

Making Sense of Phenomenological Sense-Making:¹ On Moore on Husserl

David R. Cerbone
West Virginia University

ABSTRACT. This paper examines Moore's account of Husserl in chapter 17 of *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*. I consider in particular the threat of a gap between natural sense-making, which takes place within what Husserl calls the "natural attitude," and phenomenological sense-making, which is made from within the perspective afforded by the phenomenological reduction. Moore's concerns are an echo, I suggest, of the radical account of Husserlian phenomenology developed by Husserl's student and final assistant, Eugen Fink, in his *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*. Fink's account shows just how wide a gap there is between natural and phenomenological sense-making. Given that gap, I argue that it is not clear whether phenomenological sense-making really can make sense of natural or ordinary sense-making, nor is it clear that we can even make sense of that kind of sense-making *at all*.

We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound and essential to us in our investigation resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, inference, truth, experience, and so forth. This order is a super-order between—so to speak—super-concepts. Whereas, in fact, if the words "language," "experience," "world" have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table," "lamp," "door."

—Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §97

Recall Plato's Allegory of the Cave in Book VII of the *Republic*. The central figures in the allegory are, first, the prisoners, shackled in place and fixated exclusively on a play of shadows cast by fire-lit statues, and second, the rare escapee from the cave, the aspiring philosopher, who breaks free of his chains and is able to survey the cave and its workings, but who ultimately leaves the cave altogether and ascends to the outside world. The outside world is, of course, the realm of the Forms, to which the escaped prisoner slowly acclimates as his eyes adjust to the initially blinding light of the Sun (the Form of the Good). In coming to grasp the Forms, the aspiring philosopher thereby grasps the ultimate nature of reality, what there really is in its most perfect and eternal sense. At the same time, the philosopher stands in a privileged position in relation to the goings-on in the cave he left behind: the philosopher is able to understand the cave and its workings in a way that no one confined to the cave possibly could. He, unlike the prisoners, sees the shadows for what they are, as dependent and derivative constituents of reality beholden entirely to the Forms for whatever little intelligibility they have (and Plato does think it is very little indeed). The philosopher both sees the shadows *as* shadows and sees *through* them, precisely because he sees them as shadows, and these are insights unavailable to anyone whose attention is restricted only to those shadows, i.e. to anyone still shackled within the cave.

The terms of Plato's allegory illustrate at one and the same time both the connection and the gap between the Forms and the everyday world: the Forms are both the last word on the goings-on of the everyday world and yet are wholly distinct from them. The Forms, as the last word, provide the means for making the most general sense of things, but this most general way of making sense uses resources and requires a perspective entirely outside the things of which sense is made. This gap between the Forms and the goings-on of the cave is made especially vivid in the dangers the philosopher faces in returning to the cave: he cannot, Plato says, make himself understood to the prisoners to whom he returns; the prisoners will not believe him (because they don't understand him) and the philosopher risks incurring their possibly fatal wrath. Were it not for the moral obligation of having to rule over this hostile bunch, the philosopher would surely remain outside, in the clear light of day.

It may seem odd, given my aim in this discussion of exploring a relatively late chapter in a book devoted to exploring the evolution of *modern* metaphysics, to begin by recounting a central image in the evolution of *ancient* metaphysics. Apart from a few appearances here and there, mostly in the notes, Plato falls well outside the nonetheless sweeping orbit of Moore's interest. And that is as it should be. I invoke Plato here, however, because I think the lesson of the Allegory of the Cave—and Plato's Doctrine of the Forms more generally—is instructive for thinking about Moore's take on Husserlian phenomenology. The lesson of the Allegory, for my purposes, is the tension between the explanatory burden of the Forms and their remoteness from what they are supposed to explain. To use Moore's favored idiom for metaphysics—the notion of the most general way of making sense of

things, which includes both making sense of our more particular ways of doing so and reflectively making sense of that general way—the Forms, as the most general way of making sense of things, cannot be made sense of from the perspective of the very things the Forms render intelligible. Metaphysical sense-making takes place on a plane entirely distinct from—for Plato, above—the plane of ordinary or everyday sense-making. This kind of remoteness has the effect, at the same time, of rendering those ordinary ways of making sense more *deficient* than they may have initially appeared, as they are revealed to be dependent and derivative in relation to the Forms. The Forms, for Plato, are what fully and truly make sense, whereas whatever sense anything else makes only does so in virtue of standing in some relation to the Forms. The problem the philosopher confronts in all of this lies in his making sense of these insights, to himself initially, but also to a wider audience. If the Forms are radically unavailable from the standpoint of ordinary sense-making, how exactly are insights concerning the Forms to be articulated and communicated? If the language the philosopher has at his disposal is the one drawn from everyday life, it will lack the resources necessary to capture what is distinctive about the Forms: whatever claims and assertions are couched in *that* language, a language geared toward the everyday world, will fall short of what pertains to the Forms, and so will not properly express whatever the philosopher has learned. If, however, the philosopher devises an entirely *new* language for articulating his rarefied insights, then the gap between the Forms and the everyday threatens to become an abyss. Not only will the philosopher be unable to communicate his insights to a wider audience, but the most central aspirations of the Doctrine of Forms will be threatened: if the gap between the Forms and the everyday world is so wide as to require fundamentally different *languages*, then it becomes less clear just how the Forms indeed make sense of the everyday world. In what sense have we made sense of our everyday ways of sense-making if our attention has been turned entirely away from those ways to something requiring a completely different way of making sense?

