

Against Idealism: Rand and Daubert vs. Husserl's *Ideas I*

With his development of phenomenology, Husserl attempted to devise a pure and rigorous methodology that would allow one to grasp and understand, free of presuppositions, the 'things themselves'. Despite his attempt to avoid the biases and prejudices he saw in all of Western philosophy, Husserl's later transcendental phenomenology, first elaborated in *Ideas*, betrays a troubling idealism and, specifically, Cartesianism. With his transcendental reduction, Husserl commits himself to the metaphysical principle of the primacy of consciousness. In this paper I will explore the problem of Husserl's idealism in the light of the work of two seemingly disparate philosophers: Ayn Rand and Johannes Daubert. A Russian-born novelist-philosopher controversial for her ardent defense of egoism and laissez-faire capitalism, Ayn Rand was a highly original thinker in the Aristotelian tradition but did not to my knowledge have any interest in Husserl's work. Johannes Daubert was a contemporary of Husserl and highly thought of by him, a phenomenologist in his own right, and like many other Munich phenomenologists Daubert criticized Husserl's transcendental reduction. Despite their widely differing backgrounds, there are many commonalities between the philosophies of Rand and Daubert. In particular, both stand Husserl on his head; or at least Rand would have if she had applied her philosophy to Husserl's work. Both Rand and Daubert advocated the primacy of existence, of reality. For Husserl, consciousness is an absolute and the proper starting point for philosophizing; for Rand and Daubert, in contrast, it is reality that is absolute and the proper starting point.

Like Descartes, Husserl begins from the alleged absolute prior certainty of the *cogito*.¹ Rene Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* – I think, therefore I am – represents the foundation of his attempt to prove the absolute certainty of existence via the absolute prior certainty of consciousness. Husserl does not adopt Descartes metaphysical doctrine of mind-body dualism, however.

In Section 30 of *Ideas* Husserl writes:

We emphasize a most important point... I find continually present and standing over against me the one spatio-temporal fact-world to which I myself belong, as do all other men found in it and related in the same way to it. This “fact-world,” as the world already tells us, I find to *be out there*, and also *take it just as it gives itself to me as something that exists out there*. All doubting and rejecting of the data of the natural world leaves standing the *general thesis of the natural standpoint*. “The” world is as fact-world always there; at the most it is at odd points “other” than I supposed, this or that under such names as “illusion,” “hallucination,” and the like, must be *struck out of it*, so to speak; but “it” remains ever, in the sense of the general thesis, a world that has its being out there. To know it more comprehensively, more trustworthily, more perfectly than the naïve lore of experience is able to do, and to solve all the problems of scientific knowledge which offer themselves upon its ground, that is the goal of the *sciences of the natural standpoint*.²

Husserl's work is concerned with “the problem of the subject's cognitive relation to the world, mainly to the world of nature”; with such questions as: “How can reality be given in and to consciousness? How does the identical thing present itself in or through a multiplicity of phenomena? How is true and evident cognition of 'things out there' possible at all?”³ Perception of external reality, of the world, is the foundation of our experiences and all of our knowledge, and therefore of phenomenology as well. Despite this, Husserl thinks that “this perceptual acquaintance with reality cannot legitimate its own contents and is thus not proof against sceptical [sic] doubt. For this reason Husserl

¹ See, for instance, Husserl's *Ideas*, Part II, Chapter 3, Section 28.

² Husserl, p. 96. All italics in passages cited from Husserl are his.

³ Karl Schuhmann and Barry Smith, “Against Idealism: Daubert vs. Husserl's *Ideas I*,” *Review of Metaphysics* 39 (1985), 763-93; <http://ontology.buffalo.edu/smith/articles/againstid.html>; p. 2.

regards the natural attitude, which accepts the claims of perception at face value, as no more than 'the conception of the naïve human being'.⁴

Though the “fact-world” of the natural standpoint (or commonsense realism) is the starting point for pre-phenomenological thought for Husserl, he claims that it cannot be an unquestionable starting point for truly rigorous and scientific philosophy, that is, from the point of view of phenomenology. Husserl's transcendental reduction is meant to bracket out the natural standpoint and its “fact-world” by not assuming its veracity. In other words, it is to doubt the natural standpoint and submit from the indubitability of the cogito everything else to pure and presuppositionless scrutiny. In section 31, we learn that unlike Descartes, whose purpose was to set up “an absolutely indubitable sphere of Being,” Husserl intends “that this attempt to doubt everything should serve us *only as a device of method*.”⁵ The general thesis of the natural standpoint cannot be done away with, it “still remains there like the bracketed in the bracket, like the disconnected outside the connexional system[,]” we simply “*make 'no use' of it*.”⁶ Husserl makes clear, however, that this bracketing should not be confused with “*assuming*” or “*taking for granted*”; rather, we must withhold judgment.⁷

