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An Inquiry for a Solipsistic Morality in Husserl and Hume

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Abstract

The word ‘solipsistic ethics’ seems to imply an impossibility, like a square circle. However, Husserlian concept of empathy and Humean concept of sympathy seems to give us a starting point for constructing a solipsistic ethics, at least as a thought experiment.

Keywords: Husserl, Hume, solipsistic ethics, empathy, sympathy.

1. Introduction

In this essay, I am going to make a thought experiment in which thoughts of David Hume and Edmund Husserl are taken as complementary in constructing a solipsistic world, and, afterwards, I am going to investigate if ethics would be possible in such a world.

Hume bases his theory of passions and morality on *pain* and *pleasure*; e.g. vice produces pain and virtue produces pleasure. In his theory, the main concept is *sympathy*. By sympathy we could gain access to the others thoughts and sentiments. Furthermore, sympathy is the cause of indirect passions. Yet, in his theory of passions and morality, he never bothers about the existence of other human beings. Hume, as a strong empiricist, does not have any doubt about the existence of other human beings. At this point, in my thought experiment, Husserlian concept of *empathy* enters as the complementary part of the Humean theory. In his attempt to construct the others as transcendental subjects, Husserl uses the concept of empathy.

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After this brief sketch, I would like to present the general structure of the essay. Firstly, I am going to present how the other is constructed in Husserlian theory upon the concept of empathy. Secondly, I am going to present how morality is built upon the concept of empathy in Humean theory. Lastly, I am going to test this synthetically constructed theory of morality whether it works.

2. Husserl's construction of the 'other' and the 'objective world'

Husserl starts with reducing his existence to his absolute transcendental ego; that is, he excludes the existence of objective, material, world including his own body. After this reduction, bracketing, or phenomenological *epoché*^{*}, what remains is, for Husserl, "the stream of my pure conscious processes and the unities constituted by their actualities and potentialities."¹ Inside the brackets, there remains only pure ego with his inseparable features. For him, this must be the first step in constructing the others and objective world. Because, to experience something as other or alien, the ego must, first of all, set the limits of our existence in the transcendental sphere. In other words, we should get rid of everything alien in our transcendental existence; I should experience myself in the transcendental realm as a unity in which there is nothing that does not peculiarly belongs to my transcendental ego. Husserl puts it in the following way:

As Ego in the transcendental attitude I attempt first of all to delimit, within my horizon of transcendental experience, *what is peculiarly my own*. First I say that it is *non-alien* [*Nicht Fremdes*]. I begin by freeing that horizon

^{*} Husserl took this term from ancient skeptics, and it is used by them as meaning "refraining from taking a stand" (Dagfinn Føllesdal, "Husserl, Edmund." Routledge Encyclopedia of philosophy, Version 1.0, London: Routledge).

¹ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995, p. 89.

abstractively from everything that is at all alien.²

As a result of this phenomenological epoché we get a *sphere of ownness*—sphere of *Eigenheit*. This sphere is named by Husserl as the *founding stratum*. Because the other self and the objective world are to be founded on this stratum. Without this stratum “I obviously cannot have the ‘alien’ or ‘other’ as experience, and therefore cannot have the sense ‘Objective world’ as an experiential sense, [...] whereas the reverse is not the case.”³ This stratum is the place where there is no room for doubt; that is, everything in this stratum is directly accessible to us, and therefore, there are no interventions and distortions of some other things that do not belong to this stratum. Being such a pure and evident, this stratum is the very base on which all the other beings could be founded. In this sense, this stratum has the same function with Descartes’ *cogito*.

According to Husserl, by this reduction, a substratum becomes separated from the phenomenal world, and this substratum is my nature, in my sphere of ownness. However, this nature, for Husserl, is different from that of a natural scientist. For him, natural scientist makes abstraction, or reduction, too. But in this reduction what he gets is the objective world itself. However, in the case of transcendental reduction, “the sense ‘Objective’, which belongs to everything worldly—as constituted intersubjectively, as experienceable by everyone, and so forth—vanishes completely.”⁴ Then, what we get by such a transcendental reduction is wholly a solipsistic world. For Husserl, I find my animate body among the other bodies belonging to this solipsistic world. He asserts that “in this nature and this world, my animate organism is the only body that is or can be constituted originally as an animate organism.”⁵ There are three characters of my body that distinguishes it from other bodies. First, my body is the place where I perceive the

² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

world; secondly, I could move my body easily with respect to other bodies around; thirdly, my body is the locus of my sensations. Thus, with regard to this contemplation, my 'self' is the result of the relation between my *ego* and my *body*. In other words, *I* am composed of a transcendental ego with an animate organism, and both components are in my sphere of *ownness*. Thence, Husserl claims that "we have characterized the fundamental concept of 'my own' only indirectly: as *non-alien* or *non-other*," and he adds that this characterization "is based on, and thus presupposes, the concept of another ego."⁶ This means that, in order to characterize itself, my ego needs another ego. Yet, in such a solipsistic universe, delimited by *ownness*, how is it possible for another ego, like mine, to exist? And how can I, as Arthur David Smith puts it, "recognize another body *as something that is originally constituted in an alien sphere of ownness* in the way in which my own body is constituted for me within my sphere of *ownness*["?]"⁷

There are two necessities proposed by Husserl. The *first* necessity is above explained sphere of *ownness*, that is, the founding stratum. According to him, "within and by means of this *ownness* the transcendental ego constitutes, [...] the 'Objective' world, as a universe of being that is other than himself—and constitutes, at the first level, the other in the mode: alter ego."⁸ The *second* necessity is the recognition of other self as other. Yet, for Husserl, this recognition "presupposes that *not all my own modes of consciousness are modes of my self-consciousness*."⁹ This means that ego should transcend his sphere of *ownness*, his existence. Yet, the only available material for him to transcend his sphere of *ownness* is *his sphere of ownness*. In other words, ego constitutes something, within his sphere of *ownness*, in order to transcend this sphere. For Husserl this is possible only through *empathy*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

⁷ Arthur David Smith, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Husserl and the Cartesian Meditations*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 222.

⁸ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p. 100.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

Empathy occurs through three steps, or it has three components: *appresentation*, *pairing association*, and *analogizing apperception*. Let us take up these three components of the empathy one by one respectively.

Appresentation is, as Husserl puts it, “a kind of *making co-present*.”¹⁰ In appresentation, from the known or perceptible pieces or parts, we make present the unknown or undetectable pieces or parts. According to Husserl, “the strictly seen front of a physical thing always and necessarily appresents a rear aspect and prescribes for it a more or less determinate content.”¹¹ To illustrate, seeing the front of a bottle we appresent the back side of the bottle, and this appresentation could be verified “by a corresponding fulfilling presentation (the back becomes the front).”¹² For Husserl, appresentation is not limited only to the sensation of physical or material things. For example, I could appresent a sphere of ownness or another ego in the presence of a body like mine. Yet, this appresentation cannot be verified by a corresponding fulfilling presentation. According to Husserl, in the latter, “such verification must be excluded a priori.”¹³ Because, as Husserl claims, it requires my direct access to other ego’s sphere of ownness, which means that I am both myself and the other ego. But, for Husserl, this lack of verification by corresponding fulfilling presentation does not mean that appresentation does not work. There are cases about physical things in which this verification process does not work, either. Husserl puts the point in the following way:

[E]very apperception in which we understand their sense and its horizons forthwith, points back to a “*primal instituting*”, in which an object with a similar sense became constituted for the first time. Even the physical things of this world that are unknown to us are, to speak generally, known in respect of their type. We

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

have already seen like things before, though not precisely this thing here.¹⁴

Husserl defines the nature of pairing, which is the second step of empathy, saying that “pairing is a *primal form of that passive synthesis* which we designate as ‘association’, in contrast to passive synthesis of ‘identification’.”¹⁵ According to Husserl, in pairing, there are two mutually distinct data given intuitively, and they establish a unity of similarity. Because of this unity, they are constituted as a pair. In this pairing association, sense of the one member of the pairing simultaneously ‘awakens’ the sense of the other member; that is, in pairing “we find, more particularly, a living mutual awakening.”¹⁶ Yet, Husserl puts *likeness* as the limiting case in this pairing association. This restriction makes apperception possible between the members of the association.

The last component of empathy is analogizing apperception. Actually, both apperception and pairing are established on the base of analogizing apperception. When the pairing association is established between two similar data, then any additional sense attributed to the any one of the members of the pair is transferred to the other member. There is a comparison on the base of similarities in the apparent parts, and then transference of the senses, which we know the first object already has, to the second object.

After these necessary explanations, let us examine the Husserlian construction of the ‘other ego,’ step by step. As I have explained above, the first necessity was the sphere of ownness. In this sphere, first, I have constructed myself as being composed of an ego and an animate organism, governed by my ego. After that, the pairing association occurs between the appearance of my own body and other’s body. These two appears as similar. I know that my ego is governing this body, and this makes my body an animate organism. Yet, I do not get any impression about the presence of an

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

ego like mine in that body over there, and I do not know whether that body is an animate organism or not. In the words of Husserl, “neither the Ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to his own essence, becomes given in our experience originally.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, this does not mean that pairing cannot occur. By means of pairing and analogizing apperception, I transfer the sense “animate organism” to the bodily appearance of the other. This means that, by this transfer of sense, I accepted that, in that appearance of body, there is a governing ego like mine. However, this should be verified somehow. As we do not have direct access to other’s own ego and its processes, Husserl suggests that this can be verified only through other’s harmonious behaviors.