We can find in Aristotle rehearsals of these kinds of worries regarding Plato's Forms. In the *Categories*, for example, Aristotle's contrast between "primary substance" and "predicables" emerges from an analysis of our natural sense-making. What that analysis reveals, for Aristotle, is the marked dependence of such predicables for their reality on the reality of primary substance: "Everything except primary substances is either predicated of primary substances, or is present in them, and if these last did not exist, it would be impossible for anything else to exist" (*Categories* 2b3–6). The order of dependence that emerges from a reflection on our natural sense-making runs directly counter to Plato's accordance of metaphysical primacy to the Forms. For Aristotle, it is thus not clear just what kind of sense the Forms make, since Plato's insistence on their primacy runs so directly counter to the ways in which we do make sense of things. But they fail as well as *sense-makers*. Aristotle's criticisms in the *Metaphysics* challenge whether the Forms are really up to the task Plato sets for them. In Book I, chapter 6, Aristotle raises the

question “what on earth the Forms contribute to sensible things,” and his subsequent discussion finds very little in the way of a contribution for Forms to make: “For they cause neither movement nor any change” in sensible things (*Metaphysics* 991a10–11). In making sense of something as, say, a horse, knowing that it bears some relation to a Platonic Form does not in any way expand my understanding of it: I gain no insight in terms of how that entity came to be—how the matter making it up came to be organized in a distinctively horsey way—and so I learn nothing about what *makes* it a horse. Since nothing comes from Forms, Forms do not make anything *be* anything.

But what do these sorts of worries about Plato’s Doctrine of Forms and whatever difficulties that doctrine faces in terms of communicability and explanatory force have to do with Husserlian phenomenology? I want to suggest here that Husserlian phenomenology faces similar difficulties, i.e. that there looms a gap between the *natural attitude*—what Moore accommodates to his favored idiom with the phrase “natural sense-making”—and the phenomenological attitude, which one takes up by performing the phenomenological reduction and which thereby equips one to engage in “phenomenological sense-making.” Many of Moore’s central worries about the shortcomings of Husserlian phenomenology—including Husserl’s status as an *idealist*—involve the threat—or even presence—of just such a gap and the question of whether it can be bridged in an adequate manner. I would like in this paper to explore Moore’s worries concerning phenomenological sense-making and I want to do so in part by exploring some of the ways in which they are echoes of a much earlier, but at least equally worried, account of phenomenological sense-making, namely Eugen Fink’s *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*. In this work, which was meant to supply Husserl with a kind of theoretical overview and critique of transcendental phenomenology as a whole, Fink wrestles with a number of questions and problems concerning the relation between the standpoint opened up via the phenomenological reduction and those natural ways of sense-making phenomenology both leaves behind and yet endeavors to explain. Fink’s account of that relation has the effect of making the gap between the two standpoints as wide and vivid as possible, and so brings plainly into view worries about the nature of phenomenology that might otherwise have been left lurking on the margins. Fink’s understanding of transcendental phenomenology shows that Moore’s worries are not only a set of concerns brought to bear from an external though perhaps sympathetic critical perspective; rather, they are concerns *internal* to phenomenology’s own development and self-understanding. That alone does not make them any less worrisome. Indeed, just the opposite: if Fink’s efforts ultimately do nothing to assuage those worries, that does not bode well for any attempt to assuage the ones raised by Moore.

Moore lays out the central features of Husserlian phenomenology by (quite rightly) emphasizing the contrast between phenomenology and what might be understood as its arch-nemesis, *naturalism*: “Phenomenology is an attempt to make sense of sense-making in a non-natural-scientific way, in direct violation of naturalism”

(*EMM*, 431). Moore notes that whereas an analytic philosopher *may* endorse such an attempt, i.e. a commitment to naturalism is not compulsory, a phenomenologist *must* do so: an opposition to naturalism—to the idea that there is no way of making sense of sense-making that is not natural-scientific-sense-making—is indeed compulsory for admission into the phenomenologists' camp (*EMM*, 431). Husserl's opposition to naturalism motivates, and finds expression in, his conception of the phenomenological reduction. Moore understands the reduction primarily as "a methodological tactic whereby we cease temporarily to engage in any natural sense-making. This leaves us free to reflect self-consciously on the sense-making itself" (*EM*, 433). By performing the reduction, the phenomenological investigator takes up a new attitude or stance toward his or her natural sense-making: rather than participate in that sense-making, the investigator instead studies it with complete disregard for how that sense-making fares with respect to anything beyond it. Thus, Moore notes, "to effect the phenomenological reduction is not to attend to something new. It is to attend to something familiar in a new way" (*EM*, 443–44).

