

AN INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS OF EDMUND HUSSERL'S CONCEPT OF
INTENTIONALITY

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Abstract

This paper makes an interpretative analysis of the concept of intentionality in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Although 'intentionality' is a technical term in philosophy, it stands for something familiar to us all: a characteristic feature of our mental states and experiences, especially evident in what we commonly call being "conscious" or "aware". The aim of this paper is to show that the domain of phenomenology is understanding the conscious object of qualitative experience in relation to how they are conscious, the forms of being aware, the modes of intentionality. In order to understand his concept of intentionality, Husserl in the *Ideas*, introduces the pair of terms, *Noesis* and *Noema* to refer to correlated elements of the structure of any intentional act. The term *noesis* to refer to intentional acts or "act-quality" and *noema* to refer to what, in the *Logical Investigations* had been referred to as "act-matter". He also says that every intentional act has noetic content. This noetic content is that mental act-process, which becomes directed towards the intentionally held object. Every act also has a Noematic correlate that which is meant by it. According to Husserl, *noesis* is the real part of the act that gives the character to a thing. *Noema* is the ideal essence of the character. The crucial concept in Husserl's theory of intentionality is the *noema* of consciousness. According to Husserl the full *noema* is the object of the act as meant in the act, the perceived object as perceived, the judged object as judged, and so on. Therefore, Husserl's definition of consciousness in terms of intentionality marks a revolutionary innovation in the history of modern philosophy.

Keywords: Phenomenology; Intentionality; Consciousness; Noesis; Noema.

Introduction

The concept of intentionality has been defined and developed throughout the history of philosophy in a variety of ways. The term originates from the scholastic notion of *intentio*, which was commonly used in medieval philosophy and theology. In modern philosophy the term regained philosophical importance through the works of Edmund Husserl. In a broad sense, intentionality can be defined as the "aboutness" or "directedness" of one's mental states or acts. It is the referential character of these states or acts insofar as they intend or refer to something. That is, if mental states or

acts are to have content, they must be *about* something. For instance, whenever one thinks, one always thinks about something. Likewise, whenever one hopes, believes, or denies, one always hopes, believes, or denies something, that is, in reference to some objective thing or content. Thus, one can hope that it will rain today or one can believe that it will not rain today; in both cases one's thoughts have a certain content. Even when the content is not necessarily "real," it remains to a certain extent, objective. For instance, when one thinks of heavenly paradise, one is thinking of or referring to something, irrespective of whether that something is real or not real. The concept of intentionality, then, concerns itself with this question of reference. Or, to put it as some theories do, intentionality concerns the relation between the content or object of thought (what it is about) and the act or subjectivity of thinking. The problem of intentionality, then, is primarily a problem concerning a relation.

The phenomenological account of experience asserts two things. Firstly, it claims that everyday experiences are intentional. Secondly, it affirms that experiences always reveal their objects from a perspective. Hence, the phenomenological account of intentionality reconciles the objectivism of intentionality with perspectivism of empiricism.

Husserl's Concept of Intentionality

Husserl's concept of intentionality is largely derived from the empirical psychology of his teacher, Franz Brentano. From Brentano, Husserl inherits his two central contrasts between consciousness and physical objects namely that, consciousness consists not in passive reception of sensory data (as we find in the British empiricists for example), but of acts of consciousness, and that, consciousness is intentional. This latter thesis, in a phrase tells us that consciousness always takes an object. Brentano tells us that:

Everything, although not in the same way, contains something as object in itself, in the idea something is ideated, in judgement something is acknowledged or denied, in love loved in hate hated, in desire desired etc (Brentano 196).

For Husserl,

Consciousness processes are also called intentional; to be conscious of something; as a cogito to bear within itself its cogitatum (33).

In phenomenology, consciousness is manifested in intentionality (Unah 220). The principle of intentionality asserts that consciousness is always consciousness about something. This aboutness of consciousness points to something outside the mind, which is conscious of the object. "Intentionality signifies the fact that consciousness is directional that is given in experience as an outward-moving vector" (220). An act of consciousness is always towards something. When we love, we love

something; when we are afraid, we are afraid of something; when we desire, we desire something; when we perceive, we perceive something. It is important to state that, this object of an act of consciousness need not be an existent or real object. I can be afraid of demons, although there are no demons; I can imagine a ten-finger human hand, although there is no such thing; I can hallucinate a golden mountain ahead of us on the highway, although there is no golden mountain present. This peculiar act of object, which is an object for or of consciousness but need not be a real object, is most evident in certain sorts of mental acts, of belief, assertion, and the like (Solomon 167). For example, we might say “Husserl believed that essences could be intuited”, or “Frege asserted that Kerry (Geach and Black) was confused”. What is the object of belief or assertion in these sentences? It is not essences or Kerry. Rather, what is believed or asserted is whatever the object of belief is (namely that, essences could be intuited, or that Kerry was confused). These objects hold a special place of great importance in philosophy, for their nature has long been a source of puzzlement (Solomon 167).

