

Intentionality, constitution, and the suspension of the in-itself: Husserlian critique of the metaphysical supremacy of the object and the subject

Intencionalidad, constitución y la suspensión de lo en sí: la crítica husserliana a la supremacía metafísica del objeto y del sujeto

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ABSTRACT

In *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Husserl maintains that the fundamental errors of epistemology originate in an illegitimate *metábasis* between ontological regions, as occurs in psychologism, anthropologism, and biologism. In contrast to these positions, phenomenology proposes a radical purification of experience through phenomenological reduction, which makes it possible to access the transcendental region of consciousness and its intentional dynamics of constitution. From this perspective, the appearing of beings does not necessarily presuppose the existence of an in-itself

object independent of all experience, without thereby denying it. Rather, the hypothesis of an absolutely transcendent reality is bracketed as an excess beyond possible knowledge. The world and objectivity do not present themselves as self-sufficient realities nor as mere subjective projections, but as correlates constituted within the intentionality of consciousness. In this way, Husserl does not simply invert the traditional hierarchy between subject and object; instead, he dissolves their purported metaphysical supremacy, showing that there is no sense of world or objectivity without the subjective dimension, nor transcendental subjectivity without objective correlation. This position constitutes a profound critique of traditional metaphysics and

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redefines the conditions of possibility for a rigorous science of experience.

KEY WORDS

Transcendental phenomenology; intentionality; constitution; natural attitude; phenomenological reduction; in-itself object; transcendental subjectivity; Husserl; traditional metaphysics

RESUMEN

En Ideas relativas a una fenomenología pura y a una filosofía fenomenológica, Husserl sostiene que los errores fundamentales de la epistemología tienen su origen en una metátesis ilegítima entre regiones ontológicas, tal como ocurre en el psicologismo, el antropologismo y el biologismo. En contraste con estas posturas, la fenomenología propone una purificación radical de la experiencia mediante la reducción fenomenológica, lo que permite acceder a la región trascendental de la conciencia y a su dinámica intencional de constitución. Desde esta perspectiva, la aparición de los seres no presupone necesariamente

la existencia de un objeto en sí mismo independiente de toda experiencia, sin por ello negarla. Más bien, la hipótesis de una realidad absolutamente trascendente se pone entre paréntesis como un exceso más allá del conocimiento posible. El mundo y la objetividad no se presentan como realidades autosuficientes ni como meras proyecciones subjetivas, sino como correlatos constituidos dentro de la intencionalidad de la conciencia. De esta manera, Husserl no se limita a invertir la jerarquía tradicional entre sujeto y objeto; en cambio, disuelve su supuesta supremacía metafísica, mostrando que no hay sentido del mundo o de la objetividad sin la dimensión subjetiva, ni subjetividad trascendental sin correlación objetiva. Esta posición constituye una profunda crítica de la metafísica tradicional y redefine las condiciones de posibilidad para una ciencia rigurosa de la experiencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Fenomenología trascendental; intencionalidad; constitución; actitud natural; reducción fenomenológica; objeto en sí; subjetividad trascendental; Husserl; metafísica tradicional

Introduction

One of Edmund Husserl's central claims in *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* is that the most persistent errors in epistemology arise from an illegitimate *metátesis* – a mistaken transition between fundamentally different regions of being and inquiry (Husserl, 1983). Psychologism, anthropologism, and biologism exemplify this error insofar as they reduce questions concerning the validity and sense of knowledge to empirical facts about the human subject. Against such reductions, Husserl argues that a rigorous science of consciousness must suspend all naïve ontological commitments that characterize the natural attitude, including the uncritical assumption of a world existing independently of consciousness (Husserl, 1983).

The phenomenological reduction does not deny the existence of the world, but rather brackets the thesis of its independent being in order to investigate how objects are given in experience. What is thereby disclosed is the intentional structure of consciousness: every act of consciousness is consciousness *of* something, and objectivity itself is constituted through these intentional correlations (Husserl, 1983). Immediate “real” objects of perception and ideal objects mediated by signs are not opposed realms but belong to different modes of givenness within intentional life. The question of the “thing in itself,” understood as a reality wholly outside possible experience, is thus neither affirmed nor rejected; it is methodologically suspended as exceeding the bounds of phenomenological inquiry (Zahavi, 2003).

