

Phenomenological Realism. Programmatic Considerations

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Abstract

Realism is a term that can be understood only by contrasting it with an opposite term, such as idealism or representationalism. But representationalism has indeed to presuppose something that is represented, in order for the representation to be possible at all. This does not mean, however, to fall prey to a naïve realism: our grasp on reality is always determined by our own way of accessing it. A realism which can take hold of this presupposition is to be called phenomenological realism. In this sense, reality is always given only in representation, that is, mediated by our access to it, but is not itself representation. It is an objectivity opposed to ourself, it has a particular place and it appears, but its appearance does not belong to the subject, it is simply there. Therefore, appearances are spatial and have to be described as such.

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Realism is a contrast term; it makes only sense in opposition to terms that indicate alternative conceptions. Such conceptions may vary, but what they have in common is the conviction that cognition is essentially bound in representations and has no access to reality. Idealism or representationalism as opposed to realism urges that perception or cognition functions as a conversion or transformation by which real things are changed to appearances of whatsoever kind. As Nietzsche, a key figure of radical representationalism, argues in his essay *On truth and lie in a nonmoral sense*, cognition is meta-phorical in the literal sense. This conception is an ancestor of Derrida's *différance*; it is a translation of reality into cognition by which

reality as such becomes inaccessible. Nietzsche's considerations on "truth and lie" can be read as a conversion of the pathway to truth as described in Plato's *Republic* and especially in the image of the cave. Whereas, according to the *Republic*, the way of cognition starts with deceptive appearances and finally reaches the ideas as real beings, Nietzsche's description displays a way from reality to appearance and to appearance of appearance. Reality is only the starting point, and it gets lost as soon as cognition has started its way. We have to suppose a reality behind the appearances, but appearances cannot be traced back to the reality the appearances of which they are supposed to be.

Representationalism as sketched and exemplified by Nietzsche has a soft spot. It cannot be exposed and maintained without a tacit reference to reality. Representation can only be conceived as transformative if there is something to be transformed. Appearances must be appearances of something even if this something is only present in disguise. The concepts of representation and appearance are dependent on the assumption of something that is not representation or appearance at all.

This difficulty cannot be overcome in a representationalist way. The dependency of representations on reality could only be recognized in pointing out how reality is represented, how it is present in appearances. This, again, requires an answer to the question what reality is, and this question cannot be answered without saying how it can be experienced. To do this however is tantamount to a shift from representationalism to realism. But realism should not just leave representationalism behind, but take it serious. We must not assume that with representations reality gets necessarily lost. But it would also be implausible to deny that reality is always represented. This being so, pure or rigid realism is impossible. It ignores or denies that our access to something is always formed by our capacities of perceiving or conceiving, even if this formation remains unremarkable. So we are well advised to argue for a version of realism that takes representation serious instead of suggesting a non-representative access to reality. I would like to call this a realistic realism, and as I would like to argue, it will prove to be

a phenomenological realism. This realism will take into account that for us reality is never pure. Therefore it will avoid understanding the relation between representation or appearance and reality as a depicting of something that could be compared with its depiction. Reality, to say it again, is only there in representation, but not necessarily transformed or disguised by it. It is represented reality, reality in appearance. Nevertheless we can call this being in appearance 'reality'; it is a reality that, despite of being only accessible in appearances, can be distinguished from appearance. Only on the basis of this distinction the concept of appearance or representation can have a concrete sense.

Reality is appearing insofar as it is there for someone who has certain capacities of cognition and a certain, not necessarily single viewpoint. What appears is there in dependency on these conditions. But as something appearing it is not sufficiently determined by them. Viewed from a certain viewpoint, something is there as a certain sight. Someone who stands before its front side e.g. can regard a building, and accordingly the building offers its front side. But the building also offers other sights, or in general: other possibilities to be experienced. With every possibility it is there as a certain appearance, so that appearances are possibilities of something to be there. What appears is not 'behind' its appearances; it is there in its appearances, or, to be more precise, in the plurality of appearances. Insofar as the appearances belong together in a more or less complex order they are appearances of a particular reality. This reality is there in the plurality of possibilities, which, as possibilities, must not be altogether realized at the same time. On the contrary, it is very unlikely that this can ever be the case. The appearances of a reality will normally be there in the context of possible appearances that are not experienced directly but rather as possible, as it is the case with the hidden sides of a building. In the context of these possible appearances also the actual ones prove to be possibilities; they could also withdraw into the possibility of appearing.

