

# the review of metaphysics

a philosophical quarterly

---

Husserl on Pictures and Intentional Objects

Author(s): Guido K  ng

Source: *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Jun., 1973), pp. 670-680

Published by: [Philosophy Education Society Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20126300>

Accessed: 11/07/2014 08:43

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Philosophy Education Society Inc.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Review of Metaphysics*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## DISCUSSIONS

### HUSSERL ON PICTURES AND INTENTIONAL OBJECTS \*

GUIDO KÜNG

**T**HE DIALOG between Husserlian Phenomenology and Analytic Philosophy is severely hampered by the fact that much of the secondary literature on phenomenology fails to pay attention to certain subtle semantical distinctions which are basic for a clear understanding of epistemological issues.<sup>1</sup> Some European phenomenologists even take pride in their neglect of what they consider to be shallow scholastic quibbling. I hope to remedy this short-coming by outlining in this paper what I believe to be the keypoints of Husserl's theory of perception and theory of meaning. My approach will be developmental because contrary to popular belief phenomenology has not been revealed in one instantaneous intuition; on the contrary Husserl's views developed and shifted constantly throughout his life.

#### I

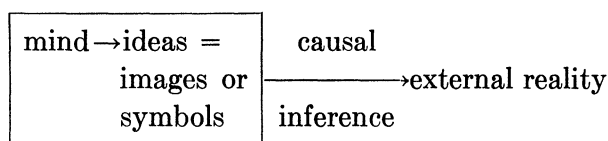
In its theory of perception modern philosophy has been characterized by a representationalist view according to which consciousness is comparable to a closed box in which the mind contemplates its ideas. These ideas are considered to be the primary objects (i.e., the referents) of our knowledge and perception, and it is thought that the existence of all other objects has to be inferred by a causal inference. If there is an external world, then it is in principle invisible, because it lies hidden behind the directly given ideas which are merely its images or symbols. This view was still defended by Helmholtz, the

---

\* This paper has been read at the Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association (Eastern Division) on December 27–29, 1972, in Boston. It is based on research at the Husserl-Archives in Louvain (Belgium) during the academic year 1970–71, made possible by a leave of absence from the University of Notre Dame and a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and it was written in the Spring of 1972 during a visiting semester at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri.

<sup>1</sup> There are, however, notable exceptions. I have learned especially from Th. De Boer and D. Føllesdal (see footnotes 10 and 13).

leading philosopher of science at Husserl's time, and by Husserl's own master Brentano.

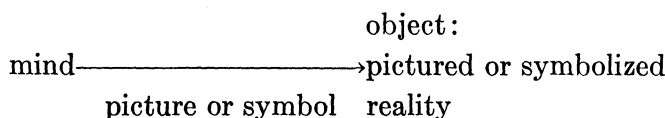


Husserl, by taking a closer look at “the things themselves,” found that the modern representationalist view of consciousness was based on a faulty description of what an experience of representation, i.e., a picture- or symbol-consciousness, really is like.<sup>2</sup> He found that in a case of genuine picture- or symbol-consciousness the picture or the symbol is *not* the object or the referent on which one is focussing. If I look at a photograph of my children, then my interest is normally focussing on my children: Are they laughing? Are they intimidated by the fact of being photographed? etc. If I read a novel, then my interest is captivated by the story; I am not focussing on the inkmarks in the book. (This explains why proofreading is not an easy job.) Of course I *can* change my attitude and focus on the photographic paper or on the inkmarks in the book, but when I do this—at this very moment—the photograph or the inkmark ceases to exert for me its function as a picture or as a symbol and it becomes for me just a physical object in its own right.<sup>3</sup> Therefore the situation of genuine