The essence of consciousness is to act towards (intentional) objects, which as mentioned earlier, may themselves not be real objects (167). The intentionality principle underlines the fact that our everyday experiences are directed towards objects, properties and states of affairs. At the same time objects are revealed from definite perspective. There seems to be a contradiction between the definite directedness of consciousness and the perspectivism of experiences. Husserl argues that, though experience reveals its object from a perspective, we are intentionally directed toward a three dimensional object. The different modes of consciousness we may have when we love, hate, desire, present, wonder etc, are all about something. Hence all object of experience are presented to consciousness as transcending. They are presented as going beyond the experience we have of them. Though all our experiences are perspectival, they also present their objects to us as transcending the perspective. For instance, when we see a tree, we do not see a mere image of the tree or a packet of sense data, but we see the tree itself. Of-course, the tree is seen from a definite perspective and only those parts of the tree that are visible from our perspective are seen by us. But Husserl asserts that, the whole tree is given to the consciousness as an intentional object (Husserl 69). Hence phenomenology goes beyond mere empiricism. That is, it goes beyond the image theory proposed by empiricism.

Husserl argues that perception enables us to go beyond the image, which is present to us. We relate ourselves to the object itself as an image to a certain extra conscious object. Husserl claims that in intentional experiences, we do not get raw uninterrupted images in consciousness. Instead, we get the data that are already interpreted as images of some objects or other.

Franz Brentano, while introducing the notion of intentionality had asserted that consciousness was essentially intentional and argued that every mental phenomenon was characterised by the intentional inexistence of an object. It is directed towards an object or immanent objectivity. According to Brentano, every mental phenomenon contains something as an object within itself, although not everyone does so in the same way. This object, argues Brentano, is the reference to a content.

...by what the scholastics of the Middle Ages referred to as the intentional (also the mental) inexistence of the object, and what we...would call relation to a content, direction upon an object (which is not here to be understood as a reality) or immanent objectivity (108).

Brentano's intentionality principle thus aims at distinguishing the psychical from the physical. Brentano thus initiates a study on the nature of consciousness and also on the phenomena as they are directly given to consciousness; he argues that every mental state contains its object completely within itself as an intentional object is immanent to the mental state.

Husserl, while adopting the principle of intentionality as a central doctrine in his phenomenology, proposed some crucial changes in its conceptualization. According to him, experiences are directed toward entities, which are both mental and non-mental. He argues that in the experience of colour, we see coloured things and not mere colour sensations. He maintains that entities like physical objects, persons, numbers, which are not spacio-temporal, particulars like the patch of blue, universals like blueness, states of affairs, mental entities like thoughts, images and feelings etc, can become an intentional object. In this sense, Husserl takes phenomenology and the principle of intentionality beyond what Brentano intended it to be.

Husserl's Analysis of Noesis and Noema

In order to describe in more detail how consciousness is always consciousness of something, in his writings from 1907 to 1913, Husserl gradually unveiled his new thinking about the nature of intentional experiences in general, seeking to identify the 'eidetic moments' of intentional acts and their objects. In order to get away from all psychologistic and naturalistic misconceptions, including those of descriptive psychology, he introduced a new terminology, drawing on the ancient Greek terms for the 'act of thinking', *noesis* and 'what is thought', *noema*, terms which carried less philosophical baggage than traditional terms for the intentional structure, for example, 'act', 'content', 'meaning', and so on. For Husserl, the most important thing to emphasize is that *noesis* and *noema* are correlative parts of the structure of the mental process (Moran 155).

Noesis according to Husserl, is an actual content of experience, i.e. intentional meaning pointed at an object specially and definitely. For this, it is called actual Noetic content of an act. Whereas *Noema* is referred to the intentional content of experience, i.e. its concrete correlate. It is important to emphasise that *Noesis* is always considered in relation with *Noema*. Thus, as Husserl would say, no noetic moment is conceived of without noematic moment. Therefore, for Husserl, object is not outside of consciousness. Object of consciousness is the original and constituting component of intentional experience. Hence, we are not only faced with *noesis* but also with *noema*, i.e. with object which is under rumination and thinking. *noesis* is an actual component of an act and hence it is an actual noetic content. Husserl calls object as *noema* (Rassi & Shahabi 29-34).