So what is gained by attending to these familiar, natural ways of sense-making in the "new way" facilitated by the performance of the reduction? Here is a relatively succinct statement on Husserl's part, from *Cartesian Meditations*, of the benefits to be reaped by taking up this new stance:

[P]henomenological explication makes clear what is included and only non-intuitively co-intended in the sense of the cogitatum (for example, the "other side"), by making present in phantasy the potential perceptions that would make the invisible visible Thus alone can the phenomenologist make understandable to himself *how*, within the immanency of conscious life . . . anything like *fixed and abiding unities* can become intended and, in particular, how this marvelous work of "constituting" identical objects is done *in the case of each category of objects*—that is to say: how in the case of each category, the constitutive conscious life must look, in respect of the correlative noetic and noematic variants pertaining to the same object. (*CM*, §20)

What Moore refers to as reflecting "self-consciously on the sense-making itself" is what Husserl refers to here as explicating "the sense of the cogitatum," in this case the perceptual experience of a spatiotemporal object. In keeping with the strictures of the reduction, the phenomenologist's attention stays "within the immanency of conscious life" (as we will see, the exact sense of "immanency" requires considerable qualification to avoid misunderstandings), in order to understand "how this marvelous work of 'constituting' identical objects is done."

To get a better sense of this "marvelous work" that Husserl refers to in this passage, let us consider an example. I turn my head away from the screen on which I am typing this paper and focus my gaze on the coffee cup sitting on my desk just to the left of my keyboard. If I begin to reflect on the way the cup is "given" in my visual experience, I may begin to notice some features of that givenness that I may have never noticed prior to this kind of reflective exercise. For example, while it is true that the cup is given in my visual experience, it is also true that it

is presented only *partially*: I do not see all of the cup all at once, but only one side at a time. I can, as Husserl suggests in the passage, engage in a further imaginative exercise, whereby I imagine the other sides of the cup coming into view, as, say, I turn it slowly while sitting at my desk. I can grasp that if I were to turn the cup around in this manner, each of my moments of experience would be qualitatively different. (If I could somehow “freeze-frame” my experience and trace out pictures of the cup as it is presented in the various “frames,” those pictures would have markedly different shapes. Ordinarily, we do not notice this very explicitly, which is one of the reasons why drawing objects with correct perspective can be so difficult.) At the same time, those qualitatively different experiences are already intimated in the experience I am having of the cup now: I see the cup *as* having other sides to be seen, even if I do not see those sides now (indeed, I cannot see any of those other sides while enjoying my current view of the cup). So we have a kind of sameness-in-diversity at work in our experience: a stretch of experience—actual and potential—presents us with *one* object (*the* cup) through an ever-changing series of “looks” or “perspectives,” what Husserl calls “adumbrations.” I recognize further that these “looks” or “perspectives” follow one another in a smooth, predictable manner: as each side of the object comes into view, it does so in a way that was already anticipated in the previous view. Nothing about seeing the back of the coffee cup surprises me when I was previously experiencing the front. (Though I am sometimes surprised, as when I turn the corner of what I took to be a house only to find that it was a carefully constructed façade, perhaps part of a movie set. When I then return to the front, I find that it now looks flatter than it did before.)

For Husserl, phenomenology reveals consciousness as having a synthetic-horizonal structure. Experience is *horizonal* in that each moment of experience at the same time points beyond that moment, to other possibilities of experience. When I look at my coffee cup, I see it from only one side, but I also see it as *having other sides to be seen*. Those currently unrealized possibilities of perception form part of the horizon of my experience of the cup (the horizon is much richer than this, as it includes possibilities that encompass different modalities of perception—reaching out and touching the coffee cup, making a dull, thudding sound by rapping on it with my knuckles—and much more beyond that). My experience of the coffee cup involves a very particular but open-ended synthetic-horizonal structure: if the various moments of experience did not have the horizons they have and if those moments were not “knit together” as they are, then my experience would not be *of or about* a coffee cup. The coffee cup could not be the intentional object of my experience. In the revelation of this structure, the phenomenologist thus comes to understand that “marvelous work” of *how* intentional objects like the coffee cup are *constituted* in the flow of experience.