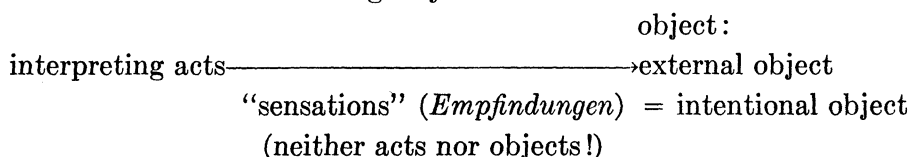
<sup>2</sup> Symbolic representation plays an essential role in mathematics. Therefore Husserl, whose initial interest was in the philosophy of arithmetic, concentrated from the start on the investigation of what Brentano had called “improper” or “symbolic presentation” (*uneigentliche* or *symbolische Vorstellung*). But soon Husserl realized that his findings were significant not merely for the philosophy of mathematics, but for the theory of perception in general. Cf. E. Husserl “Psychologische Studien zur elementaren Logik,” *Philosophische Monatshefte* (Berlin), vol. 30 (1894), pp. 159–91, reviewed by Husserl himself in his “Bericht über deutsche Schriften zur Logik aus dem Jahre 1894,” *Archiv für systematische Philosophie* (Berlin), vol. 3 (1897), pp. 224–27. Important also is Husserl's unpublished review of the book by K. Twardowski, *Zur Lehre vom Inhalt und Gegenstand der Vorstellungen*, Wien 1894.

<sup>3</sup> The examples of the photograph and the novel are not taken from Husserl's texts. But in “Psychologische Studien . . .,” pp. 182–84, Husserl contrasts, e.g., the viewing of an arabesque (*die Betrachtung einer Arabeske*) with the viewing of an arithmetical symbol in its actual functioning (*die Betrachtung eines arithmetischen Zeichens in seiner lebendigen Funktion*). Actually what is first seen as a mere arabesque can turn out to be a numeral. But “at the very moment at which the arabesque turns into a symbol, i.e.,

picture- or symbol-consciousness has to be schematized as follows:



If representationalism is right in suggesting that there is an analogy between picture- or symbol-consciousness and ordinary external perception,<sup>4</sup> then the essential distinction between picture or symbol on the one hand and object on the other hand must carry over into a similar distinction in external perception. That is, the object of external perception cannot be that which in this perception has a function comparable to that of a picture or a symbol; and conversely, whatever in external perception plays a role analogous to that of a picture or a symbol cannot be the object of external perception. Husserl arrived therefore at a theory of perception which can be schematized in the following way:<sup>5</sup>



Husserl's theory of perception may still be called a representationalism, since it still makes use of an analogy with picture-consciousness, but it differs essentially from the kind of representationalism that was rampant in modern philosophy: consciousness is no longer comparable to a closed box.

---

acquires the character of a representing content, the mental situation is totally changed. We see of course the symbol, but our interest is not focussed on it, we are not intuiting it.” (*In dem Augenblick, wo die Arabeske zum Zeichen wird, also den Charakter eines repräsentierendem Inhalts gewinnt, hat sich die psychische Lage total geändert. Wir sehen zwar das Zeichen, aber wir haben es nicht darauf abgesehen, wir schauen es nicht an.*) See also Husserl, *Logical Investigations* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), vol. 2, pp. 566–67.

<sup>4</sup> It would seem that we have here a case of a non-viciously circular metaphor. Cf. C. Mason Myers, “The Circular Use of Metaphor,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 26 (1966), pp. 391–402.

<sup>5</sup> Professor Richard Allan Watson of Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, has drawn my attention to the fact that Husserl's theory of perception is remarkably similar to that of Thomas Reid.

Husserl's theory of perception entails the following important consequences:

1) External reality cannot be a hidden "Ding-an-sich" (against Kant).