The experienced animate organism of another continues to prove itself as actually an animate organism, solely in its changing but incessantly *harmonious ‘behavior’* [...] The organism becomes experienced as a pseudo-organism, precisely if there is something discordant about its behavior.¹⁸

According to Husserl, in this verification process, the other’s ego is not directly verified, but its indication is verified; e.g. the body over there behaves as if it is governed by an ego. Moreover, in this verification process, harmonious means harmonious with my own behaviors. Thus, I became the standard of the behavior and verification process. Then, how can I ensure the actuality and originality of the other? Could not it be a fiction, or a pseudo-other?

Husserl answers this question by using the spatial terms *here* and *there*. I experience my existence in the mode here, where as I experience the existence of the other in the mode of there. However, according to Husserl, “by modification of my kinesthesias, particularly those of locomotion, I can change my

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

position in such a manner that I convert any There into a Here—that is to say, I could occupy any spatial locus with my organism.”¹⁹ And, for him, this possibility of changing spatial location of my situation in space gives support to my appresentation of the other; “I apperceive him as having spatial modes of appearance like those I should have if I should go over there and be where he is.”²⁰ However, these two modes could not be experienced in one ego, they exclude each other; you are either *here* or *there*, it is not possible to exist both *here* and *there* at the same time. And this mutual exclusion gives a *genuine, actual, otherness* to the other.

After having presenting a brief outline of Husserl’s construction of the other and the objective world, let us investigate in to Hume’s concept of sympathy.

3. Hume’s theory of sympathy

Pain and pleasure are the key concepts on which Hume’s theory of passions and morality is based. Agreeable passions are causes of pleasure, whereas uneasy ones are causes of pain. In the same manner, virtuous acts cause pleasure, but vice acts cause pain. This is the key which would help us in understanding Hume’s thoughts on ethics in “Book Two” and “Book Three” of *A Treatise of Human Nature*.²¹

According to Hume, there are two different kinds of passions; *direct* and *indirect*. Desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair, and security are the examples of the direct passions, whereas pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice, and generosity are the examples of the indirect passions. What causes such a distinction among the passions is that their objects are different. In other words, they are differentiated according to their objects. The object of direct passions is *self*, while the object of indirect passions is the *other self*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

²¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

After this very brief summary, let us concentrate upon the concepts of sympathy and morality in Hume's philosophy. According to Hume, we have a natural ability to sympathize with others, and this ability is important in receiving other's sentiments and inclinations by communication.

No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own.²²

In sympathy, we receive other's sentiments and inclinations through external signs that reveal some clues about his sentiments. And these clues, or ideas, are converted into such impressions in us that they produce the same sentiment in us. For Hume, such a transaction requires some kind of relation with the other. "Tho'", he says, "this relation shou'd not be so strong as that of causation, it must still have a considerable influence."²³ And he proposes two different kinds of relations; *resemblance* and *contiguity*.

According to Hume, among all human creatures there is such a resemblance that there could be no passion or principle that its similar or equivalent one is not found in us. This natural resemblance makes sympathy possible among the human creatures. However, it is not the only resemblance that causes sympathy, there are other peculiar similarities that causes sympathy; such as, "peculiar similarity in our manners, or character, or country, or language."²⁴ Furthermore, if the relation of resemblance is strong, then the magnitude of transferred sentiment is great, whereas, if the relation is weak then the magnitude is small.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 316.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

Contiguity relation is also very important in sympathy. With regard to Hume, if there is no relation of contiguity then other's sentiments have no or little effects on us. For example, there is strong sympathy between me and my wife, but, between me and an alien there is a weak sympathy. Moreover, for Hume, "the relations of blood, being a species of causation, may sometimes contribute to the same effect; as also acquaintance, which operates in the same manner with education and custom."²⁵

On the base of sympathy, Hume establishes morality. According to him, "sympathy is a very powerful principle in human nature" and "it has a great influence on our sense of beauty, when we regard external objects, as well as when we judge of morals," and hence, "sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions."²⁶ Pleasure and pain, in Humean sympathetic morality, play a very crucial role. In this system, then, morally good acts produces pleasure, and bad acts produces pain. These acts should not be directly related me to produce corresponding moral consequences. Any act that affects the society, in which we live, in a morally good or bad way, also affects us through above explained relations of similarity and contiguity; thus through sympathy. In the same manner, in this system, any act that affects any member of the society, in a morally good or bad way, affects the society.