The external fact-world, then, is dubitable. Rather than a science of facts, which is a science that studies the contingent fact-world, Husserl seeks to establish a science of essence, a science that traces the logically necessary connections between the essential nature of things. To do this, he thinks he has to bracket out existence (or reality) and study consciousness in its absolute purity as well as that which is found to be immanent to it. Consciousness for Husserl, and for Rand and Daubert as well, is characterized by

⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵ Husserl, p. 97.

⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

⁷ Ibid., p. 99.

intentionality: consciousness is always consciousness *of something*. Of the wide sensory field that presents itself to the subject, whenever his consciousness selects out or focuses on a particular thing or attribute it directs itself towards an intentional object. Herein we find the first step down the road of idealism for Husserl: he makes a sharp distinction between the intentional object (the real object), which is transcendent to consciousness, and the content (noema or perceptual sense/meaning) of consciousness, which is immanent to consciousness. Daubert rightly interprets this “as signifying a doubling of the object pole of the perceptual act.”⁸ As a prime example, Husserl writes:

The *tree plain and simple*, the thing in nature, is as different as it can be from this *perceived tree as such*, which as perceptual meaning belongs to the perception, and that inseparably. The tree plain and simple can burn away, resolve itself into its chemical elements, and so forth. But the meaning – the meaning of *this* perception, something that belongs necessarily to its essence – cannot burn away; it has no chemical elements, no forces, no real properties.⁹

In this way does Husserl reduce the significance of reality, by relegating to it the mere status of dubitability and contingency. In contrast, he grants to consciousness and its contents absolute indubitability and essential necessity. Reality is not only dubitable and contingent, it is dependent upon consciousness! Husserl writes:

Reality, that of the thing taken singly as also that of the whole world, essentially lacks independence. [...] Reality is not itself something absolute, binding itself to another only in a secondary way, it is, absolutely speaking, nothing at all, it has no 'absolute essence' whatsoever, it has the essentiality of something which in principle is *only* intentional, *only* known, consciously presented as an appearance.”¹⁰

Thus, Husserl thinks that in nullifying reality methodologically we lose nothing. Daubert and Rand disagree, however. Daubert is plainly responding to Husserl's remarks about

⁸ S&S, section 2, p. 3.

⁹ Husserl, p. 240.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 139-140.

the tree quoted above when he writes: “Precisely that which I perceive and which is given to me by way of perception is real and has its place in reality; it has its chemical structure, it burns, etc. There is nothing behind it.”¹¹ Rand too rejects Husserl's sharp distinction between the intentional object and the content of consciousness: “Directly or indirectly, every phenomenon of consciousness is derived from one's awareness of the external world. Some object, i.e., some *content*, is involved in every state of consciousness.”¹²

Rand and Daubert's denial of Husserl's doubling of the object pole essentially undermines the very basis upon which the transcendental reduction rests. There is no “self-subsisting layer of senses whose ties to reality could be loosened or even – in a reduction – dispensed with entirely[.]”¹³ Moreover, Rand and Daubert reverse the direction of dependence between reality and consciousness; it is consciousness that is dependent upon reality for its existence and elucidation. Indeed, it is consciousness that has no independent existence of its own. For both Rand and Daubert, consciousness is a function.

Rand:

Existence exists – and the act of grasping that statement implies two corollary axioms: that something exists which one perceives and that one exists possessing consciousness, consciousness being the faculty of perceiving that which exists.

If nothing exists, there can be no consciousness: a consciousness with nothing to be conscious of is a contradiction in terms. A consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms: before it could identify itself as consciousness, it had to be conscious of something. If that

¹¹ S&S, section 2, p. 3. Daubert's own words.

¹² Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, expanded second edition edited by Harry Binswanger and Leonard Peikoff, (New York: Penguin Books, 1990 [1966]), p. 29. Emphasis in original. See also p. 31.