This suspension has significant metaphysical consequences. Husserl does not simply replace the supremacy of the object with the supremacy of the subject, as is often assumed in traditional interpretations of transcendental philosophy. Rather, he dissolves the hierarchical opposition between subject and object by showing that neither has sense in isolation. There is no world without subjectivity, but neither is transcendental subjectivity conceivable without its correlate of objectivity and worldhood (Husserl, 1983; Moran, 2000). In this respect, phenomenology constitutes a radical critique of traditional metaphysics, which sought to ground reality either in an objective realm independent of experience or in a foundational subject detached from the world.

While *Ideas I* focuses primarily on the transcendental region of consciousness and the formal structures of constitution abstracted from the material world, Husserl later extends this analysis in *Ideas II* to include the constitution of nature, the body, and intersubjectivity (Husserl, 1989). Taken together, these analyses suggest that phenomenology does not abolish realism but reconfigures it, replacing metaphysical claims about an absolute in-itself with a disciplined investigation of how meaning, objectivity, and worldhood arise within the horizon of possible experience.

Contemporary scholarship on Husserlian phenomenology has extensively debated the status of objectivity, realism, and the role of transcendental subjectivity, particularly in relation to the traditional metaphysical opposition between subject and object. Early post-Husserlian interpretations often characterized phenomenology as a

form of transcendental idealism that privileges the constituting subject, thereby risking a collapse into subjectivism (Ströker, 1987). However, subsequent research has nuanced this reading by emphasizing the relational and non-hierarchical nature of Husserl's account of constitution.

A significant line of interpretation focuses on the notion of constitution not as a creative act of a sovereign subject, but as a descriptive analysis of how meaning and objectivity emerge within intentional structures. Scholars such as Carr (1999) argue that Husserl's transcendental turn does not negate the reality of the world but seeks to clarify the conditions under which the world is experienced as meaningful and objective. From this perspective, phenomenology refrains from making metaphysical claims about a mind-independent reality while simultaneously resisting reductive empiricism.

Another influential debate concerns Husserl's relation to realism. Some commentators have proposed the notion of a "phenomenological realism," according to which Husserl neither endorses naïve realism nor radical idealism (Drummond, 1990). Instead, objectivity is understood as intrinsically bound to horizons of possible experience and intersubjective validation. The world is not constituted arbitrarily by an isolated ego but emerges within a shared framework of intentionality that already presupposes others and communal sense-formation.

The role of the natural attitude has also been a focal point of recent scholarship. Rather than viewing it as a philosophical error to be eliminated, several authors emphasize its indispensability for everyday and scientific practices (Sokolowski, 2000). The phenomenological reduction does not destroy the natural attitude but temporarily suspends its ontological commitments in order to reveal the structures that make such commitments intelligible in the first place. This interpretive shift has helped clarify that Husserl's project is methodological rather than doctrinal.

Furthermore, studies on later Husserl have highlighted the importance of embodiment and passivity in challenging the image of an all-constituting transcendental ego. Analyses of genetic and generative phenomenology show that subjectivity itself is shaped by habituality, temporality, and bodily experience, thereby undermining any claim to

absolute subjective supremacy (Steinbock, 1995). These developments suggest a continuity between Husserl's early transcendental analyses and his later concern with worldliness and history.

Overall, the state of the art reflects a broad consensus that Husserl's phenomenology does not establish a hierarchy in which either subject or object enjoys metaphysical primacy. Instead, it articulates a correlationist framework in which meaning, objectivity, and worldhood arise through intentional relations that cannot be reduced to either pole independently. This interpretive orientation situates Husserl's project as a critical alternative to traditional metaphysics rather than a reiteration of its foundational oppositions.

The secondary literature on Husserl's phenomenology has developed along several interconnected lines, particularly concerning intentionality, the phenomenological reduction, and the problem of realism. Early systematic reconstructions of Husserl's project emphasized the methodological novelty of phenomenology as a descriptive science of consciousness rather than a speculative metaphysics (Gurwitsch, 1964). From this standpoint, phenomenology aims to clarify the structural features of experience without advancing ontological claims about the ultimate nature of reality.

A recurring theme in the literature is the interpretation of the phenomenological reduction as a suspension (*Epoche*) rather than a negation of the world. Føllesdal (1988) stresses that the reduction brackets existential commitments while preserving the full descriptive richness of experience, thereby allowing phenomenology to analyze how objectivity is constituted in and through intentional acts. This reading has been influential in countering interpretations that assimilate Husserl's position to classical idealism.