2) Everyday experience and physics are dealing with one and the same reality (scientific realism).<sup>6</sup>

3) If the intentional object of external perception is understood to be the intended object, i.e., the *referent* of the intentional act, then it is identical with the external object. The interpreting acts and the sensations (*Empfindungen*) are immanent, but the intentional object thusly understood is entirely transcendent. In the first edition of the *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901) Husserl could therefore claim that the intentional object did *not* belong to the subject matter of "descriptive psychology," i.e., of phenomenology.<sup>7</sup> The following schema typifies Husserl's view at that time:

interpreting acts	→	intentional object
sensations		= referent
( <i>Empfindungen</i> )		= object in external reality
immanent: domain of phenomenology		transcendent: domain of physics or metaphysics

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Husserl, *Ideas* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), §52. esp. p. 146; Husserl, *Ding und Raum: Vorlesungen 1907*, Husserliana vol. 16 (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1973), pp. 6–7. See also R. Ingarden, "Husserl's Betrachtungen zur Konstitution des physikalischen Dinges," *Archives de Philosophie*, vol. 27, (1964), pp. 356–407.

<sup>7</sup> Husserl spoke of "the narrow phenomenological domain" (*die enge phänomenologische Sphäre*) and affirmed: "These insights can only be checked and confirmed by someone who has trained himself . . . to be receptive for the pure phenomenological states of affairs, uncontaminated by any admixture from the intentional objects." (*Nachgeprüft und bestätigt können diese Einsichten nur von Demjenigen werden, der die wohlgeübte Befähigung erlangt hat, . . . die phänomenologischen Verhältnisse rein, von aller Einmischung der intentionalen Gegenständlichkeit ungetrübt, auf sich wirken zu lassen.*) "For the phenomenological investigation the objects themselves are nothing, since they are, generally speaking, transcendent with respect to the act." (*Für die phänomenologische Betrachtung ist die Gegenständlichkeit selbst nichts; sie ist ja, allgemein zu reden, dem Acte transscendent.*) Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*, first edition, vol. 2 (Halle 1901), pp. 17, 11–12, 387.

Of course our grasp of an object may be one-sided, inadequate or even erroneous, and some kind of distinction between the-object-as-we-take-it-to-be and the-object-as-it-actually-is has to be made; but at the time of the first edition of the *Logical Investigations* Husserl had not yet gotten the necessary categories which would allow him to explicate this distinction in ontological terms.

4) If in actual fact there is no object in external reality, then in actual fact there is no referent, i.e., no intentional object understood in the sense mentioned above. In the *Logical Investigations* (first edition) Husserl came therefore to the conclusion that in such a case the intentional object was a fiction, that to talk about it was then a mere *façon de parler*, a mere way of speaking, which carried no ontological commitment.<sup>8</sup>

## II

Let us now turn to the theory of meaning. According to the doctrine of intentionality, all mental acts are meaningful, i.e., they are directed, they mean certain objects, they are referring. Furthermore, that an act means just such-and-such an object is due to the fact that the act is just such-and-such an act. In establishing this theory, the primary example which Husserl had in mind was again the case of symbol- or picture-consciousness: that by looking at this painting I see such-and-such a mountain is primarily due to the fact that I interpret the color-patches on the canvas in just such-and-such a way. (Notice that in themselves the color-patches mean nothing, they merely have certain similarities with other physical things.) Accepting an analogy between symbol- or picture-consciousness and ordinary external perception, Husserl concludes that in ordinary external perception too, what kind of object is meant depends primarily on the *act* of perception which is an act interpreting the sensations (*Empfindungen*).

Husserl calls the “suchness” of an intentional act in virtue of which it is an act intending just such-and-such an object, the “matter” (*Materie*) of this act. For an intentional act to have meaning is therefore to have a certain “matter.”<sup>9</sup> Notice that this “matter”