¹³ S&S, section 3, p. 4

which you claim to perceive does not exist, what you possess is not consciousness.

To exist is to be something, as distinguished from the nothing of non-existence, it is to be an entity of a specific nature made of specific attributes. [...] *A is A*. A thing is itself. [...] Existence is Identity, Consciousness is Identification.¹⁴

Consciousness, as a state of awareness, is not a passive state, but an active process[.]¹⁵

[M]an is an indivisible entity, an integrated unit of two attributes: of matter and consciousness[.]¹⁶

Daubert:

Consciousness is not a being in itself but rather something which functions only in something else and in which something else functions in its turn. The functioning being of consciousness has no special existence of its own and is nothing real.

[T]hat in which reality shows itself is nothing existing by itself but only a function directed towards reality.

Consciousness taken as act, [i.e.] insofar as it functions, has in contrast to the object no existence of its own. Only when I reflect on it does it cease to function and seem to have a being of its own. This resembles the problem of the 'and'. Does it receive a being of its own in virtue of the changed or wholly new position we take up in thematising it? At this point, Husserl makes his fundamental mistake. This positing, which renders consciousness thematic, thereby reinterprets it in the direction of a peculiar being which is alien to it, or of a form or an achievement made up of real components of mental processes. The static character which thematising dictates is reinterpreted as a static existence.¹⁷

Schuhmann and Smith argue that “Daubert thereby goes beyond Husserl in affirming the inadequacy of any Aristotelian conception of consciousness in terms of beams or rays emitted by a special 'ego-substance'. Consciousness itself cannot be grasped in terms of this conception, because it is nothing in front of us, nothing on which the beam can fall,

¹⁴ Rand, “Galt's Speech,” *For the New Intellectual*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), pp. 124-5. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵ Rand (1990), p. 5.

¹⁶ Rand (1961), p. 129.

¹⁷ S&S, section 3, p. 4. Daubert's own words.

and, with this, nothing substantial.”¹⁸ Thus, consciousness functions in a normal way only when it is directed toward an object; consciousness is always and can only be understood as consciousness *of*. To treat it as an object, as a categorematic substantive, as one does when one holds that it can be separated from reality, is to modify it in the same manner as laid out by Husserl himself in his fourth Logical Investigation.

For Rand and Daubert, then, consciousness is inextricably entangled with reality. Consciousness can only be given a kind of conceptual pseudo-being when its normal function is interrupted by “imaginative or hypothetical thinking, in neutralization or reduction,”¹⁹ but even in these modifications the tie to reality remains, albeit in the background of awareness so to speak. This is why Rand writes: “*Directly or indirectly*, every phenomenon of consciousness is derived from one's awareness of the external world.”²⁰ Daubert makes a stipulation akin to the argument given by Ayn Rand in the block quote above: “Without a persistent reality no cognition would be possible at all.”²¹ For the phenomenological elucidation of consciousness to be possible direct awareness of reality must be present as the foundation in every act of reflection. Daubert further remarks: “‘One cannot derive any reality whatsoever from pure consciousness’, i.e., from acts of second order taken alone.”²²

It is interesting that both Rand and Daubert use the term “direct awareness” to describe the pre-cognitive awareness of reality. Before delving into the roots of intentional consciousness in direct awareness of reality, it will be useful to compare Daubert and Husserl on the relationship between hyletic data and the thing itself as well

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., section 4, p. 5

²⁰ Rand (1990), p. 29. Emphasis mine.

²¹ S&S, section 4, p. 5. Daubert's own words.

²² Ibid. Daubert's own words are in single quotation marks.

as to see if there is an analogue to Daubert's critique here in Rand's work. According to Husserl, a perceptual act does not have to have a real, transcendent object at the other end of the ego-pole. Schuhmann and Smith remark:

this means the pure ego acquires the status of an absolute substance, reality that of a mere dependent accident. Husserl's awarding an absolute status to pure consciousness and a relative status to the world of objects is thereby, as he himself admits, a reversal of 'the sense usually expressed in speaking of what is' (93). As Daubert insists, however, the sense of 'reality' and 'existence' becomes established in everyday language, prior to any philosophizing, and it cannot be the task of phenomenology to overthrow this sense but only to elucidate it: phenomenology must be 'inner clarification of the given' not criticism in the sense of 'theory from above'.²³

