

Christian Lotz, Comment on Zahavi's Paper, SPEP 2002

I. Summary of Zahavi's Claims, Plus Agreements

[Intro, Thanks, etc.]

I would like to deliver my comments according to the following structure: First, I will summarize some of the main points that Zahavi made in his paper; second, I will ask for clarification on one particular point; and third, I will myself attempt to clarify one of the main problematics with which Zahavi is dealing in the paper, namely, the problem of the noema. Here, my comments will attempt to clarify the “double sense” in which Husserl deals with the relation between the referent or object as a part of the noema – i.e., the ‘X’ or substrate – and the ideal, “real” object as the *possible* fulfillment of all experiences that we could have of such an object. It is my suspicion that some commentators miss this important distinction, and thus either interpret the noema as an *epistemological* concept or as an *ontological* one. I will argue, however, that if we follow Husserl, we should adopt a position that is beyond both.¹ Finally, I will conclude my comments by suggesting, in a general formulation, a prospect for reflecting on the problem of absolute consciousness, which follows from Zahavi's claim that we should not apply the distinction between “internal” and “external” to Husserl.

a. Against Dreyfus Interpretation and Sympathy for East Coast Interpretation

As Zahavi mentions in his paper, the debate about Husserl's notion of the noema² is roughly divided into two groups, namely, the West Coast interpretation and the East Coast interpretation, both of which deal with the concept of the noema as Husserl articulates it in his *Ideas I*. The West Coast interpretation, on the one hand, tries to smooth out Husserl's theory so that it can fit into a broader discussion within cognitive psychology. On the other hand, this interpretation further elaborates a Heideggerian critique of Husserl's phenomenology. The latter is

¹ In my view, the best comment on this problem can be found in Bernet's contribution to the problematic. See Bernet 1990. As a non-expert in the debate, I have profited most from this essay.

² Husserl's concept of the noema is (a) first *introduced* in his lectures on *Logic and the Doctrine of Meaning*, given between 1906 and 1908, (b) first *published* in *Ideas I*, (c) commented on by Husserl himself in his *Analysis of Passive Synthesis* (1921), and (d) further elucidated in his *Psychology* lectures (1925).

chiefly presented by the work of Dreyfus. As Zahavi – correctly, in my view – points out in his paper, however, Dreyfus’ interpretation is based on a confusion about the status of the transcendental reduction and its sense, which leads him to advance his thesis that the noema must be interpreted as an *internal* representation and mediation of external reality. For this reason, the West Coast interpretation is best characterized as a “mentalist” approach to understanding Husserl.

By contrast, the East Coast interpretation of Husserl’s concept of the noema tries to avoid transforming Husserl’s theory into a mentalistic approach to understanding consciousness. For these interpreters, the noema is *not* a mediator of the external object and the conscious act; rather, the noema is to be understood as the phenomenologically reduced object, or – to put it in other words – as the object as it appears *for* the phenomenological “I.” On this point, I am in absolute agreement with Zahavi, as I too think that the East Coast interpretation is the only reasonable way to interpret Husserl, given that its interpretation is faithful to *his thought*. I will later point out (again) why the noema should be interpreted as the *object in its how*, or, in other words, as the *world itself as it appears* for the phenomenological eye.

I would now like to turn to a discussion of what I take to be one of Zahavi’s main points.

b. Husserl’s Position is Beyond the East and West Coast Interpretations (Internalism-Externalism Distinction is not Applicable)

In his paper, Zahavi elaborates Husserl’s concept of the noema within a discussion of the distinction between internalism and externalism. I do not want to repeat his convincingly presented and elegant reference to that debate here, however; rather, I want to focus on his claim that Husserl operates *beyond* the distinction between internalism and externalism. I absolutely agree with this claim, for – if we understand the reduction in an appropriate manner – the pure, which is to say, absolute consciousness or transcendental subjectivity, must be conceived as a dimension of consciousness that is unable to be conceptualized by applying the difference between internal or external. For, if we understand the reduction as the attempt to *identify* or *reduce* being to sense, then the ontological distinction becomes a mere *descriptive* distinction, through which the world reveals itself *as* something. This is, in the end, nothing else than what

Husserl refers to as the “noema.” Scholars such as David Carr have called the attitude that conceives being as sense “metaphysical neutrality.”

