

EDMUND HUSSERL AND ST. THOMAS --A STUDY NOTE IN THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

By Joseph P. L. Jiang

When I read Edmund Husserl's *Ideas* and *Cartesian Meditations* a couple of years ago, I was surprised to find a close similarity between the basic assumptions of Husserl's phenomenology, his methods of phenomenological reduction and eidetic intuition, and St. Thomas's theory of knowledge. I became quite convinced that, although their answers to that most basic philosophical question, namely the relationship between being and thinking, fundamentally differed at the end, both of them had started with a set of quite compatible assumptions and shared a number of interesting observations regarding the nature of intellectual knowledge. In this paper, I attempt, in a spirit of philosophical sympathy, first to bring their points of agreement together, and then point out how the phenomenologists, despite all their efforts and struggles, were still basically confined to the circle charted for them by the Cartesian-Kantian system, mainly because of their failure or unwillingness to step out the realm of immanent epistemology and to affirm a transcendental ontology. Thus for the phenomenologists, as well as for Descartes and Kant, philosophical reflection, instead of turning to the thing perceived in order to study it more closely, became a turning back of the self on itself, or as Husserl put it, it became an egological science, a universal problem of *ego cogito*.

For brevity's sake, I have to assume the readers have an acquaintance with the basic elements of the Thomistic doctrine of knowledge. Also, citations from Husserl will be limited to his *Cartesian Meditations* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), which is the shorter and easier to read of the two books cited above.

I

The following items about the nature of our cognitive life might serve as useful points of comparison between Husserl's phenomenology and St. Thomas's theory of knowledge.

(1) The immanent character of cognitive life—to Husserl as well as to St. Thomas, human knowledge is not simply the product of an impersonal causality. Knowledge is much more than a bundle of individual sense impressions, or signs of particular objects. Knowledge *formaliter* exists in the subject *cogito* and forms part of its inner being in conformity with its own nature. Truth is thus primarily a property of the intellect, and only in a secondary and derivative sense that of the things. In this intimate relationship, the *noema* is united with the *noesis* according to the nature of man's consciousness. Understanding also perfects the intellect in so far as human faculties are perfected by their appropriate acts.

I believe this agrees very well with the oft repeated maxim of St. Thomas that things are perceived according to the manner of the recipient. (*Omne quod recipitur in altero, recipitur secundum modum recipientis, or secundum modum cognoscentis.*)

(2) The intentional nature of cognitive life—Husserl must be credited with having brought out the notion of intentional consciousness and assigned it a prominent place in explaining the contact of our mind with the external world. The intentional nature of consciousness, according to Husserl, who refuted the Cartesian notion of a passive evidence, does not merely take the certainty of clear and distinct ideas as sufficient. It is rather a dynamic teleological act, which discloses itself to a critical reflection, and reaches out beyond the isolated subjective process, and goes out to the object, actual and potential.

The concept of intentionality dominates the whole Husserlian theory of knowledge. It is the key with which one opens the consciousness to the reality, and

the bridge which constitutes our first relation with the real, and makes the real present to me as “real-for-me”, that is, as something which has a meaning and value for me. It carries our partial perception (*Abschattung*) to its logical perfection and makes a white paper with some black dots and shades as meaningful as the image of my friend. It unites the *noesis* and the *noema* in a significant unitary act, and makes human knowledge a living, humanly meaningful knowledge.

Likewise, according to St. Thomas, knowing is a teleological or quasi-teleological process. Though born a *tabula rasa*, our mind has, so to speak, an innate intention, a motivating force to interpret, to grasp the meaning of things. In a certain sense, we may even say that we possess in us the germ of all knowledge. (*Preexistung in nobis quaedam scientiarum semina. De Veritate*, XI, 1). This spontaneous and active power which is present in us, St. Thomas calls the *intellectus agens*, or *lumen natura'e*, after the analogy of the divine light.