Now, a crucial, but especially thorny, question concerns how exactly we are to understand this notion of constitution. What does the insight that the coffee cup is constituted “within the immanency of conscious life” tell us about the *dependence*

of the cup on that conscious life? In other words, the notion of constitution raises the question of phenomenology's relation to *idealism*. To begin to see where the question of idealism arises, let us consider different ways of trying to make out the following basic claim, using some of the language of the passage from *Cartesian Meditations*:

Claim CC: The coffee cup—as a fixed and abiding unity—is constituted within the immanency of conscious life.

One way to try to understand this claim, using Moore's terminology, would be as an instance of *natural* sense-making. The claim pertains to the goings-on in the spatiotemporal world in which we find ourselves, to the effect that such goings-on are a certain way when it comes to coffee cups and conscious life. So understood, the claim exemplifies a fairly crude, but also straightforward, form of empirical idealism, along the lines of Berkeley's "To be is to be perceived." But so understood, the claim also seems patently false, at least as far as Husserl is concerned. Husserl has no wish to defend any form of phenomenism or Berkeleyan idealism, such that the coffee cup, what holds my coffee and sits to my left as I type, is somehow really made out of appearances, looks, adumbrations, experiences, or what have you. The way we naturally make sense of the cup is as something made of clay, glazed and fired in a kiln, and no such ingredients or processes are in any way "immanent" to conscious life, at least when it comes to the conscious life of particular, empirically real creatures.

The final qualification in the last sentence is significant, as it suggests a different way of understanding CC, not as a piece of (unacceptable) natural sense-making but as exemplifying *phenomenological* sense-making. And that is as it should be, given that the "marvelous work" the phenomenologist bears witness to only becomes available after the performance of the reduction. That we are operating within the reduction puts a new twist on the notion of "the immanency of conscious life," as that no longer refers to *my* empirically real conscious life, nor to anyone else's for that matter. CC, understood as an instance of phenomenological sense-making, does not make any claim about the relation between coffee cups and David Cerbone's conscious life, at least not in any direct or straightforward way. The "conscious life" referred to in CC is conscious life *as such*, so that the claim concerns *how it happens* that consciousness, any consciousness, makes sense of things in terms of coffee cups (and other spatiotemporal objects). In order to make sense of a world "out there" as populated by a variety of enduring, materially real things, consciousness, viz. perceptual consciousness, *must* be structured such that momentary adumbrative experiences are related to one another so as to constitute "fixed and abiding unities." Only in that way can experience be directed (perceptually) toward such things as coffee cups. Constitution thus pertains not to coffee cups, understood as materially real particulars, but to *sense* or *meaning*: for my experience to mean or intend "coffee cup," it must be structured in a certain way; it must consist of adumbrational presentations that refer to—and connect with—other such adumbrational presentations. Phenomenology brings into view

the *systematic* nature of objects at the level of appearance or experience: objects are constituted as systems of adumbrational presentations.

So construed, CC makes a *transcendental* claim with respect to our natural sense-making; it says what *must* be the case in order for a certain kind of natural sense-making to be *possible*. And such a claim only becomes available, according to Husserl, via the performance of the phenomenological reduction. Hence, transcendental sense-making is at the same time phenomenological sense-making. But is it a way of making sense of our natural sense-making that amounts to a form of *idealism*? It is a form of idealism if *what* we make sense of in some way depends upon what phenomenological sense-making reveals. Moore, for his part, sees that form of dependence at work in Husserl. The dependence is evident in the *Cartesian Meditations* passage we have been considering, wherein Husserl characterizes how objects are constituted *within* “the immanency of conscious life.” For, we might ask, what are objects outside of or apart from that immanency? Is that a question that makes sense from the standpoint of the phenomenological reduction? Husserl answers this question emphatically in the negative: there is no *possible* sense to be made of objects apart from what sense phenomenological sense-making makes of them. And since what phenomenological sense-making makes sense of is our natural sense-making, the various ways we make sense of objects, then according to Moore, it follows that the objects we make sense of depend upon those natural ways of making sense of them. As Moore puts it, “things in space and time [depend] for some of their essential features on their susceptibility to natural sense-making” (*EMM*, 451). At the same time, Husserl’s idealism is clearly a form of *transcendental* idealism, since that dependence “is not itself susceptible to our natural sense-making. It manifests itself when, and only when, we indulge in phenomenological sense-making” (*EMM*, 451). We saw this already with respect to claim CC, which could not be understood as an instance of natural sense-making: any attempt to understand it in that way resulted in something patently false.