Another important strand of scholarship examines the distinction between noesis and noema and its implications for the objectivity of meaning. Authors such as Smith and McIntyre (1982) argue that Husserl's theory of intentionality provides a robust account of how objects can be experienced as transcendent to consciousness while remaining accessible only through meaningful appearances. The noematic structure of experience secures objectivity without invoking a metaphysically independent realm beyond all possible experience.

The problem of realism has also been addressed through analyses of horizontality and fulfillment. According to Bernet, Kern, and Marbach (1993), Husserl's account of perceptual horizons shows that objects are always given as more than what is currently perceived, thereby grounding their experienced transcendence. This surplus of sense does not point to a noumenal object in the Kantian sense, but to an open-ended structure of possible verification within experience.

Recent literature has further emphasized the role of intersubjectivity in safeguarding objectivity against solipsistic interpretations. Schutz's phenomenologically informed social theory, though not strictly Husserlian, demonstrates how shared meaning and typification contribute to the constitution of a common world (Schutz, 1967). Such analyses support the view that objectivity is neither purely subjective nor purely objective, but emerges within intersubjective practices and communal horizons of sense.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that Husserl's phenomenology offers a non-metaphysical account of objectivity grounded in intentional correlation, horizontality, and intersubjectivity. The literature consistently highlights that phenomenology neither affirms nor denies the existence of a world in itself, but rather reframes philosophical inquiry around the conditions under which meaning and objectivity are given in experience.

Despite extensive scholarship on Husserl's phenomenology, persistent interpretive tensions remain regarding the status of objectivity and the role of transcendental subjectivity. In particular, Husserl's critique of psychologism and his suspension of the "thing in itself" are still frequently read either as a covert form of subjective idealism or as an implicit denial of realism. This ambiguity has led to conflicting accounts of whether phenomenology establishes a hierarchy between subject and object or instead overcomes this metaphysical opposition. A clearer conceptual articulation of Husserl's notion of constitution is therefore required in order to assess its implications for objectivity without reverting to traditional metaphysical frameworks.

How does Husserl's concept of intentional constitution reconfigure the relation between subjectivity and objectivity without granting metaphysical supremacy to either pole?

Husserl's phenomenological account of intentional constitution dissolves the traditional hierarchy between subject and object by conceiving objectivity as a correlate of transcendental subjectivity, such that neither subjective experience nor objective worldhood possesses metaphysical primacy independently of their intentional relation.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative, theoretical-methodological approach grounded in transcendental phenomenology. Rather than aiming at empirical generalization, the method is designed to clarify conceptual structures and conditions of possibility underlying the relation between subjectivity and objectivity in Husserlian phenomenology. Such an approach is appropriate when the research objective is philosophical elucidation rather than causal explanation or hypothesis testing in the empirical sciences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The primary methodological procedure consists of a systematic phenomenological analysis of key Husserlian texts, guided by the principles of *epoché* and reduction. Following Giorgi's (2009) articulation of phenomenological method, the analysis brackets presuppositions derived from naturalistic, psychological, and metaphysical frameworks in order to focus exclusively on the structures of meaning as they are given in experience. This does not entail a denial of the world's existence, but a suspension of ontological commitments that are irrelevant to the descriptive task.

Textual analysis proceeds through close, interpretive reading aimed at identifying intentional structures, modes of givenness, and constitutive relations between consciousness and objectivity. Particular attention is paid to shifts in Husserl's methodological orientation, especially the distinction between static and genetic analyses, in order to avoid a reified or overly formal conception of transcendental subjectivity (van Manen, 2014). Passages are examined in their systematic context rather than treated as isolated doctrinal claims.

To enhance methodological rigor, the analysis follows an iterative process of thematic clarification. Conceptual units—such as intentionality, constitution, and horizonality—are first described at a descriptive level and then examined in terms of their methodological function within phenomenology as a science of experience. This

strategy aligns with contemporary qualitative research standards that emphasize transparency, reflexivity, and coherence between research questions and analytic procedures (Maxwell, 2012).

Finally, the study maintains a clear distinction between phenomenological description and metaphysical interpretation. Interpretive claims are restricted to what can be justified through phenomenological evidence and methodological consistency, thereby avoiding speculative extensions beyond the limits of possible experience. This methodological restraint ensures that the analysis remains faithful to Husserl’s project of establishing phenomenology as a rigorous, non-dogmatic philosophical science.

Results

The results are organized into three analytical tables that synthesize the outcomes of the phenomenological analysis. Each table corresponds to a core dimension of the hypothesis: the rejection of metaphysical supremacy, the role of intentional constitution, and the reconfiguration of objectivity.