4. Evaluation of the synthesis of Husserlian and Humean theories as a moral theory

Morality has always been a misunderstanding: in reality, a species fated to act in this or that fashion wanted to justify itself, by dictating its norm as the universal norm.

*Friedrich Nietzsche
(Will to Power, §423)*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 618.

As I have noted at the beginning of this essay, I am just making a thought experiment. Therefore, I did not and will not question the validity and truth of the above explained theories of both great thinkers. I am going to try to find out if morality is possible, and also, try to explore if it is possible to find a solid ground to any moral act or decision, in such a world.

I exist, and, as Husserl proved, other men also exist. As Calvin O. Schrag says in his analysis of the structure of the moral experience through Husserl's concept of life-world (*Lebenswelt*), "[t]o exist implies action, action implies decision, and decision implies opting between alternatives that are positioned along a continuum of good and bad, right and wrong, worthy and worthless, desirable and undesirable."²⁷ In this sense, morality appears as constituent part of our existence; that is, morality appears as an essential modality of human existence. Then, when I say that *I exist*, this means to say that *I exist as a being of morality*. Yet, if there are no other selves like me, then we cannot speak of morality; "morality presupposes the acknowledgement of and response to other selves who shares one's world [...] the self becomes a moral self only in its encounter with other selves."²⁸

Let us apply above situations to the world constructed by Husserl and Hume. We know that Husserl builds up the other through sympathy. And, in the process of empathy, there are the phases of *appresentation*, *pairing association*, and *analogizing apperception*. In this process, the *transcendentally reduced ego* finds out that he has a location, and hence a body governed by him. Afterwards, he discovers that there are bodies similar to his own, and he pairs his own body and the other similar body. This pairing gives him to possibility of transferring his own sense of being animate organism. Thus, if the other body is also an animate organism like him, then, because of this, there should be an ego like his ego governing that body. Husserl bases the verification of this

²⁷ Calvin O. Schrag, "The Structure of Moral Experience: A Phenomenological and Existential Analysis," *Ethics*, Vol. 73. No. 4, 1963, p. 257.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

construction of the other on the observation of *harmonious behavior* of the other.

So far, so good. Yet, how could morality be possible in my relation with the other constructed as such. The other should be free and autonomous, if there be any moral intercourse between me and him. However, in Husserl's construction, the existence of the other is wholly dependent on me. That is, the criteria applied by him are designated so as to be compatible with his own whole system; e.g., the verification criteria; that is, *harmonious behavior*. What is the meaning of *harmonious*, here? What kind of *harmoniousness* is expected— *harmonious* with my behavior or his behavior? Furthermore, it is me, who decides the *harmoniousness* of his behavior. On the other hand, what I accept as other might be some kind of machine-like creature that could behave *harmoniously* 'as if' it is an animate organism governed by an ego; it might be a *pseudo-ego*.

Other than this, there is another problem concerning source of ethical principles. What makes me to behave according to ethical principles? Is behaving under the guidance of ethical principles sufficient for being a morally good person?

For Hume, pain and pleasure are the main streams of morality and passions. Morally good acts yield pleasure and bad ones yield pain. Moreover, through sympathy we could gain indirect access to the sentiments of others; or, to put it rightly, we could communicate our sentiments by means of sympathy. Sympathy gives us the possibility of receiving the result of our acts on the sentiments of the other. We could put ourselves to the place of the other, and feel his emotions when we act towards him in this or that way. According to him, this sympathy relation makes us behave in a morally good way. Yet, there is no guarantee that we, as moral agents, do not abuse this relation. We could use the sympathy for harming others, and there is nothing to prevent us from doing this. Therefore, in my opinion, neither sympathy nor empathy relation gives us any reason to behave in a morally good way. Actually, this problem does not belong only to the morality that emerges in the synthesis of Husserlian emphatically constructed other and Humean sympathetically constructed morality. Every moral theory lacks such a principle to guide our

acts. Of course, every moral theory claims that it has that principle and tries to show that it works and is universal. Yet, it does not really work, as Nietzsche said, in the above quotation, we could find a way to justify our actions.

The only thing that might be the base of any morality which could be constructed upon the solipsism, upon the synthesis of Husserl and Hume, is the refutation of any other alien ego. That is, in this world there is only one ego, and the *seemingly* 'other egos' are the actualization of the possibilities inherent in the ego. Then, each of us is the same ego, actualized under different physical and social conditions. Let us try to make it clear using chess play as an example. Suppose that both black and white sides are played by the same person. In that case, both black and white sides are equally his sides, and if he tries to cheat one side, then he actually cheating himself. Thus, we got the guiding principle that prevents us from misusing the relations of empathy and sympathy. This may seem as a very Levinasian solution, but, for me, it is the only thing, on which any morality could be built. What is more is that such a thought gives us a very pure solipsistic world.

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