Notwithstanding my agreement with Zahavi that Husserl operates beyond the distinction between internalism and externalism, I shall point out in the last part of my commentary that although Zahavi’s proposal overcomes certain problems, such as understanding Husserl in a mentalistic way, new problems emerge from his suggestions, especially if we take into account the nature of absolute consciousness as well as the subject-object distinction that is still implied by Husserl’s sustained view of the distinction between noesis and noema, that is to say, the distinction between the how of the intending act and the how of the intended object.

II. Request for Clarification

Before making further comments about the “noema problematic,” however, I am compelled to suggest that a clarification of one of the claims that Dr. Zahavi advances in his paper is in order, especially as the unclarity of his position could be the seed of further confusion. Toward the end of his paper, after having acknowledged that the East Coast interpretation is better than that of the West Coast, Zahavi claims that the East Coast interpretation nonetheless “suffers from one major drawback” (8), namely, its failure to take into account the whole transcendental project that Husserl unfolds in his other writings. According to Zahavi, we must conclude that Husserl’s methodological solipsism leads us to understand a “representationalist character of his thinking.” (8) This claim leaves me somewhat uneasy, however, especially as I am unable to understand why Husserl’s transcendental project, *even if* we take his theory of reduction into account, should lead us to a re-integration of the terms “internal” and “external.” To put it differently, on the one hand Zahavi claims that *we must go beyond* the internalism-externalism jargon, while on the other hand he *uses* the distinction *for a characterization and critique* of Husserl’s project. It would have been more appropriate, it seems - within the context of the overall argument that Zahavi presents - to *uphold* the claim that Husserl’s methodology should be located *beyond* the distinction, and to avoid using this very distinction in his analysis.

III. Additions

In a next step, I would like to point out a further clarification of the noema problematic, which seems to be important for an understanding of Zahavi’s discussion of internalism and external-

ism. It is sure that Husserl's theory of the intentional object can be quite confusing, particularly since, on the one hand, Husserl claims that he does not give up the real transcendence of the object, while, on the other hand, he transforms the "real" transcendence into a "conscious givenness." To put it in other words, for Husserl the reality of the object (or referent) is constituted *as* transcendent.

c. X as the Object in the Noema, but Ideal Object as the Ideal Object of all Experiences

At this point I want to turn to a discussion of the relation between the object and the noema, as understanding this relation is crucial to the project of gaining clarity on Husserl's conception of the noema. In order to understand Husserl's conception of the noema, we must first grasp his definition of the "object-that-is-intended" *in* the noema. As Zahavi – following Drummond – pointed out, the "object-that-is-intended" is itself a fundamental part of the noema, but it cannot be understood as an ontologically different entity. In other words, the noema is not to be conceptualized as a mediator.

Second, we must attempt to grasp Husserl's concept of the object. Husserl mainly deals with reality and actuality in the fourth part of the *Ideas I*, *after* (!) he introduces the noema. It is important that we take into account that according to Husserl, the noemata constitute themselves in the form of an identity. The simple fact that I perceive, imagine, or remember the same thing within a temporal process, constitutes the object of my acts *as identical*. For instance, I can *now* remember how I *yesterday* went to the waterfront in Chicago. Throughout my acts of remembering, I re-present my own acts of perception that I performed yesterday, when I saw the waterfront. "The waterfront" as "the" thematic remains, throughout my different remembered acts, always the same, and it is indeed constituted *as* the same. This identical object must not be identified with its different appearances, however, and therefore it must be defined as transcendent in the Husserlian sense. To put it differently, the *noematic identity* of the object is *beyond its appearances*.

However, the waterfront as an identical, intentional object is different from the *real* object, which is defined as the *infinite* fulfillment of all *possible* experiences that we³ could have

³ If we take Husserl's later theory of intersubjectivity into account, then we have even to claim that the „real“ or „actual“ object should be defined as an ideal object of *all intersubjective experiences*.

of it. Accordingly, we must draw a distinction between the *noematic identity* of the object and the *real identity* of the object (or referent). If we take this distinction between the *noematic identity* of the object and the *ideal reality* (“truth”) of the object into account, then we can easily see that in fact Husserl *never* thought that the noema is an *internal* mediator of the object. After the phenomenological reduction is performed, the noema *is* the object in its how, showing up *as both* identical *and* (ideally) real.⁴

IV. Further Question: What follows from Zahavi’s Claims?

d. Distinction between Subject and World does not Disappear when we Eliminate the Distinction between Internalism and Externalism; Nature of Absolute Consciousness, and the Relation to Heidegger