Moore finds Husserl’s brand of idealism to be “problematic.” One indication of its problematic character is the “tension” Moore detects between the natural and phenomenological forms of sense-making, in that the latter appears to deny what is clearly affirmed in the former. Moore asks:

How comfortable should we be with [Husserl’s idealism]? How well, for example, does it square with our natural sense-making? Is there not perhaps an unrelievable tension between it and the most basic of our natural convictions, that which Husserl himself dignifies with the label ‘the general thesis of the natural standpoint’ (*Ideas* I, §30), namely the conviction that the spatio-temporal world ‘has its being,’ as Husserl puts it, ‘out there’ (*ibid.*)? (*EMM*, 452–53)

The tension Moore claims to find in Husserl concerns the interplay between natural sense-making and phenomenological sense-making with respect to the notion of constitution. Those objects which we naturally make sense of as “out there,” independent of our sense-making activities (e.g., we tend to think that they would

in many instances be just the way they are were those activities never to have occurred) are revealed to be dependent on those activities, at least to the extent that they must be susceptible to those ways of making sense of them in order to be objects *at all*. And Moore worries that this tension may be “unrelievable” because he does not see a way of sufficiently insulating natural sense-making from the discoveries made from the standpoint of phenomenological sense-making. While other philosophers (Moore here refers back to his discussions of Kant and Dummett in previous chapters) have strategies for sharply distinguishing two standpoints so as to obviate any felt tension, it is less clear to Moore that Husserl has such a strategy:

In Husserl’s case there is no analogous case of even trying to relieve the tension. On Husserl’s view, our philosophical (or phenomenological) sense-making, while fundamentally different in kind from our ordinary (or natural) sense-making, is still from our position of engagement with things. “[The world] goes on appearing,” we heard him say in §3, “as it appeared before” (*Meditations*, §8). So where familiar concepts are exercised in our philosophical sense-making, there is no reason, or at any rate no analogous reason, to expect them to be exercised in anything but familiar ways. (*EMM*, 453)

With this last remark, Moore seems to have taken back something he himself had emphasized in his rendition of Husserl’s phenomenology up until this point in the chapter, namely, the divide between natural and phenomenological sense-making. Since the latter traffics in claims that are utterly foreign to natural sense-making, e.g. claims about the constitution of objects “within the immanency of conscious life,” it seems odd to say that there is “no reason” to expect “familiar concepts” to be “exercised in anything but familiar ways.” Given the claimed novelty and radicality of the perspective made available via the phenomenological reduction, it would seem that there is every reason to expect such a thing.

I want to turn now to another reading of the phenomenological reduction, one developed in close collaboration with Husserl himself, that does everything it can to fulfill this expectation. Eugen Fink’s *Sixth Cartesian Meditation* offers perhaps the most radical account of the phenomenological reduction, which describes the transition from the natural to the phenomenological attitude in sometimes wildly hyperbolic terms. The radical disparity between the phenomenological and natural attitudes bespeaks an incommensurability between them that Fink struggles with throughout the *Meditation*. I want to suggest that such an incommensurability goes a long way toward alleviating the kind of tension Moore detects in Husserlian phenomenology, but it does so at a cost: by widening the gap between the natural and the phenomenological, Fink thereby threatens to undermine the very *point* of taking the phenomenological turn, namely to make sense of what Moore calls natural sense-making. In the end, I think we ultimately face a kind of dilemma: either we follow Moore’s reading, such that phenomenological sense-making keeps natural sense-making in view but then leads to a problematic

idealism, or we go the way of Fink, which leaves us with a conception of phenomenological sense-making so insulated from natural sense-making that we cannot make much sense of it at all.

The principal goal of the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation* is to outline a *critique* of phenomenology, which would provide a kind of systematic overview of both phenomenological method and results, a kind of phenomenology of phenomenology. Understandably, Fink devotes considerable effort to the gateway to any work in phenomenology, the performance of the phenomenological reduction. Any systematic account of how phenomenology works must make sense of how this fundamental pivot point in phenomenological practice works. From the outset of his exposition, Fink is keen to emphasize the difficulties of *motivating* the performance of the reduction starting, as one must, from the standpoint of the natural attitude. Indeed, there seems to be no motivation for it whatsoever:

Or is it that the reduction in the end *fundamentally* does *not* arise from motivation stemming from the natural attitude? For “natural attitude” man is not the reduction, in confronting him as a piece of writing, that which is simply incomprehensible? Why in the world should I “inhibit” experiential belief? . . . Why should I now simply “bracket” *everything* that is experientially accepted? Do I not then stand before “nothingness”? Are cognition and science at all still possible? Is it not paradoxical and nonsensical to renounce knowledge altogether out of fear of possible deception? (SCM, 30)