(3) Knowledge of the soul—Both Descartes and Husserl start their philosophical reflection from the primordial fact of the thinking *ego*. Although the Thomists would not accept *ego cogito* as the first philosophical principle because it presupposes at least the principle of contradiction, they will not deny that it is a valid proposition so far as the knowledge of our own mind is concerned. This is certainly implied in the statement that “soul is known by means of its own acts”. In *De Veritate q. 10, a. 8, ad 8*, St. Thomas also says: “The knowledge of the soul is most certain inasmuch as each one experiences in himself that he has a soul and that of the acts of the soul are present in him. Though it might be difficult to know what is the essence of the soul, it is a most certain fact that we sense that we are. Moreover, given the actuality of my operation (my thought, for example), known in internal perception or experience, the existence of the soul becomes necessary although in itself it is not necessary (*necessitas ex suppositione*)”.

(4) Knowledge as the cause of things—It is indeed puzzling to read in Husserl

such recurring statements as "The world with all its objects derives its whole sense and its existential status, which it has for me, from me myself, from me as the transcendental *Ego*" (*Cart. Med.*, p. 26). But even this assertion can be understood in a Thomistic way. First, it has been stated by St. Thomas that the first operation of the mind, namely sense perception, is concerned only with quiddity, essence. Discovering the existential content of the sense data is the propiate and exclusive act of intellectual judgment, independent of the senses. In the judgment actuality is attributed to the content of the representation, *indicare ita esse in re vel non esse*. Of course, the human mind does not do this in an arbitrary manner, but has to do it by examining the relationship of its acts to the things in the outside world. Nevertheless, the starting point and the active principle are attributed to the subjective mind. Secondly, St. Thomas also mentions somewhere that knowledge is the cause of things (*Scientia quae est causa rerum*). This sentence probably can mean two things. The first meaning is a metaphysical one which postulates that the intellect has a formal precedence over other spiritual faculties (such as passions and will), and the divine ideas are in fact the forms which construct all things. In another sense, which comes very close to the most recent theory of sociological analysis, empirical data are completely meaningless until they are arranged in a mental framework and interpreted.

(5) The mind as the cause and depository of meaning —Husserl says: "The world is for me absolutely nothing else but the world existing for and accepted by me in the conscious *cogito*. It gets its whole sense, universal and specific, and its acceptance as existing, exclusively from such *cogitationes*" (*Cart. Med.*, p. 21). As far as the origin of meanings is concerned, it is quite possible for a Thomist to accept Husserl should his formula be limited to the following interpretations.

First, it goes without saying that in a world of inert matter, without a trace of consciousness, the ideas of rationality and meaning could not even arise. Obviously,

if things are to be known and understood, there must be rational beings possessing consciousness apart from the external world.

Second, as stated above, this consciousness is never merely passive in grasping its object. In producing knowledge, our mind has a much creative role to play than the empiricists would admit.

Third, it is also true some meanings enter the world solely through human activities. These are artificial things, and whatever is due to human initiative insofar as it transforms the world of nature into a world of civilization and culture. A hammer, a table, an aesthetic creation—these have a sense and meaning only through man. Even our knowledge of natural things and modes of logical reasoning, as Husserl says, always involve an element of creative cultural activity. Think of language, for example.

(6) The enriched concept of reason—The intentional analysis introduced by Husserl into contemporary philosophy and his avowed return to the concrete (*Zu den Sachen Selbst*) constitutes, in a sense, a reaction against the narrowly conceptualist notion of reason, and discloses an anxiety to go back to the pre-Cartesian tradition of philosophy. Edmund Husserl as well as St. Thomas refuses to accept abstract concept, which is only an instrument, a *medium quo*, in the midst of and at the service of knowledge, as knowledge itself. True knowledge must attempt to understand the reality in all its concreteness, born of our lived experiences of presence with the world. To understand (*intelligere*, to read into), to produce concepts (*concipere*), to grasp the reality, always implies an active element of the mind, and is not simply a matter of cut-and-dried reason that exists somewhere outside the mind or nowhere. It is foremost a living experience, a living uniting of the *noesis* and the *noema*.