In his argument against the distinction between internal and external, Zahavi quoted a passage that can be found in Husserl’s Introduction to his *Lectures on Logic* (from 1906-07), in which Husserl claims that the nature of absolute consciousness can be understood neither as psychic nor as physical reality. In other words, the dimension of consciousness that Husserl calls “absolute,” or in his later works, “transcendental subjectivity,” must be conceived as a dimension that is *beyond* these distinctions.⁵ If we take into account that we are no longer allowed to operate with the internal-external distinction, then we should conclude that the transcendental dimension is neither internal nor external, neither psychic nor physical. To be more precise, *if*

⁴ In this connection, the following passage, taken from Husserl’s *Psychology* lecture, is instructive [ad translation here]: “Das wahre Objekt ist identisch dasselbe wie das jeweils intentionale im Eigenwesen vermeinte, das objektive oder an sich wirkliche. Es liegt, gemäß dem eigenen Sinn unseres Bewußtseins von der objektiven Welt und im besonderen des Weltliches erfahrenden Bewußtseins, nicht in einem mystischen Draußen und An-sich – draußen, völlig bewußtseinstranszendent, dem Bewußtseins-Ich prinzipiell unzugänglich – draußen und außerhalb der jeweiligen Erfahrungen und Erkenntnisse -, sondern immerzu in ihnen als das identisch beständig Vermeinte, relativ Bewährte und weiter noch zu Bewährende [...]“ (Hua IX, 431)

we want to accept Zahavi's claim, then we must show that the internal-external distinction, as well as the physical-psychic distinction, is constituted *within* the transcendental dimension. To put it differently, we must show how the transcendental dimension can be interpreted *as* physical, *as* psychic, *as* internal and *as* external. Consequently, we will not only run into the problem of accounting for how *we* are able to separate the transcendental dimension from its self-interpretations, but we will also have to show how *absolute consciousness* is able to do so.

I believe that thus far the phenomenological literature has failed to solve these problems, because – and this is simply a suspicion at this point – scholars are unable to think *speculatively*. To make myself clear, a speculative question would read as follows: How is it possible that we – obviously – can interpret “ourselves” (in the sense of being beyond every distinction) *as* something that has an “inner” side and an “outer” side? How is it possible, in other words, that we are able to interpret ourselves *as* something that *has* undoubtedly an inner and an outer side? We *can* interpret ourselves as psychic beings. As is well known, this part of Husserl's theory is one of the most difficult issues to work through in his thought.⁶ As perhaps a first attempt to work through this problem, in his *Ideas II* Husserl tries to show how the personal dimension, the psychic dimension, and the physical dimension have to be conceived as self-interpretations *within* absolute consciousness.⁷

Moreover, in his *Crisis*, as well as in later manuscripts, Husserl tries to show how in the absolute temporal flow, to which absolute consciousness can be reduced, a basic distinction of otherness can appear. This concept of “otherness” or negativity is presupposed for the distinction between internal and external, since the absolute dimension must *differentiate itself from itself* in such a way that it can be conceived as something that *it is not*, namely as psychic or “internal.” This basic and speculative sense of negativity and difference does not have any

⁵ In another manuscript Husserl nicely writes: „Bewußtsein, das ist der Grundfehler, der den letzten Grundfehler des Psychologismus ausmacht (dem alle Empiristen nicht bloß, sondern auch Rationalisten unterliegen), ist kein psychisches Erlebnis, kein Geflecht psychischer Erlebnisse, keine Sache, kein Anhang (Zustand, Betätigung) an einem Naturobjekt. Wer errettet uns vor der Realisierung des Bewußtseins? Das wäre der Retter der Philosophie, ja der Schöpfer der Philosophie.“ (Ms. A I 36, 193b (1910), quoted after Bernet/Marbach/Kern 1989, 61.)

⁶ And, I might mention here, I think that Heidegger also fails to give us a convincing answer to this question.

⁷ See Hua IV, 105.

place in Husserl's thinking, however, and thus it must be *posited* in order even to attempt to open up a genuine possibility for an absolute dimension in Husserl's philosophy.

However this might be, this consideration leads us to a final question, namely: Does not the claim that we must operate beyond the internal-external distinction force us to pose the following (Heideggerian) question: What is actually the *being* of the transcendental dimension (or transcendental subjectivity) if it is neither subject nor object, neither psychic nor physical, neither internal nor external? To put the question differently: How are we to understand this character that we call *beyond every thing*?