As a “deeper and more radical” form of reflection, the phenomenological reduction “is not different from human self-reflection by a matter of *degree*, as if both self-reflections were of a unitary type; rather, it is *qualitatively* different from the latter (SCM, 32). Nothing on the side of the natural attitude seems then to point the way toward the performance of the reduction, much less provide any encouragement to do so. But the problem of motivation is really only the tip of the iceberg on Fink’s account: performing the phenomenological reduction is not only something that I, a particular human being occupying the standpoint of the natural attitude, am not in any way *motivated* to do; it is not even something that is *possible* for me to do: “The self-reflection of the phenomenological reduction is not a radicality that is within human reach; it does not lie at all within the horizon of human possibilities” (SCM, 32). Instead, the performance of the reduction involves such a radical rupture and reveals something so fundamentally different that I, this person, cannot be understood as the performer of it; rather, what is revealed is “transcendental subjectivity, concealed in self-objectivation as man, [which] reflectively thinks about itself, beginning *seemingly* as man, annulling itself as man, and taking itself down as man all the way to the ground, namely, down to the innermost ground of its life” (SCM, 32). Thus, when it comes to the question of a way from the natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude, Fink’s view is emphatically negative:

If we take ways into phenomenology to mean a *continuity in motivation* that beings in the natural attitude and by an inferential force leads into the transcendental attitude, then *there are no such ways*. (SCM, 33)

We saw above that on Moore's reading of Husserl, there are insights about natural sense-making available from the standpoint of phenomenological sense-making that cannot be made sense of from within natural sense-making. I think it is clear that Fink likewise endorses this sort of claim, as he sees phenomenology as wholly unavailable to the natural attitude: "A universal epoche is not only not feasible in the natural attitude, but is senseless" (SCM, 36). Fink's declaration raises a question, one which he himself acknowledges and tries to address, of just how phenomenological insights are to be articulated and communicated. What *language* does one use for phenomenology and what is the relation between that language and the familiar ones that are part and parcel of the natural attitude? Fink refers to this as the problem of *outward expressional form*, which he sees as "based on the *necessity* that phenomenologizing in some way exit from the transcendental attitude" (SCM, 84). How Fink addresses this problem is not entirely clear to me, especially as it seems to rely upon some rather dubious assumptions about the status of language with respect to the performance of the reduction. This assumption is most clearly at work in the following passage:

Now, through the phenomenological reduction, the I indeed loses its natural-attitude restrictedness; but in no way loses the habitualities and dispositions acquired in the natural attitude, it *does not lose its "language."* The *constituting I*, as the proper I that is concealed by the human being, is also the *proper speaker*, predication is a form of its life activity, is a mode proper to *constituting action*. (SCM, 85)

I must confess that I do not understand what licenses Fink's claim here, given the sharp divide he has otherwise claimed divides the natural attitude from the standpoint of transcendental phenomenology. Recall that he claimed that the reduction could not even be regarded as a *human* possibility, and so that it is wrong, strictly speaking, to say that I, this empirically real individual person, perform the reduction. But then how is it that those "habitalities and dispositions" that are, after all, human habitualities and dispositions carry over into the reduction. The "transcendental I of reflection, the *phenomenologizing onlooker*, . . . *does not stop exercising a belief in the world because he has never lived in belief in the world to begin with*" (SCM, 42), and yet this "onlooker" has at its disposal a human language geared toward, among other things, an empirical world. So when Fink asserts that "language is indeed retained as habituality right through the epoche" (SCM, 86), the grounds for that assertion strike me as wanting.

Even if we allow Fink this rather dubious assumption about the retention of language, even he acknowledges that we are not out of the communicative woods yet. We are not because an account is still needed of the "expressional character" of the language used within the reduction. According to Fink, the language retained through the epoche "does not lose the *expressional character of referring solely to what is existent*," but what is needed is a "*transcendental language . . . that can with genuine suitability explicate and give predicative safekeeping to transcendental being*" (SCM, 86). The problem appears to be this: language, as part and parcel

of the natural attitude, is geared to talking primarily about what there is, what Fink calls here the “existent.” I am not sure why Fink says “solely” here, as even in the natural attitude, we can talk about what does not exist and indeed what cannot exist. It may be because even these latter uses of language operate against the background of the reality of the *world* in general: even when we talk and think about what does not exist, *nonexistence* here means not being a part of the real world. Thus, implicitly, a commitment to the reality of the world is operative even in those uses of language. But the phenomenological reduction brackets that basic existential commitment, along with all the more particular ones. *Whatever is left over to talk about* following the reduction cannot be talked about on the basis of that all-encompassing worldly commitment and so any language whose sense presupposes that commitment will necessarily misfire for such purposes. That is why Fink says that “in taking over language the phenomenologizing onlooker *transforms* its natural sense as referring to what is existent” (SCM, 86). He adds that “if this kind of *transformation* did not occur, then the phenomenologist would *slip out of the transcendental attitude* with every word he spoke” (SCM, 86).