Husserl's insistence on this reversal and his doubling/separation of the object pole of intentional acts commit him to an idealism of the traditional sort, despite his protestations. For Husserl, hyletic data (the data of sense-perception), from which are produced noemata (the perceptual sense/meaning of the transcendental object), are immanent to consciousness. To Husserl's statement that "all being is either pure consciousness or a being constituted by pure consciousness," Schuhmann and Smith relate Daubert's objection:

...if transcendence is brought about by a progressive bestowal of sense, then 'the world would become progressively constituted – it would develop in the very process of cognition itself'. [...] Alluding to Wilhelm Windelband's famous definition of idealism as 'the dissolution of the experiential world into processes of consciousness', Daubert says that Husserl's idealism 'finally solves the enigma of enigmas (consciousness "of") by means of an ontological dissolution of one reality into another'.²⁴

Further, to Husserl's claim that "hyletic data are not perceived in the actual perceptual process but only become accessible through reflection, thereby undergoing 'essential changes'," Schuhmann and Smith relate Daubert's objection "that it is false

²³ Ibid., section 5, p. 6. The embedded Husserl quotation is to a translation I don't have access to.

²⁴ Ibid. Daubert's own words are in single quotation marks.

phenomenology to suppose that hyletic data are seized upon by reflective acts, for the later ‘always seize only entities which are already formed and grasped.’ [...] ‘Hyletic data cannot be grasped and interpreted, for in that case they would be object-like and not at all hyletic data lacking in intentional unity.’²⁵

Daubert offers a different description of hyletic data from that of Husserl and along lines similar to that of Rand. For Daubert and Rand, hyletic data are located “in the transcendent sphere of objects.”²⁶ For Daubert, they become thematic through a different sort of analysis than that of Husserl’s, they are merely abstracted from genuine givenness: “Hyletic data are not themselves something given... They can be abstracted only as component parts of a givenness which always contains other *Formelemente* too.”²⁷ This abstraction from component parts of a givenness is strikingly parallel to Rand’s theory of abstraction. For instance, she writes: “The act of isolation involved [in concept-formation] is a process of *abstraction*: i.e., a selective mental focus that *takes out* or separates a certain aspect of reality from all others (e.g., isolates a certain attribute from the entities possessing it, or a certain action from the entities performing it, etc.).”²⁸

Daubert adopts Husserl’s use of the term adumbrations to refer to the perspectival nature of perception. Rand, too, while her terminology is distinctly different from that of phenomenologists, recognizes the perspectival and agent-relative nature of perception and knowledge, thus the incredible importance she repeatedly stresses for context-keeping. For both Rand and Daubert, adumbrations and appearances result from the relationship between subject and object, between perceiver and perceived, and are not

²⁵ Ibid., p. 7. For the source of the summary of Husserl’s claim, see *Ideas*, Section 68, p. 264. Daubert’s own words are in single quotation marks.

²⁶ Ibid. Daubert’s words.

²⁷ Ibid. Daubert’s words.

²⁸ Rand (1990), p. 10. Emphasis in original.

component parts of acts. They depend only upon “the actual presence of a cognizing subject in a field of objects.”²⁹ This is just the way that perception automatically and necessarily functions.

It is now necessary to turn to the role of “direct awareness” of reality in explaining reality’s indubitability and primacy. Their accounts differ somewhat, but the similarity between Rand and Daubert is nevertheless striking. For Daubert, direct awareness is a pre-cognitive mode of experience, the original mode of consciousness in which reality is first disclosed. This direct awareness, which he calls *Innesein*,

underlies perception (provides its foundation), and furnishes the feature which distinguishes it from experiences that are subjected to the neutrality modification. The ‘immediate access’ to reality granted by *Innesein* gives ‘immediate evidence’ of the world and produces ‘immediate certainty’. It contains ‘an absolutely certain awareness’ not only of my own real existence but also of ‘externally perceived reality in its being (its reality)’.³⁰

“Reality is given not in perception but in the direct awareness on which it rests.”³¹

Daubert distinguishes direct awareness from cognition proper, which is the aspect of consciousness that differentiates, abstracts, and negates. Cognition proper is intentional, relational, and capable of reinterpretation, error, and doubt. “Physical reality can never be cancelled by conflicting cognitions. A single object, it is true, can turn out not to be real, but only with regard to the standard of reality itself”; otherwise, how could we say that “this or that is really an illusion”?³² In other words, the very possibility of error, doubt, and hallucination presupposes a persistent and indubitable reality as the standard of cognition.

