

Analecta Husserliana

The Yearbook of
Phenomenological Research

Volume CXVIII

The Sense of Things

Toward a Phenomenological Realism

Angela Ales Bello

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Antonio Calcagno

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Toward a Phenomenological Realism

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*For Anna Teresa Tymieniecka—in gratitude
for her generosity and gifted mind.*

In memoria.

Preface

But how do things stand with other egos that are not mere representations or represented objects, synthetic unities that can be verified in me, but in their own sense are properly “other?” Have we made an error vis-à-vis transcendental realism? This could be lacking phenomenological foundations, but in principle this could be right insofar as it inquires after a way that moves from the immanence of the ego to the transcendence of “others.” (Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, § 42.)

¹Edmund Husserl’s brief reflection serves as a guide for the pages that follow.

In order to comprehend the guiding thesis of the present study, one can begin with the last chapter, which holds a double function: it is both conclusive and programmatic. One finds in it an attempt to justify the title of this book through the argument the monograph offers, but it also reiterates and clarifies the thesis that the book wishes to defend.

Today, in Italy, one encounters renewed philosophical interest in realism, which has fostered much intense debate. I offer here a contribution to this debate by rereading the transcendental realism of Edmund Husserl, always from the phenomenological perspective. I discuss his very definition of “transcendental idealism,” a point of view that he himself explicitly maintained.

The thesis of this book is paradoxical: Transcendental idealism is truly a transcendental realism. But the objection quickly arises: how can one transform idealism into realism, if the two notions have always been opposed to one another within the history of western philosophy? We must ask if this opposition is valid.

If one stops to examine the prevailing use of the two terms, it seems as if no one term can exist outside of this opposition. If we probe more deeply, however, we find that at the core of such an opposition, there lie many equivocations. I maintain that the idealism advanced by Husserl demonstrates that “idealism” can be said in many ways and that this is also valid for realism: the semantic domains to which the two terms refer are not always univocal. Hence, Husserl’s understanding of idealism possesses certain characteristics that are traditionally attributed to “realism” pro-

¹Chapter 4 is not found in the original Italian edition and was added for this English translation.

vided that one does not forget the accompanying adjective that he attaches to the term, namely, “transcendental.” Husserl’s transcendental idealism is a realism.

I have always maintained this interpretation of Husserl’s thought. This book represents a synthesis of my considerations over recent years set within the framework of my own theoretical and historical investigations of phenomenology. I showcase the results of my study here against the backdrop of a philosophical climate that calls for a return to realism, often asking myself whether or not the claims of realism are naïve or dogmatic.

It seems to me that Husserl’s phenomenology has its own particular theoretical force and is capable of furnishing us with a deeper understanding of not only the relation between idealism and realism but also of a way for better clarifying our human knowledge of the “sense of things,” which is the primary goal of philosophical research.

Husserl’s writings and his treatment of sense are undoubtedly difficult as he requires us to change our perspective. Husserl’s revolutionary thinking follows in the wake of Kant’s Copernican Revolution, but Husserl arrives at different conclusions about knowing than does Kant.

Often, certain claims remain unknown; they are buried away or misunderstood, abused by various interpretative stereotypes. Here, we do not claim to know the actual, definitive truth of the sense of things through Husserlian-based analysis; rather, I hold that this is our cognitive goal in every case, even for those who explicitly negate this possibility. And this goal is linked to our searching for what is convincing precisely because what is most convincing is evident and indubitable. If someone “shows” us an approach through which we can arrive at certainty, then it must be explored and evaluated.

My readings of Husserl’s work give me the distinct impression that we find ourselves in front of a signpost [*Wegweiser*] that makes evident aspects not previously considered or only partially explored. This signpost can help us comprehend the sense of things. This understanding of the sense of things is a search entrusted to the community of philosophers who can collaborate and assist one another by thinking “beyond their own time and space,” to paraphrase an expression of Edith Stein.

The finitude of the human condition must keep us far away from the pretense of absolutization, but this does not mean that we have to listen to the sirens of nihilism for even nihilism is a form of absolutization.

Walking the long and arduous path of evidence and clarification, both of which remain ideals to be achieved, allows us to seize the sense of things.

Vatican City, Italy

Angela Ales Bello

Abstract

This book offers a new interpretative framework for reading and overcoming the binary of idealism and realism. The way human consciousness unfolds in the relationship between the I and the world is central. This relationship opens up a field of phenomenological inquiry that cannot and must not remain closed within the limits of its own disciplinary borders. *The Sense of Things* focuses on the philosophical question of realism in contemporary debates, ultimately dismantling prejudices and undeveloped claims that one finds in them. Angela Ales Bello shows that at the root of the conflict between realism and idealism, one often finds equivocations of a semantic nature. By returning to the origins of modern phenomenology and by employing the Husserlian concept of transcendental idealism, she demonstrates that the aforementioned conflict is to be resolved through a broader conception of sense. By following a transcendental method and by neutralizing the extreme positions of an acritical and naïve realism, Ales Bello proposes a “transcendental realism,” which reveals the horizon of a dynamic unity that embraces the process of cognition and which grounds the relation and not the subordination of subject and object. The investigation of this relation allows us to move beyond the limits of the domain of knowing, thereby leading us to the fundamental questions about the ultimate sense of things and their origin.

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