Table 1. Phenomenological Status of Subject and Object after Reduction

Analytical Dimension	Descriptive Result	Implication for the Hypothesis
Subjectivity	Identified as transcendental, not empirical or psychological	Subjectivity does not function as a metaphysically dominant entity
Objectivity	Given only as correlate of intentional acts	Objectivity lacks independent metaphysical primacy
Relation	Correlational, not hierarchical	Supports the hypothesis of non-supremacy between poles

Table 1 shows that, following the phenomenological reduction, neither subject nor object appears as ontologically self-sufficient. Subjectivity is not elevated to an absolute foundation, nor is objectivity treated as independently given. This directly supports the hypothesis by demonstrating that intentional correlation replaces metaphysical hierarchy.

Table 2. Modes of Constitution and Their Epistemic Function

Mode of Constitution	Phenomenological Description	Relation to Hypothesis
Perceptual constitution	Object given through profiles and horizons	Objectivity depends on intentional fulfillment
Signitive constitution	Ideal objects mediated by meaning	Objectivity is not reducible to immediacy
Horizontality	Object exceeds any single act	Preserves transcendence without metaphysical realism

Table 2 indicates that objectivity emerges through multiple modes of constitution, all of which presuppose intentional activity. At the same time, horizontality ensures that objects are experienced as exceeding subjective acts. This confirms the hypothesis by showing how objectivity is constituted without being subjectively fabricated.

Table 3. Metaphysical Consequences of Intentional Correlation

Classical Metaphysical Claim	Phenomenological Result	Hypothesis Assessment
Subject as ultimate ground	Rejected through reduction	Hypothesis confirmed
Object as independent in-itself	Bracketed, not denied	Hypothesis confirmed
Hierarchy between subject/object	Dissolved into correlation	Hypothesis strongly supported

Table 3 demonstrates that phenomenology neither affirms nor negates traditional metaphysical claims, but suspends them methodologically. The dissolution of hierarchical structure between subject and object directly corroborates the hypothesis that Husserl's account avoids metaphysical supremacy on either side.

Across all three tables, the findings consistently support the hypothesis that Husserl's concept of intentional constitution dissolves the traditional hierarchy between subject and object. Objectivity is shown to be neither independent of consciousness nor reducible to it, but constituted as a correlate within intentional life. The results thus validate the hypothesis at a conceptual and methodological level, reinforcing phenomenology as a non-metaphysical framework for understanding objectivity.

Discussion

The results of this study provide strong support for the hypothesis that Husserl's notion of intentional constitution dissolves the traditional metaphysical hierarchy between subject and object without granting supremacy to either pole. The tabulated findings demonstrate that phenomenological analysis consistently replaces ontological prioritization with a correlational framework in which subjectivity and objectivity are mutually implicative. This outcome aligns with interpretations that understand Husserl's transcendental turn as methodological rather than metaphysical in intent.

First, the absence of metaphysical primacy attributed to transcendental subjectivity challenges long-standing critiques that equate phenomenology with subjective idealism. As several commentators have noted, Husserl's transcendental ego is not an entity within the world nor a substantial ground from which reality is produced, but a functional unity revealed through methodological reflection (Brough, 1991). The results reinforce this view by showing that subjectivity is disclosed only insofar as it is engaged in intentional relations, not as an autonomous source of being.

Second, the findings clarify the phenomenological status of objectivity. By demonstrating that objects are constituted through perceptual, signitive, and horizontal structures, the analysis confirms that objectivity is neither a mere projection of consciousness nor an independently existing in-itself accessible beyond experience. This supports readings that emphasize phenomenology as a critique of both naïve realism and classical metaphysical realism (Heidegger, 1988). The bracketing of the object in itself does not amount to its negation but reflects a disciplined refusal to exceed the limits of phenomenological evidence.

Moreover, the emphasis on horizontality plays a decisive role in preserving the experienced transcendence of objects. The results show that objects are always given as exceeding any particular act of consciousness, thereby maintaining their objectivity without recourse to metaphysical postulates. This resonates with interpretations that locate Husserl's originality precisely in his account of transcendence-in-immanence, where objects are experienced as other than consciousness while remaining accessible only through it (Held, 2003).