²⁹ S&S, section 5, p. 8. Daubert’s own words.

³⁰ Ibid., section 8, p. 11. Daubert’s own words are in single quotation marks.

³¹ Ibid., section 9, p. 13.

³² Ibid., section 8, p. 11. Daubert’s own words. Schuhmann and Smith argue that direct awareness for Daubert is in some sense prior to the dualism of subject and object.

Rand, at least to my knowledge, offers a more differentiated conception of consciousness. Rand identifies three levels of man's consciousness: the level of sensations, the perceptual, and the conceptual. Rand essentially equates "direct perception" and "direct awareness," using these to refer to the perceptual level of consciousness. She also mentions that "[d]iscriminated awareness begins on the level of percepts." This difference with Daubert is explained by Rand's argument that "epistemologically, the base of all of man's knowledge is the *perceptual* stage." This is because sensations, "as such, are not retained in man's memory, nor is man able to experience a pure isolated sensation"; and a "percept is a group of sensations automatically retained and integrated by the brain of a living organism. It is in the form of percepts that man grasps the evidence of his senses and apprehends reality." According to Rand, the "knowledge of sensations as components of percepts is not direct, it is acquired by man much later: it is a scientific, *conceptual* discovery."³³ Rand does make a brief parenthetical remark, however, that brings out the similarity of her account with Daubert's:

It may be supposed that the concept "existent" is implicit even on the level of sensations – if and to the extent that a consciousness is able to discriminate on that level. A sensation is a sensation of *something*, as distinguished from the *nothing* of the preceding and succeeding moments. A sensation does not tell man *what* exists, but only *that* it exists.³⁴

So, for Rand too (undiscriminated) direct awareness of reality underlies perception. Rand is just here more concerned with the basic elements consciously graspable by man for use in concept-formation. For Rand it is the conceptual level of consciousness that is unique, so far as we have thus far been able to determine, to man. It is the conceptual level that is

³³ Rand (1990), p. 5. Emphasis in original.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6. Emphasis in original.

capable of abstraction, of differentiation and integration, of judgment, error, and doubt. Like Daubert, Rand argues that doubt, error, and hallucination only make sense with a persistent and indubitable reality as the standard of cognition. One can doubt individual things that we experience, but one cannot coherently doubt existence (or reality) as such.

Husserl seems to want to overcome the perceived weakness of perception, which is that it derives its data from the alleged dubitability of the world. But the value of phenomenology should not be measured by the degree to which it overcomes perception but rather by its capacity to remain faithful to the source that makes it possible.³⁵ The very possibility of phenomenology, as we have seen, presupposes the indubitability of a persistent reality as the foundation and standard of cognition. It is existence that is primary and absolute, not consciousness. Our contact with and direct awareness of the persistent, absolute, and indubitable reality is derived from our very bodily existence and movement in that reality, from the most fundamental and basic level of sense-perception, and consciousness is inextricably entangled with it. Consciousness does not exist except insofar as it is conscious of something. Only when I am conscious of something can I then become aware that *I* am conscious of *it*: *it* exists and *I* know it. Existence is primary. And it (or reality) in general as well as the essential nature of the things themselves provide the standard of cognition by which we can arrive at nonarbitrary knowledge, correct errors, etc. A is A: A thing is self. In Rand's words, the Law of Identity is a corollary of the axiomatic concept of existence. Consciousness is the faculty of perceiving that which exists; it is identification. The apodicticity of these three axiomatic concepts – Existence, Identity, and Consciousness – need not be proven, indeed, cannot be proven *except* by the method of negative demonstration: careful examination reveals

³⁵ S&S, section 2, p. 3.

that one cannot do without these concepts and that any attempt to refute them necessarily involves one in a performative contradiction because their very truth is presupposed in the attempted refutation. Husserl fell into such a performative contradiction. Rand and Daubert provide the explanation of why this is the case and also how the indubitable, persistent reality provides the foundation and standard of cognition. Although there are likely many differences in their respective philosophies, the similarity between Rand and Daubert's metaphysical and epistemological positions revealed in this essay are striking. It is unfortunate that exceedingly little of Daubert's work has been published in any language, much less in English, thus far.