

# BA Thesis Final Evaluation



UNIVERZITA  
KARLOVA

**Milan Zeman, *Kant, Husserl and Berkeleyan Idealism***

**ÚFAR, FFUK, WS 2021-2022**

## **General Description of the Work**

Milan Zeman's thesis is mostly concerned with what could be labeled a "corrosive" task, which consists in showing in what sense and to what extent—despite what they themselves affirm in their works—both Kant's and Husserl's idealism ("formal" in the former case; "transcendental" in the latter) amount in the end to two different variations upon Berkeley's own material idealism. But the candidate aspires to do more than just make the case for the doctrinal identity between Berkeley's idealism on the one hand, and Kant's and Husserl's idealism on the other. His task is "corrosive" to the extent that the candidate wants to show the internal contradiction and untenability of the theory of (material) idealism (hence, of any and every form of idealism)—be it assumed in its Berkeleyan, Kantian or Husserlian variety. The thesis is hence divided into two major parts, and both present the reader with the same structure and argumentative strategy: in the first place, the candidate identifies the philosophical tenets which, in either Kant or Husserl, betray their being adherents of material idealism. Secondly, being aware that both Kant and Husserl always rejected (though to a different degree and based on different strategies) the assimilation of their respective philosophies to that of Berkeley, the candidate critically addresses what he himself calls "Kant's" and "Husserl's defense" in order to argue for their basic untenability. Thirdly and lastly, the candidate concludes by laying claim to the self-contradictory and inconsistent character of Kant's and Husserl's view, i.e., and as far as we can tell, of any form and every of idealism whatsoever.

Not only does the thesis testify to the candidate's deep familiarity with the works under scrutiny; it also shows very well his argumentative capacity: rather than dwell on textually subtle analyses, the candidate is able to directly get at the heart of the matter, bringing every time to the fore the most essential traits of the position under discussion. Moreover, the candidate's mode of approach to the texts leaves no room for doubt about his preparation being higher than that of a BA student: he is well familiar with both the history and the philosophical background of the texts, which are always

in fact quoted and discussed in the original language/version. In so doing, all the issues that could possibly derive from the necessity of relying on their translations are avoided *ab initio*. However, it should also be noted that the candidate's strategy to get to the essential of the authors' views leaves sometimes on the reader the strong impression that some crucial conceptual differences or nuances (either in the confrontation between Berkeley, Kant and Husserl or in the discussion of each one of them per se taken) are either overlooked, intentionally set aside or ignored.

When it comes to the assessment of Kant's philosophy, the candidate focuses on the structure of the transcendental aesthetic. The spatio-temporal world, as Kant describes it at the beginning of the first *Critique*, is mere appearance, its structure being imposed upon the world by the subject's own sensibility. And whereas one might be tempted to dismiss any hasty identification of Kant with Berkeley on the ground that the former still admits the existence of the object (the famous "thing-in-itself"), the candidate hasten to show in what sense here we are dealing with a "contradictory" and non-sensical concept. Employing an argument that Husserl himself resorts to on several occasions, the candidate plainly observes that: "it makes no sense to speak of a material entity—which a thing necessarily is—which is not perceivable in principle. [...] The same necessarily applies to any material thing whatsoever: insofar as it is material, it is, in principle, perceivable" (p. 17). The very idea of a thing that would exist independently of the subject (non-Berkeleyan moment of Kant's position) and would be not perceivable in principle (self-contradictory moment) is a non-sense. And once such non-sense is recognized, any alleged difference between the two falls: "the non-existence of the thing-in-itself is equal to the non-existence of the very grounding through which Kant believed to have secured the reality of empirical objects. In other words, if we remove the thing-in-itself, we also eo ipso invalidate Kant's central argument against the charge of being a material idealist" (pp. 19-20). As the candidate concludes, both Berkeley and Kant—and regardless of what the latter would claim against the former—turn the material world into "a mere representation."