The dissolution of subject-object hierarchy also has significant implications for Husserl's critique of traditional metaphysics. Rather than reversing the metaphysical order by privileging the subject, phenomenology suspends the very framework that demands such prioritization. As a result, metaphysical debates concerning ultimate grounds of reality are transformed into methodological questions about sense, meaning, and givenness (Tengelyi, 2012). The findings thus support the view that phenomenology inaugurates a post-metaphysical orientation without collapsing into relativism.

Finally, these results contribute to broader discussions about the relevance of phenomenology for contemporary philosophy. By articulating a non-hierarchical account of subjectivity and objectivity, Husserlian phenomenology offers conceptual resources for current debates in epistemology and ontology that seek to move beyond entrenched dichotomies. The correlational model evidenced in this study suggests that phenomenology remains a viable framework for rethinking objectivity without abandoning rigor or critical restraint.

Conclusion

This study has argued that Husserl's phenomenological project, as articulated through the concepts of intentionality, reduction, and constitution, offers a systematic dissolution of the traditional metaphysical hierarchy between subject and object. By suspending the ontological commitments of the natural attitude, phenomenology reframes philosophical inquiry around the conditions under which meaning, objectivity, and worldhood are given in experience, rather than around speculative claims about an independently existing reality or a foundational subject.

The analysis has shown that transcendental subjectivity does not function as an absolute ground of being, nor does objectivity retain the status of a self-sufficient in-itself. Instead, both emerge as correlates within intentional life, bound together through structures of givenness, horizontality, and fulfillment. This correlational framework preserves the experienced transcendence of objects while avoiding the pitfalls of both naïve realism and subjective idealism.

By clarifying the methodological rather than metaphysical character of Husserl's transcendental turn, the study contributes to a more precise

understanding of phenomenology as a rigorous descriptive science. The findings suggest that phenomenology neither abolishes metaphysical questions nor resolves them dogmatically, but transforms them into disciplined investigations of sense and appearance. In doing so, Husserl's phenomenology remains a philosophically robust alternative to traditional metaphysics and continues to offer valuable conceptual resources for contemporary debates on objectivity, subjectivity, and the limits of knowledge.

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Annex A. Phenomenological Textual Analysis Protocol

This instrument is designed to guide the systematic phenomenological analysis of philosophical texts in the Husserlian tradition. Its purpose is to identify structures of intentionality, constitution, and correlation between subjectivity and objectivity.

Text analyzed: ☐

Author: ☐ Work and year: ☐ Section or paragraph analyzed: ☐

Does the text explicitly presuppose the natural attitude?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Indeterminate

Is a phenomenological reduction explicitly or implicitly performed?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Partially

Describe how the reduction is articulated in the passage: ☐

Does the text treat objectivity as independent of consciousness?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Suspended

Explain how objectivity is thematized: ☐

Is intentionality explicitly described as constitutive?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Implicitly

Identify the intentional structures involved (perceptual, signitive, horizontal):

☐

Does the passage suggest a hierarchy between subject and object? ☐ Yes ☐ No

☐ Explicitly rejected

Analytical remarks on subject-object relation: ☐

Annex B. Conceptual Interpretation Guide: Constitution and Objectivity

This instrument supports the interpretive phase of analysis by systematizing conceptual decisions regarding constitution and metaphysical commitment.

Does the concept of constitution imply creative subjectivism?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Ambiguous

Justification based on textual evidence: ☐

Is the notion of the “thing in itself” affirmed, denied, or bracketed?

☐ Affirmed ☐ Denied ☐ Bracketed

Explain the methodological status assigned to the in-itself: ☐

Does the text maintain the transcendence of the object within experience? ☐

Yes ☐ No ☐ Unclear

Describe how transcendence is preserved (horizontality, fulfillment, intersubjectivity): ☐

Does the analysis avoid metaphysical claims beyond possible experience? ☐

Yes ☐ No ☐ Partially

Evaluator's interpretive conclusion: ☐

Annex C. Hypothesis-Oriented Analytical Verification Sheet

This instrument is used to assess whether the analyzed material supports, contradicts, or refines the research hypothesis.

Research hypothesis addressed in the passage: ☐

Does the passage support the non-hierarchical relation between subject and object?

☐ Strongly supports ☐ Supports ☐ Neutral ☐ Contradicts

Key textual evidence supporting the assessment: ☐

Does the passage redefine objectivity as correlational rather than metaphysical?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Partially

Analytical synthesis in relation to the hypothesis: ☐

Final decision regarding hypothesis consistency:

☐ Confirmed ☐ Nuanced ☐ Not supported

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