Husserl’s Refutation of (Psychologistic) Idealism

By

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Abstract

To call Edmund Husserl an idealist is somewhat misleading. Like Kant before him, Husserl dedicated a significant portion of his writings to arguing that his transcendent position does not devolve into the metaphysical forms of idealism which had manifested in the early modern period. Unfortunately, as it was with Kant, Husserl was largely unsuccessful in his efforts, and these elaborations on transcendental-phenomenological idealism became the source of more confusion than clarity. The “Refutation of Idealism” in Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason [B274-279] attempts to distinguish transcendental idealism from the dogmatic and confused positions of Descartes and Berkeley. While Husserl understood his version of transcendental idealism to be distinct from that of Kant, there is general agreement that Husserl needs his own “refutation of idealism” in order to combat the threat of solipsism that emerges in Ideas I (1913). There is no consensus as to whether or not Husserl successfully presents one. Bachelard (1957) identifies a Husserlian “refutation of idealism” in Formal and Transcendental Logic (1929), while Alweiss (2003) and De Warren (2009) locate it in the Cartesian Meditations (1931). In this paper, I will attempt to reconstruct the main part and pillar of Husserl’s refutation of (psychologistic) idealism as it is presented in Part II of the Formal and Transcendental Logic, particularly in Chapters 1, 5 and 6. I will then argue that the “refutation of solipsism” in the Cartesian Meditations is an extension of the refutation of idealism already presented in Formal and Transcendental Logic, and that the two texts ought to be read in conjunction. The hope is that this will give us a better understanding of the nature of Husserl’s transcendental-phenomenological idealism, with an emphasis on how it differs from traditional forms of idealism, particularly with respect to its treatment of the external world.