The complex order of appearances must not be confused with the more or less coherent sequence of experiences in which a particular reality is perceived and conceived. Such a series is,

at least in one respect, independent from the order of appearances that constitutes the particular reality as such. Neither does the order of appearances prescribe a sequence of experiences nor can the order of appearances be reduced to the experiences in which it can be discovered. Different sequences of experiences may discover the same order, perhaps as slightly different, but nevertheless in such a way that it can be identified as the same. Although the order of appearances is only there if experienced, remembered or imagined, it is not constructed by the experiences as such. It rather challenges experiences, possibly again and again.

In order to be experienced in different sequences and from different viewpoints, the particular realities that are there in possible appearances must have a certain unity, and in order to have this unity, they must be separated from each other. The more they are unique, the more they can be experienced as realities. Realities must be individuals; their degree of reality goes along with their degree of individuality. Individuals can form clusters, which can be experienced as being individual if they appear in a unique, more or less complex order, and thus prove to be individualities.

Individuals or individualities challenge experience in different degrees. This challenge is most intense if the unity of appearances can be experienced with every particular constellation of appearances and of possible appearances, and if, at the same time, the order of appearances in its complexity is evidently inexhaustible. Then the particular reality is objective (*gegenständlich*) in an eminent sense; it stands in opposition to the one who is about to experience and to discover it, not being integrated in the context of her or his life. Nevertheless it is no 'brute fact', but rather an encouragement to perception and interpretation. Works of art are objective appearances of this kind; they are objective appearances *par excellence*. Therefore they can be called phenomenal objects.

With objectivity or objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*) as sketched, the difference between the sequences of experiences and the order of appearances becomes especially dominant. Objectivity takes place only in distance to its experience. Since it cannot be exhausted by experience, it also cannot be regarded

as belonging to the space of experience in its possibilities. An object stands for itself, over there, separated from experience. It has a place and space of its own.

This separateness must not be confused with the pure reality as presupposed by representationalism or by puristic versions of realism. It is no objectivity 'behind' the appearances but rather their objectivity, and accordingly it can only be realized in referring to its appearances. In these appearances it is something that stands for itself. Accordingly, this reference consists not just in propositions that state what it is or what it is like. Reference to phenomenal objects has to do justice to their phenomenality, and in doing so it will be guided by the intention to let the appearances be there. Such a reference will not just be stating but rather be eminently showing. What is shown is not just made known but confirmed in its appearance. What showing aims at cannot be realized by the showing itself, but only by the object which is shown. It is realized in the object's showing itself.

In reference to phenomenal objects the general character of reference becomes obvious. Every conceptual reference to something has, more or less explicit, the intention of showing. Speaking about something draws attention to it, and for this attention the correlate of reference is there; it appears, more or less intensely. Insofar conceptual reference to phenomenal objects intensifies only what takes place in every statement about something. This intensification however goes along with a specific turn. Reference to phenomenal objects is transcending insofar as it is devoted to the objects and their appearing. It is not primarily guided by cognitive interests that are normally also interests of practice, acquisition or usage, but is enacted in favor of its phenomenal correlates.

This is crucial for the understanding of appearances. Appearances are not primarily belonging to the sphere of subjectivity. Primarily they are no representations but something transcendent that is only affirmed by representing it. Representation, understood as 'internal' representation, is related to external appearances and to their showing themselves.

The externality of appearances is basically expressed by referring to appearances as to something being there. They are there, over there, separate from me – although without me or someone else they could not be appearances but only virtual appearances, whose virtuality can only be conceived after they have been experienced as appearances. They are over there, while I am here, in conjunction with them by separation – a separation that can be crossed already by pointing to them. Pointing, indicating, showing – these gestures are crossings without the intention to overcome distance and separation. They confirm it.

It may already have become evident by these considerations that appearances are spatial. They are essentially spatial if their essence as appearances can be best understood in respect to their being there. If the spatiality of appearances is essential, it is very likely that their essence can be described more in detail in the context of an elaborated conception of space. But also without such an elaboration it should be clear that the experience of appearances is basically perceptive, and, consequently, corporeal, necessarily incarnated in a living body. This does not mean that sense perception is, as such, the adequate or even the only adequate experience of appearances. I just cannot do without sense perception. The distance, openness, and width, however, that is initially experienced in the experience of something being there – and, accordingly, me being here – can and should be articulated and reflected more distinctly and explicitly, and thus it can become more evident as such. In articulations of that kind, the spatiality of appearances will be affirmed as the enabling of their transcendence. Without transcendence there are no objective appearances. Since objective appearances are the most evident realities, reality, phenomenal reality proves to be spatial. Phenomenological realism is basically a phenomenology of space.