 133-150), where I have tried to show, among other things, that the ideal nature of the cultural object was foreshadowed by the latter. Among the great theoreticians of the cultural sciences, Windelband was totally innocent in that connection; Rickert, probably under the influence of Husserl, thematized and adopted the ideality thesis, but without an adequate account of its application to non-linguistic cultural objects.

In yet another sense this subjective reference is essential for the very being of the cultural object as such. But this time that reference points to the subjectivity apprehending the cultural object. If it were not for the apprehending subjectivity spontaneously grasping whatever is expressed in the cultural object, one would remain confronted with the receptively constituted object; it would remain capable of being perceived in the field of experience as a unified multiplicity of figurations, but its cultural sense as such, its being culturally this or that, like an aesthetic or religious object, or a linguistic sign, would not be constituted on the basis of it.

Further, cultural objects, like natural ones, have a corporeal articulation. In the natural object, that articulation is merely factual. Natural objects happen to have such and such parts instead of others. To be sure, the properties of objects, and their change, are causally determined. But causation "happens" to bring about such qualities or such changes.

This does not hold true for cultural objects. A part of a cultural object is not merely there, factually making up the qualitative plurality of a material thing. Rather, any singular part of a cultural object is meaningfully connected with the other members of the whole in such a way that the sense of the articulation is apprehensible. The relationship between parts and whole is here characteristic, as can be seen, for instance, in the fact that a melody is altered if a note is suppressed and the note itself, in isolation, is no longer what it was when integrated into the sound sequence. Also a picture without a certain line or color is not an altered picture but a different one, while the line or the color are, abstracted from the whole, a new perceptual entity.

One should not believe that that peculiar relation belongs to cultural objects insofar as they are perceptible objects, for in the case of cultural objects the relationship whole-part is deliberately used by the culturally active subjective activity for its cultural telos. This category can be called "meaningful articulation".

Another predicable is "unchanging unity". A natural object is what abides over and against change. The states of the natural object last and change under causal rules, whereas the object itself remains the same while it lasts.

Now the cultural object does not have changing states; it is not, like the natural thing, a unity of change and hence there is no need to search after the causal dependencies under which the changing states stand.

But then it is necessary to determine, beyond these mainly negative indications, the ontological specificity of the cultural objects as compared especially to both psychic events and physical bodies. The determination will lead to the introduction of the regional category "ideal being" as universally valid for the region of cultural objectivities. The being of cultural objects differs from both psychic events and physical bodies mainly with

respect to their *different modes of temporality and relation to spatial points*. All these entities are given in time, but cultural objects, from the point of view of their cultural sense, do not share in the objective time in which physical bodies and psychic events are individualized. The cultural object "is contingently in time, insofar as it can "be" the same in any time".⁶ Their givenness-time does not have as its counterpart temporality as an essential feature of the objectivities thus given.

That is not the case with physical and psychic phenomena. Thus the properties of physical things are privately possessed by each individual material thing. No material property can be present in more than one thing at the same time as the same identical property. The whiteness of an ivory dice may resemble the whiteness of another one, but resemblance is not identity. Again, the shape of two objects may be similar, but between both shapes there is a relation of reciprocal otherness. Both primary and secondary qualities, in the language of modern tradition, are spatio-temporally unique, and such uniqueness is essential to any natural property.

This is not the case with the cultural objectivity, for the same identical cultural sense can be present in a multiplicity of individual instances, in different points of space and time. One and the same drama subsists in a number of versions in different languages, in a number of different performances, in many books, etc. Or the same logical sense exists in a spoken, heard, written, read series of words, regardless of whether the physical signs belong to the same language or to different ones. When I pronounce or write the sentences "the sea is blue" and "el mar es azul" the hearer or reader is confronted with two different cultural formations with separate corporalities. But these have one and the same sense.

Nor is the cultural object to be identified with a psychic event. All psychic phenomena are temporal. A given act of perception, of recollection or willing, has a definite position within the flow of the life of consciousness. Having been actual, it perishes in the sense that it can never return as the same identical act. A similar act can appear in consciousness. For instance, a second perceptual act intentionally directed to the same object, can be experienced by a subject. Between both acts, a relation of very close similarity may obtain. But, again, similarity is not identity. Both acts are numerically different and the difference lies, everything else being equal, precisely in their different position in time.

On the other hand, every psychic phenomenon is private. The lived experiences taking place in a certain subject belong to that psychic context

⁶ E. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, trans. by James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 259.

alone and cannot be shared by any other subjectivity. My act of seeing the tree is irrepeatable, not only by any other subject but even by myself.

Now the "cultural objectivity" is an identical objectivity for any subject. The meaning of any linguistic or non-linguistic cultural object is an identical core to which different acts of consciousness within or without one individual subject may be directed. The latter are "real" events, spatio-temporal and causally determined. While the latter are then temporally individuated, the former is non-real, though not a nonentity, for it is an "observable, distinguishable, repeatedly identifiable *something*; about it one can ask sensible questions and make intersubjectively verifiable judgments".⁷

Under one condition alone can non-ideal objects appear identically the same in different times and spaces, say in times t and t_3 , or in places p and p_3 , namely, provided that they endure continuously through t_1, t_2 , or that they traverse, while enduring, the intermediate positions p_1, p_2 . Otherwise, they can be objects which are alike but individually different.