(7) The order of sciences—Both St. Thomas and Husserl prefer to classify sciences according to the convenience of the intellect rather than according to the

natural order of things. To both of them, it is the formal aspect, the viewpoint from which a science considers its object, rather than the material object itself, which provides the ultimate criterion for the differentiation of sciences from one another. In this respect, though their final conclusions go separate ways, both St. Thomas and Husserl are eagerly preoccupied with the question of the ultimate grounding of existence, actual and potential, which constitutes first and foremost the object of our intellectual pursuit. They also agree that the science of the possible should precede the science of actualities, and the proper object of intellectual knowledge is the necessary, universal and unchangeable.

(8) Habit and history—To Husserl must be credited the fact of having brought out two important aspects of human cognitive life, namely, the repeatability of the conscious act and the continuous flow of experience (*das Erfahren*). Because an object of consciousness can always be seized again, a habituality is formed in the subject, in other words, the subjective intentionality is habitually modified. Thanks to this habituality, what is constituted for me becomes an abiding possession, and culture becomes not only possible but, in a certain sense, natural. And the continuous flow of experience, before as well as during the process of conscious explication, manifests a universal synthesis connecting the past, the present and the future, a unity of history for the *ego* (*Cart. Med.*, p. 75).

In the Aristotelean-Thomistic philosophy, habit is also an important category. But there it is treated as a predicament in the division of being, or refers to the order of morality. It is seldom touched upon in epistemology. Moreover, the traditional treatment of time and history is mostly confined to external motions. The peculiar structure of our inner consciousness is rarely spoken of.

The Husserlian emphasis on internal time, and on the continuity and repeatability of the conscious processes, can thus greatly enrich our philosophical lore. It introduces us to a living world, a world which is particularly of our own, where intentionality

and the givenness combine to give us a humanly meaningful meaning to the cold reality surrounding us, a world where the notions of personal liberty and intersubjective sociability acquire a peculiar new meaning for us.

II

Underlying these similarities between the Husserlian and the Thomistic theories of knowledge, there also exist fundamental differences which have to be explored. The following quotation from the *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 9, may well serve as the starting point for our discussion.

“Truth is known by the intellect inasmuch as the intellect reflects upon its act; not only inasmuch as it knows its acts but inasmuch as it knows the relationship (proportion) of its act to the thing, which relationship cannot be known unless the nature of the act be known; and this cannot be known unless there is known the nature of the active principle, which is the intellect itself, whose nature is to be conformed to things; hence the intellect knows truth inasmuch as it reflects upon itself”.

(Cognoscitur autem veritas a intellectu secundum quod intellectus reflectitur supra actum suum, non solum secundum quod cognoscit actum suum, sed secundum quod cognoscit proportionem ejus ad rem, quod quidem cognosci non potest nisi cognita natura ipsius actus; quae cognosci non potest nisi cognoscatur natura principii activi, quod est ipse intellectus, in cujus natura est ut rebus conformetur; unde secundum hoc cognoscit veritatem intellectus qui supra seipsum reflectitur.)

This is a very difficult passage though most people think St. Thomas's theory of knowledge is contained here in a nutshell. Truth is gained by reflection of the intellect upon its act. But the intellect and intellectual acts are not known independently, but in their relationship and conformity to things. In other words, the intellect is known by means of its acts, and the acts are known by means of

objects. (*Ex eo quod cognoscit intelligibile, intelligit ipsum suum intelligere*). The ultimate material foundation of our knowledge is, therefore, the things, the *species intelligibile* as represented by images or phantasms. And the criterion of truth consists of the conformity of judgment not merely with the perceived state of affairs, but ultimately with the real nature of things.