Noesis

The *noesis* is an act of consciousness. It is that, which intends or is directed towards an object (of consciousness). The central function of this intending is to provide a formative synthesis to shape material elements into intentional experience (Husserl 228-229). In other words, the *noesis* is responsible for the organisation of experience into experiences of objects. The *noesis* is the concretely complete intensive mental process approached in such a way that its noetic components are clearly emphasized (Husserl 233). The *noesis* includes what Husserl formerly called the ‘quality’ of the act (impression, beliefs, doubts etc), which all acts of hoping, or remembering, have in common. But the *noesis* has a larger function in that it is responsible for bestowing sense for constituting the meaning of what it grasps (Moran 156).

Intentional acts (*Noesis*) are distinguished not only in being related to or aiming at objects, but also insofar as this intentional direction undergoes differentiation. Brentano had already distinguished between various kinds of intentional relations of various “psychological phenomena”. Husserl distinguishes himself from Brentano by grounding this differentiation of the intentional relation exclusively in the eidetic structure of the intentional act rather than in the various kinds of intentional objects. As such, everything that a noetic phenomenology can say about the intentional object derives immediately from the description of the intentional act (*noesis*).

The object is an intentional object, that is, there is an act with a determinately characterised intention, an intention that in this determinateness makes up precisely what we call the intention toward this object (Husserl 120).

In another section of the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl maintains that:

There are ...not two things present in immanent experience, the object is not immanently experienced and then next to it the intentional, immanent experience itself...rather, only one thing is present, the intentional, immanent experience, of which the essential descriptive characteristic is precisely the relevant intention (99).

The characteristic, that of “presenting ...an objectivity” is common to all intentional experiences regardless of their diversity in other respects. The various kinds of intentional experience all belong to the same class of “objectifying” (Husserl 167) acts. This moment, common to all objectifying acts and having the function of presenting an intentional objectivity, Husserl calls the “material” of the act.

The material counted for us as the moment of the objectifying act that brings it about that the act will present just this object and in just this way, that is, in just these articulations and forms, with particular reference to these determinations or relations (240).

Every word of this definition is important and pregnantly comprises a whole series of consideration from the sixth of the *Logical Investigations*. The most important determination of the material is doubtlessly that it refers the act to “just this object” and in a way that implies at the same time the determinations of this object. Thus, the material determines which object the act will refer to (denoting) and within this “objective relation”, it determines at the same time the characteristics of this object (connoting). “The material firmly determines not only the object as such, which is meant by the act, but also the way in which it is determined” (232).

According to the above quotation from the sixth of the *Logical Investigations*, this “way” comprises not only the characteristics attributed to the objects but also the articulations and forms in which these characteristics are thus attributed. The simplest because most immediate way of relating to the determinate object is by means of names (147). In naming, the intentional act (*noesis*) is related directly to the object directly to the object pointing to it “as if with the finger”, meaning or intending the object in one ray of meaning or intention. The material of such a single-membered (simple) act is a “single-membered material” ((168-169). Husserl further distinguished between such singled-rayed acts of meaning from multi-rayed acts, that is, the “propositional” or “synthetic acts” (147-167).

Noema

The act of cognition must refer to that which is thought. The referents of cogitations, that is, their intentional objects are termed “cogitate” or *noema*. The Greek work *noema* means “that which is perceived” (Sahakian 333). According to Husserl’s theory of intentionality, every cogitation has its *cogitata*; every *noesis* has its *noema*. Every thought has that which is thought about, every perception has that which is imagined, etc – every intention has its referent object. It does not matter whether or not the *noema* is idea, for its truth rests upon its being a correlate of one’s own intentionality.

The term *noema* is first used in pencil draft of *Ideas I* in 1912 (Bernet 73). Husserl’s interest in the *noema* came through a reconsideration of the relation between the individual experiential act and its acts of grasping a meaning and referring to an object. Husserl is rethinking the nature of the international object, now under the bracketing of existence. He is in a sense meditating on the kind of relation between sense and reference, which Frege had proposed in his famous article in 1891, but with the *epoche*, all questions regarding the true referent of an expression are excluded. He is interested, then, not in actual reference but only in the act of referring and the *intended* reference of the act. The point is that, with the *noema*, Husserl is positing a single complex entity which will take care both of what Frege includes under the term sense, and the referential function of the act. In this sense, Husserl is not simply restating the Fregean conception in his own term, but essentially rethinking the relation between the act of giving meaning and the meaning and object intended (Moran 156).