The transformation Fink has in mind here does not concern the lexicon of the phenomenologist:

It is not in its external *vocabulary* form that natural language suffers a “transformation” in being claimed by the transcendental onlooker for the expression of his transcendental cognitions, but in the *way it signifies*. When enlisted in the language function of the phenomenologizing I, not a single word can retain its natural sense. Instead the natural meaning that is indicated by the particular verbal unit now serves *only as an indicator* for a transcendental linguistic sense. (SCM, 87)

So language is retained, and yet nothing in the way of the “natural sense” of language carries over into the reduction. Instead, the “natural meaning” plays an indicative role, but just how this indicative function works is not entirely clear. Fink appeals to the notion of *analogy* at one point to help to explain the kind of indication at work: the natural meaning indicates the transcendental meaning by way of analogy. Just as “coffee cup” refers to coffee cups in the natural attitude, “coffee cup” refers to the sense *coffee cup* in the transcendental attitude (we will see shortly why, on Fink’s reading of the reduction at least, this cannot be right). At the same time, Fink himself raises doubts about the extent to which the notion of analogy can properly explain the transformation in linguistic sense required for phenomenology. He first notes:

On the one hand, the natural meaning of the word and sentence points analogously to a corresponding transcendental sense, while, on the other hand, the intended transcendental meaning *protests*, as it were, against its expressional form, it is in constant rebellion against the constraint imposed upon it by the formulation in natural words and sentences. Thus all transcendental explications have a special *inadequacy*, all concepts and sentences in one way or another fall short and in a particular sense fail before the demand that is, it seems, to be placed upon every predication (but especially the scientific). (SCM, 88–89)

But the kind of “protest” and “inadequacy” mentioned in this passage are only the beginning of the difficulties. Fink ultimately acknowledges that the notion of analogy—or analogical predication—breaks down: the “non-ontic” meanings associated with phenomenological sense-making cannot be understood on analogy to the “ontic” meanings involved in natural sense-making. Fink writes:

If, now, natural language, which is exhibited by the phenomenological epoche as a dispositional habituality of the *constituting* I, is claimed by the *phenomenological onlooker* for the explication of his “theoretical experience”—which does not deal with what is “existent” (with that which is end-constituted), but with that constituting life which actualizes itself and the world in stages of “*pre-being*”—then the natural meanings of words and sentences cannot stand in a relationship of analogical predication to the intended transcendental sense-elements. This is because *ontic* meanings just cannot form an analogy to “*non-ontic*” transcendental meanings, for the two cannot be at all compared with one another. Instead we have to admit that talk about an “analogical function” possessed by natural meanings for the predicative explication of transcendental complexes of matters has simply become an *expression that causes a predicament*. (SCM, 90)

The “predicament” Fink notes is a kind of communicative gap between phenomenological and natural sense-making. Phenomenological sense-making must be drawn not from natural sense-making, even by analogy, but from the phenomenological experiences themselves. As a result, Fink says that “phenomenological sentences” can “only be understood if the *situation of the giving of sense* to the transcendental sentences is always *repeated*, that is, if the predicatively explicating terms are always verified again by *phenomenologizing intuition*” (SCM, 92). Fink concludes:

There is thus no phenomenological understanding that comes simply by reading reports of phenomenological research; these can only be “read” at all by re-performing the investigations themselves. Whoever fails to do that just does not read *phenomenological* sentences; he reads queer sentences in natural language, taking a mere appearance for the thing itself to his own self-deception. (SCM, 92)

Reports of phenomenological research “are not understandable at all if one does not *oneself* perform the phenomenological reduction” (SCM, 112). At most, the statements reporting the results of phenomenological inquiry to an audience that has not participated in such inquiry are “imperative pointers” that gesture toward “a cognitive action of a hitherto unknown radicality *which can be comprehended only in being itself performed*” (SCM, 112–13).

While Fink is forthcoming in acknowledging at least some of the difficulties that beset articulating and communicating phenomenological findings, there remains the worry that he nonetheless has not owned up to the full extent of the problem. That is, the problem is not just a kind of theoretical-practical difficulty of making one’s findings known to a wider audience, but one of just what those “findings” are and what work they are really able to do. Again, we find ourselves

confronting the question of just what the notion of phenomenological constitution amounts to. To put the question bluntly: if phenomenological sense-making is fundamentally incommensurable with natural sense-making, in what sense can natural sense-making be constituted by processes only available to phenomenological sense-making? To put the question slightly less bluntly and in more technical language, if natural sense-making is, as Fink asserts, *ontic* sense-making, i.e. a kind of sense-making operative against the backdrop of the assumed reality of the world, while phenomenological sense-making is *non-ontic*, in what way can the latter explicate or constitute the former? Fink maintains that “phenomenologizing is *not a human possibility at all*, but signifies precisely the *un-humanizing of man*” (SCM, 120), but natural sense-making is a human possibility, indeed a human actuality, so why should something so radically “un-human” shed light on this human achievement?

Consider again our simple example:

Claim CC: The coffee cup—as a fixed and abiding unity—is constituted within the immanency of conscious life.