This epistemological realism has been sometimes criticized as too naive, because it is impossible to prove by deductive reasoning and with absolute conclusiveness, the reliability of sense perceptions and our cognitive faculties. The Thomists can accept this challenge at its face value by replying that every philosophy must start from a basic assumption, an *Urdoxa* (*Urglauben*), a central reference point which defies any attempt of a logical proof. How can one prove the veracity of reason while he must use reasoning to prove it? The Thomistic theory of knowledge, therefore, faithful to the daily experience, starts from below to what is above, from senses to intellect, from the external to the internal. "We can enter the innermost parts of a thing only through those things that stand outside, as through a door. This is the method of human knowledge that progresses from effects and properties to the knowledge of the essence of a thing". (III, *Sententia* 35, 2, 2.) Is this a naive realism? Through an arduous and gradual process of abstraction, this philosophy has attained a knowledge of the most universal, *being*, which is interchangeable with such *prima intelligibilia* as unity, truth, goodness etc., that are shared analogically by whatever exist or can exist.

On the other hand, phenomenologists like Husserl assert that a radical philosophy must be grounded on the foundation of the subject himself. The transcendent *ego* is regarded not only as prior in the order of knowledge, it becomes the sole basis on which all subjective cognition must take place. In the words of Husserl himself, "the world is a universal problem of egology" (*Cart. Med.*, p. 53). The nature of the cognitive acts are no longer to be known by means of their objects,

but by means of the manifestations they have on our consciousness through an intuitive reflection. It is not because the world exists that I come to have experiences of it, but because I have such experiences that the world and other people in it are posited. Where then do the subjective experiences come from? This question is not answered by the phenomenologists. It is taken for granted as their basic reference point, their own *Urdoxa*.

If the world has meaning solely for man as it appears to man (a statement repeatedly found in Husserl's writings), then one has either to identify reality with phenomenon, in which case the existing thing is reduced to a series of appearances which manifest it, or else he would have to recognize the necessity of a transphenomenal foundation if the phenomenon is not to founder in the deep seas of the immanent consciousness. The former position leads logically to the Berkeleyan formula of identifying *esse* with *percipi*: Things exist only in their appearances, as perceived by the *ego*. On the other hand, if the transphenomenal is granted, how can we be able to say anything about it except that "it is what it is"? Husserl's own position, despite his tremendous efforts to reconstruct an intersubjective world, comes dangerously close to the doctrine of Berkeley.

But Husserl is a post-Kantian philosopher, and his whole philosophical system is grounded on a basic post-Kantian assumption: The autonomy of the subject *ego*. In the first *Cartesian Meditation*, Husserl asserts that because "I who am I" possess such and such experiences, the *ego* constitutes a world of subjectivities and objectivities outside me and for me. If the subject *ego* is taken to mean the intellectual processes of the human mind, as he evidently thinks so, it is indeed very difficult to accept his premise. The subject *ego* which thinks and acts is not an autonomous, necessary, and independent being. As evinced by the transitional character of the conscious acts, the human mind is only a contingent being, as well as heavily dependent on corporeal disposition. If, therefore, the nature of knowledge convinces

him that reality must be grounded on the intellect of some sort, this intellect could not be of his own, but must belong to a divine essence which exists of itself, and through itself, in the most perfect manner. It would also be perfectly true that if one could know the divine intellect better than we do now, through this alone he would have a very good knowledge of things. As it is, this is impossible in our present material-bound existence. We have thus to depend upon the help of sense perceptions, and to gain knowledge from effects to cause, and this only through a rather arduous process of intellectual abstraction.

In conclusion, it is not inappropriate to quote that concise statement of St. Thomas, which illustrates so well the relationship of being and thinking:

“So then the divine mind is a measure, but not measured; a natural thing is both a measure and being measured; and our mind is measured; it can be said to measure artificial things, but not natural things.”

(Sic ergo intellectus divinus est mensurans, non mensuratus; res naturalis autem mensurans et mensurata; sed intellectus noster est mensuratus, non mensurans quidem res naturales sed artificiales tantum. —Disputations, I; de Veritate, 2.)