The fundamental distinction which underlies the doctrine of *noema* was already present in the fifth logical investigation, where Husserl distinguished between the *object which is intended* and the *object as it is intended* (Husserl 578), for example, the Emperor of Germany may be understood as the

son of Friedrich III or the grandson of Queen Victoria. In the 1906-1907 *Lectures on Logic and Theory of Knowledge*, Husserl speaks of grasping this intended object immanently, as it is given, without regard to existence (232). As usual, Husserl contrasts the real temporal living act of intending with the ideality of non-real nature of the object grasped as it is grasped. The problem is whether the *noema* as an immanent entity in consciousness is a part of the occurrent thought, or whether it refers to the object beyond the thought, or whether it is the abstract ideal meaning through which the object is given.

Husserl maintains that in our everyday natural attitude, we focus just on the object, but the function of suspending the natural standpoint is to focus on the *noema* by a kind of reflection which Husserl acknowledges is “unnatural”. Husserl thought that a special kind of phenomenological or philosophical reflection was required to focus on the *noema* rather different from our ordinary act of reflection, as when, for example, we reflect on the meaning of the sentence we have just uttered (Sokolowski 113-129). If these forms of reflections were the same, then, phenomenology would not differ from semantic or conceptual analysis. But for Husserl, the reason for applying the reduction is to be able to generate a new kind of reflection, one which is self-consciously “unnatural” as Husserl put it. I am not normally conscious of the *noema* in my act of perception, rather I see the objects directly and the *noema* itself can only be grasped by a special act of transcendental reflection. Our consciousness always has directedness; it is always directed as if there were an object. An intentional act is normally directed to the real or transcendent object; if I am thinking of a box, it is the real box that my thought is directed on. Similarly, when I am fascinated about a holiday on Paradise Island, it is the imagined place, Paradise Island, that I am focusing on (whether or not it exists in reality). The *noema* is not the object towards which the acts is directed, but rather provides the vehicle which connects any occurrent thought to the intended object. The *noema* is that through which the object is grasped, it is the route to the object (Moran 159). Husserl always emphasizes that we are at first naïve realist in perception; we see the tree out there, we do not see the *noema*. But we see a tree because our perceptual act has a ‘noetic-noematic’ constitution, because our act has a *noema*.

The main discussion of the *noema* occurs in *Ideas*, where Husserl introduces it in terms of a fundamental rethinking of the components proper to the intentional process. The *noesis* is considered in its essence to contain within it something like a ‘sense’ (Husserl 214). Correlative to the noetic element of the act there is the ‘noematic content’ or *noema*, and even perceptual acts have a ‘sense’ in this wide sense. In the natural attitude, when I see an apple tree in the garden, I treat it as a transcendent really existing thing. But now the reference to the outside world is suspended: “now the real relation, previously meant as actually existing, is destroyed (215). There remains left over a *perceiving* and a *perceived*. To examine the structure of this perceived as perceived is to examine the *noema*. The bracketing has changed our relation to this object. As Husserl says, the object, the apple tree, can be destroyed but the *noema* cannot be destroyed:

The *tree simpliciter*, the physical thing belonging to nature, is nothing less than this perceived tree as perceived, which as perceptual sense, inseparably belongs to the perception. The tree simpliciter can burn up, be resolved into its chemical elements etc. but the sense – the sense of this perception, something belonging necessarily to its essence – cannot burn up; it has no chemical elements, no force, no real properties (216).

In the analysis by Moran, this perceived entity contains nothing in itself but what appears and precisely as it appears, ‘in the mode of givenness’ appropriate to it. Even the non-existence of the actual object cannot remove the sense from the intending act, but Husserl does not want to speak of the sense of merely ‘intentional’ or ‘immanent’ in the scholastic or Brentanian sense. Husserl would talk of the intentional object as opposed to the actual object if this were not to bring in a false dichotomy. There is no second immanent tree beside the real tree in the garden which I perceive. In the phenomenological reduction, the whole point of distinguishing between the internal, intentional object and the external object has been annulled and Husserl is concerned more to account for the manner in which the tree-object as perceived appears in consciousness (Moran 158).