Clearly, this is pretty small game in the grand phenomenological scheme of things. At the same time, if phenomenological sense-making founders on such a humble example, that should give us pause with respect to its grander claims. As a claim about constitution, it must be offered from the standpoint of the phenomenological reduction; otherwise, as we have seen, it will assert something unacceptable. Now Fink has acknowledged that the *vocabulary* of phenomenological sense-making carries over from the natural attitude, but how that vocabulary signifies works differently. So, presumably, the term “coffee cup,” when used as part of CC, does not stand for, or mean, *coffee cups*. That would be an “ontic” construal of the term, which is out of bounds in phenomenological sense-making. And that is as it should be, since claims made from the phenomenological standpoint are not *about* coffee cups. As we have seen, Husserl has no wish to assert that real coffee cups are literally constituted by whatever it is that phenomenology reveals. Phenomenological constitution and material constitution must be kept apart at all costs. Instead, claims concerning phenomenological constitution are claims about meaning or sense: the “marvelous work” of constitution is not the literal construction of materially real entities, but the sense or meaning via which experience is directed toward or about those entities. So understood, CC is really something like:

Claim CC: The sense or meaning associated with “coffee cup”—as designating a fixed and abiding unity—is constituted within the immanency of conscious life.

So rendered, the claim still runs the danger of being misunderstood from the standpoint of natural sense-making, if “conscious life” is understood to mean the psychological goings-on of particular individuals. So again, we need to be careful to bear in mind the strictures of the phenomenological reduction. However, with all of these caveats and qualifications out of the way, the real difficulty thereby

comes into view: even if we restrict our attention to the realm of sense or meaning, phenomenology as laid out by Fink seems ill-suited to the constitutional task at hand. We must bear in mind that the term “coffee cup,” as used in natural sense-making, is, to use Fink’s terminology, an *ontic* signifier. The term is used primarily to talk about actual things (and even imaginary coffee cups, crafted from pixie dust and the like, still count as *ontic*), so whatever sense that term has must be one that “directs us” to real coffee cups. The question then is how is *that* sense constituted in “the immanency of conscious life” in the reduced or purified sense, if the senses of terms “used” by that life—the life of the transcendental subject—are one and all *non-ontic*. Whatever sense is at work in and for transcendental subjectivity—and saying what that sense is is not something we can do from the natural attitude, as genuinely human speakers—is simply the wrong kind of sense to make sense of the sense we make around here.

I have appealed to Fink’s radical interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology as providing the resources for addressing Moore’s worries about the persistence of an “unrelievable tension” he finds there. Fink, more than any other interpretation I’m aware of, insulates phenomenological sense-making from natural sense-making. What I have tried to suggest is that such attempts at insulation carry costs at least as high as the problematic idealism with which Moore sees Husserl as saddled. Not only are we left with a conception of phenomenological sense-making whose sense is radically unavailable from any point of view apart from the phenomenological reduction, but such a radically different form of sense-making does not seem to be up to the task of making sense of the natural sense-making we typically make. And that undermines the promise that phenomenology held for us in the first place. Whatever “marvelous work” the phenomenologist is privy to does not appear to be the constitution of the sense we in fact make.²

NOTES

1. The full title, borrowing from the celebrated Woodchuck of song and legend, is: “Of How Much Sense Can Phenomenological Sense-Making Make (If Phenomenological Sense-Making Indeed Makes Sense)?”
2. A final note about idealism. Although I have appealed to Fink’s more insular conception of phenomenological sense-making as a strategy for avoiding the problematic idealism Moore finds in Husserl, Fink himself endorses a robust form of idealism. In the final pages of the *Sixth Cartesian Meditations*, Fink unequivocally asserts the dependence not just of our natural sense-making, but what we make sense of in those terms, on the constitutive activities of transcendental subjectivity. Note the “awful tremor” he claims attends this realization:

The *world* as the total unity of the really existent, boundlessly open in space and time, with the whole immensity of nature filling it, with all the planets, Milky Ways, and solar systems; with the multiplicity of existents such as stones, plants, animals, and humans; as soil and living space for human cultures, for their rise and fall in the turn of history; as locale for final ethical and religious decisions; the world in this manifoldness of its existence—in a word, *being—is only a moment of the Absolute*. The awful tremor everyone

experiences who actually passes through the phenomenological reduction has its basis in the dismaying recognition that the inconceivably great, boundless, vast world has the *sense of a constitutive result*, that therefore in the *universe of constitution* it represents only a *relative "totality."* (SCM, 143–44)

I will leave aside Fink's many qualifications concerning the difference between phenomenological idealism and the many "worldly" idealisms that have come before it. As with phenomenology in general, there is a gap in terms of comprehension that must be bridged. I only note Fink's unabashed idealism to suggest that ultimately his rendition of phenomenology gives us the worst of both worlds: an idealism that upends our natural sense-making, while failing really to make sense of it.