Cultural objects are then irreal or ideal formations, i.e., objectivities not spatio-temporally individuated. We have seen how numerical identity belongs as an objective trait to such formations. But ideality, their main ontological determination, would seem to assimilate them to the same class to which, for instance, mathematical and logical truths belong. But it obviously cannot be said about a cultural formation that it is "valid once for all", "for everyone" and "in any possible world", which we can and must say in regard to the logico-mathematical "free idealities". Where are we to place them within Husserl's pluralistic ontology?

One thing is sure, namely that the cultural sense, though embodied is a real object and thus time-related, is not thereby individualized, for, at least in principle, it is repeatable, as no real physical body or property is. (We forego here also the problems of "adequate embodiment" and of tools and other kindred cultural objects, in which the sensuous aspect of the cultural formation is essential to the cultural sense, which is not the case with, say, scientific discourse, where the sensuous aspect of the words is totally indifferent. In this connection, think that in poetry such is the case, and that, therefore, even in regard to linguistic cultural formations themselves the distinction between essential and non-essential sensuous aspects is valid. By way of a hint one may say that one must be prepared for the paradoxical notion of "ideal sensuous body of a cultural formation," for the picture, e.g., is not that thing hanging on the wall).

⁷ Dorion Cairns, "The Ideality of Verbal Expressions", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (November, 1941), p. 454.

To be sure, an ideal object like Raphael's *Madonna* can *in fact* have only one mundane state and in fact is not repeatable in an adequate identity (of the complete ideal content). But *in principle* this ideal is indeed repeatable, as in Goethe's *Faust*.⁸

But it is also sure that some cultural formations, a civil constitution for instance, are valid only within the limits of a particular cultural "territory" and, accordingly, must be distinguished from free idealities. It seems that Husserl's concept of "bound idealities" may be a solution to the problem. We say then that some cultural idealities are bound in that their validity is restricted to spatio-temporal circumstances and in some cases, to *factually* irrepeatable embodiments. Bound and free idealities would thus be two species of the genus ideal objects.

Obviously this theory of ideal being, if sound, implies not only that naturalistic or idealistic monism, but also dualism, are wrong and that pluralism should be endorsed. According to dualism, the world is made up of two sub-worlds, namely the sub-world of physical bodies and events and that of psychic phenomena. But this view is mistaken if it is shown that there are objectivities which are neither physical nor psychical nor nonentities. Now such is the case with cultural objects (and with states of affairs, essences and other objectivities of the understanding).

But why so much phenomenological fuss about these ideal objectivities, bound or free? Are they not genera? A brief reflection seems to clear this matter: genera have an extension of instances in each of which a content appears as an individuated datum (for example, the red color as an individuated aspect of a number or surfaces). Obviously, the *Faust* is not a genus, for it does not appear as a common, but spatio-temporally individualized, aspect in a number of physical carriers (books).

3

At this moment one may recall Karl Popper's theory of ideality and understanding in the cultural sciences, published in 1968.⁹ After having advocated pluralism, i.e., the theory according to which there is a "third world" of autonomous entities which are neither physical nor mental, he tries to derive therefrom a "contribution to the theory of understanding". His contribution consists essentially (if we put it in a nutshell) in pointing out that "*it is the understanding of objects belonging to the third world which constitutes the central problem of the humanities*". But right here we notice

⁸ E. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, p. 266.

⁹ Karl R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 162-183.

an ambiguity, for although Popper characterizes understanding as being understanding of third-world entities, we see thereafter that what he means is that understanding *consists of third-world entities itself rather than that third-world entities are its object*.

Popper's theory amounts to saying that understanding is a theoretical process assimilable to the conjecture-refutation scheme. The process is a sequence of propositions—which in turn are proposed solutions to a certain problem encountered in humanistic research—which are successively asserted and either upheld or replaced depending on how well they withstand criticism. The process of understanding, in other words, is a special case of the conjecture-refutation scheme of empirical knowledge in general. Now since a proposition is a third-world or ideal object, Popper concludes that understanding, insofar as it both *establishes* propositions as explanatory hypotheses and critically *assesses* them, is an operation with ideal objects.

Confronted with a problem, the cultural-scientist formulates a tentative theory (third-world entity); such theory is subjected to a process of attempted refutation whereby possible error is eliminated. Then a new problem-situation emerges which leads to a second attempt at solution and so on. Throughout this process, ideal objects are dealt with in that theories, propositions or conjectures are true or false and thus neither physical nor psychical entities.

Now, Popper's theory seems true as far as it goes. But one sees its limitation in two respects: firstly, although it is introduced as a contribution to the theory of understanding in the humanities, all that is said in that connection is equally applicable to knowledge in other empirical sciences. Thus, it does not throw light on the specificity of humanistic knowledge and understanding. And if Popper believes that there is no such specificity, he does not say so and his language certainly leads to the opposite expectation. Further, if there is no specificity in humanistic understanding as compared with, say, knowledge of nature, one does not easily see how to make congruent the implied methodological monism with his acknowledge pluralism.

Secondly, Popper's theory does not raise *the question as to the nature of the objects studied by the humanities or cultural sciences*. And because Popper does not raise that question, he fails to see that ideality is to be found in the very objects of understanding, linguistic and nonlinguistic, and not only in the propositions about them, and that, finally, ideal being is one of the genuine regional categories in the light of which a field of objects is demarcated as the subject matter of the cultural sciences.

Universidad de Puerto Rico