In understanding Husserl’s noetic-noematic structure of experience, it is also important to mention that, though every act has a *noema*, not every act has an object: for example, in thinking of a unicorn, my act has a *noema*, but there exists nothing corresponding to this *noema*. Different acts of attention by the ego in fact present the *noema* under different modifications. Logic which studies propositional contents, is interested only in the objective noematic core and is not interested in the fuller noemata of judgements – that which makes one judgement evident and another blind, for example, the how of its givenness. Similarly when I see a tree, the perceived as perceived includes the properties of being lovely, admired, to the left of the window, and so on. The noematic core is to be distinguished from the determinations which are often thought of as more subjective (158).

Dagfinn Follesdal has argued that the *noema* is an intentional entity, rather like Frege’s notion of ‘sense’, but now generalised from linguistic assertions to cover all intentional acts including, for example, visual perception (Follesdal 680-687). Follesdal quotes Husserl’s remark in *Ideas III* that “the *noema* is nothing but the generalisation of the idea of meaning to the field of all acts. This means that the *noema* is to be found in all acts, not just linguistic acts. Follesdal wants to define *noema* as “all those features of the act in virtue of which it has the object it has” (266). It follows that, every intentional act has an object, but the object strictly speaking is not the same as the *noema*. Moreover, in each mental act, there is only one *noema*. When we think of something in different ways the *noema* supports changes in the mode of givenness, and thus guarantees that our experiences are of the same object. Husserl speaks here of a “noematic nucleus” which is what allows ‘the victor at Jena’ and the ‘vanquished at Waterloo’ to refer to the same object (Moran 159).

Edmund Husserl admits to having some difficulties regarding the mode of being of the *noema*, the manner of its immanence in the noetic act, and the mode of its intending of the object. In his earlier discussion, he characterised his new thinking of meaning as ‘ontic’ and this has also led critics to worry about the ontological status of the *noema*. Husserl himself never addressed this problem in a clear way. Those difficulties have been bequeathed to subsequent commentaries. Follesdal, Smith and McIntyre, among others, have taken it to be an ideal, abstract, intentional object associated with the act, an extension of the Fregean doctrine of sense. Others understand it as a linguistic meaning (Solomon 168-181). David Bell has argued that it is not a sortal notion at all, but rather a “ragbag concept” covering different times which are there to condition or product the meaningfulness of the noetic act (Bell 175). As such, Bell thinks Husserl’s notion is incoherent; Husserl is assuming that there is a single entity – the *noema* – responsible for making intentional acts meaningful, but for Bell, this is a misunderstanding. Furthermore, Bell holds that Husserl, in having a notion of a determinable X at the centre of the *noema*, is simply assuming that he is setting out to explain, namely how the intentional act achieves relevance.

Given the above analysis, it can be deduced that in all external perception, there is always more to the object than is contained in the *noema*, there is an excess, as it were. Thus, Aron Gurwitsch interpreted the *noema* as the object itself, the object as seen from a certain perspective, or perhaps a part of the object, for example, the tree as perceived. Gurwitsch tends to think of the object as an assembly of noemata; thus, when we grasp a *noema*, we grasp the object in part, as it were. For Gurwitsch, the object is a series of noemata and nothing more. Robert Sokolowski on the other hand, argues that the *noema* is the object as it is intended in the act, and hence it is not the same as a sense or meaning (Moran 160). We cannot here sort out these difficulties; however, our survey of Husserl’s theory of intentionality has shown us that consciousness consists in acts (*noeses*), and sensory matter (*hyle*) which together give us intentional objects (*noemata*).

Conclusion

Husserl’s definition of consciousness in terms of intentionality marks a revolutionary innovation in the history of modern philosophy. It solves a problem which, on the grounds of the traditional modern conception of consciousness, proved hopelessly enigmatic; to say the least, the problem in question is opened to promising theoretical treatment. Hence, it appears opportune to consider Husserl’s theory of intentionality historically, though, to be sure, the theory of intentionality must ultimately be judged on its own merits. Its validity can only depend upon its satisfactorily accounting for the fundamental structure of consciousness. Still, to present it historically brings forth its full significance in the most striking fashion. One of the values of Husserl’s concept of intentionality is that, it enables the phenomenologist to deal with the immanent-transcendent problem—i.e., the relation between what is within consciousness and what extends beyond it—in a manner different from that, which were employed by many philosophers who have claimed that an

experienced, represented, and remembered object (e.g, a tree) is inside consciousness (immanent), whereas the real object itself is outside the mind (transcendent).

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