Similar is the strategy adopted in the Husserl section, where the candidate's discussion revolves around the so-called "principle of relativity"—which is summarized as follows: "According to this principle, the material world does not subsist in itself (*an sich*), but is, in essence (*wesensmäßig*), relative to the perceiving subject" (p. 23). Or, as the candidate even more explicitly emphasizes later on: "since, as we have seen, to be essentially relative to consciousness means nothing but to be entirely dependent on it, it is evident that the official formulation of Husserl's idealistic doctrine entails material idealism and that, as a consequence, Husserl is, as regards his idealistic doctrine, a material idealist" (p. 25). The candidate is very adamant on how Husserl's position should be read,

and this regardless of what Husserl himself would say as regards the difference between his idealism and that of Berkeley. For, as long as we point out that the world is nothing without consciousness, it does not make any real difference whether we conceive of material things as really immanent complexes of sensations (as Berkeley would do according to Husserl) or as intentional unities (as Husserl does on the contrary). In either case, a form of material idealism is embraced.

### **Final remarks and questions**

Although the thesis, and the candidate's arguments show how good his familiarity with the authors is, the work could have quite likely benefited from a more close-up confrontation with the texts (at least in some cases). This appears quite clearly, in particular, during the discussion of Husserl's own idealism. For example, what the candidate calls "the most general expression of Husserl's idealism" (p. 23) seems to be the direct result of the candidate himself recalling only a few words from §41 of the *Cartesian Meditations*, whose full argument is never really tackled. The tendency to directly go to the heart of the matter is also visible in the way the principle of relativity is first framed and then discussed: "According to this principle, the material world does not subsist in itself (*an sich*), but is, in essence (*wesensmäßig*), relative to the perceiving subject. In other words, it consists in the claim that the existence of the material world is entirely relative to and, as such, dependent on consciousness, which alone is 'absolute' or 'irrelative'" (p. 23). It is not clear whether the candidate means that (a) *for Husserl* "relativity" implies "dependence" or (b) whether "relativity" does imply "dependence" *even though Husserl would deny it apertis verbis*. We are making this point because in the passage in question "*wesensmäßig*" refers to the necessity of the correlation between object and subject (which is hence essentially necessary), not to the object's essence being relative to the subject (as we are under the impression the candidate would rather say). *Relativity* can be at least of gnoseological nature (the problem of ascertaining the existence of the object and its mode of being); it can be ontological (concerning the mode of being of the object) or metaphysical (concerning its factual existence). The same distinctions would extend over to the concept of dependence, and it is not always apparent upon what ground the candidate goes from the former (relativity) to the latter (dependence) without any further ado. In this respect, we would like to ask the candidate:

- To elaborate on his understanding of the principle of relativity, also in light of the fact that the candidate himself uses Husserl's own arguments against the thing-in-itself in the chapter on Kant. To argue—as the candidate does—that the concept of a material thing in principle not perceivable is a contradiction or counter-sense should automatically result—according to

Husserl's argument—in that form of relativity which he calls *co-relation*: the material thing being always the correlate of a possible perception. What would follow from the candidate's own argument against the Kantian thing-in-itself would or should be also the contradiction proper to the idea of a material thing independent of any possible perception.

- Given the almost exclusive *apagogic* character of the thesis, it would be interesting to know and understand whether the candidate takes his arguments to be some sort of *prolegomena* to realism, the latter construed as a position “consistent with reality.”

The point is important as the candidate himself admits the importance, for Husserl, of the so-called “*Korrelativeinstellung*” (p. 27). Here, too, the question is crucial because whereas the candidate is adamant on the sequence: *correlation* (intentional correlates)-*relativity-dependence*, the expression *Einstellung* as “attitude” suggests *a certain mode of looking at...*, which would not necessarily have any ontological implications.

Depending upon how the discussion goes, the candidate could for sure be granted *excellent* (1) as a final grade.

Prague, December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Daniele De Santis