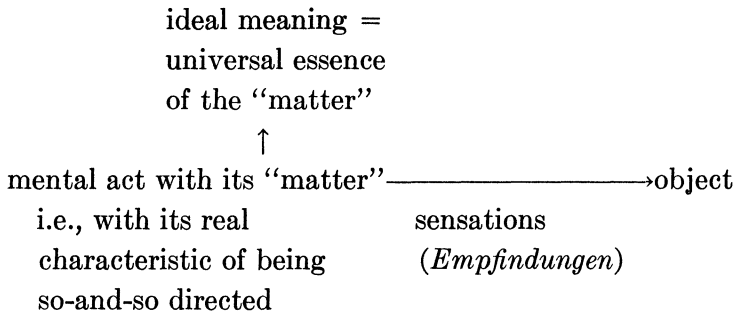
<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Logical Investigations*, vol. 1, pp. 352–53; vol. 2, pp. 558–59, 595–96, 869.

<sup>9</sup> Actually I have somewhat simplified my account by not introducing the notion of the “quality” of the act. In the *Logical Investigations* the

is not something unreal, but it is as real as the act of which it is a constitutive characteristic. Furthermore this “matter” is not to be confused with the sensations (*Empfindungen*): the latter are not characteristics of the act, but elements of consciousness distinct from the act.

After the publication of his *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (1891) Husserl learned from Natorp and Frege, and by reading Bolzano, Lotze and Herbart, that logic and mathematics had to be understood as being concerned with *ideal* meanings, e.g., propositions (*Sätze-an-sich*), and that a failure to realize this was bad psychologism. But what kinds of entities could those ideal meanings be? In the first edition of *Logical Investigations* Husserl assumed that they must be a kind of universal essences (*Species*) and he identified them with the universal essences of “matters” of intentional acts.<sup>10</sup> For instance the ideal meaning Red is taken to be the universal essence which is instantiated by the “matter” of all acts which are acts of intending something red. Notice that the ideal meaning Red is *not* the universal essence Red: the latter is instantiated in all red things, but not in mental acts.

The following schema illustrates Husserl’s first theory of meaning:



“quality” of the act is also counted as part of the meaning. But Husserl himself says that whether or not to include the “quality” is rather a matter of convention (cf. vol. 2, pp. 737–38).

<sup>10</sup> *Logical Investigations*, vol. 1, p. 330. Cf. Th. De Boer, *Das Verhältnis zwischen dem ersten und dem zweiten Teil der ‘Logischen Untersuchungen’ Edmund Husserls*, *Saggi Filosofici* No. 27 (Torino: Filosofia 1967); and Th. De Boer, *De ontwikkelingsgang in het denken van Husserl* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1966).



In 1908 Husserl became dissatisfied with the view that ideal meanings are a kind of universal essences.<sup>11</sup> He found that meanings, though they are not what we normally refer to, are nevertheless always in a certain sense “meant”: it makes sense to say that they are “what we mean.” However, neither the “matter” of an intentional act nor the universal essence instantiated by this “matter” is in any sense “meant,” at least not at the moment at which we perform that intentional act. Therefore neither of them can be the meaning in the sense of “what we mean,” and the theory which identified the so-called “ideal” meaning with the universal essence of the “matter” of the act must have been mistaken. Husserl concluded that the meaning is neither something real nor an ideal universal essence, but rather something third. As a matter of historical fact Husserl has been influenced in this change in his theory of meaning by Frege’s notion of sense.<sup>12</sup>

The new theory of meaning included an important bonus: Husserl could now assimilate the intentional objects (understood as the-objects-as-we-take-them-to-be) to this third kind of entities. For instance states of affairs (the intentional objects of propositional acts) and propositions (the “ideal” meanings of propositional acts) have a very similar status. (They are not exactly the same, because e.g., the statements ‘The emperor is coming to Goettingen’ and ‘William II is coming to Goettingen’ exemplify according to Husserl a situation where there are two propositions but only one intentional state of affairs.) In the *Ideas* (1913) Husserl holds therefore that the intentional object, i.e., the noematic object, belongs on the general level of meaning (*Sinn*),<sup>13</sup> and he accepts now a distinction between the real object and the intentional object: a real tree can burn, but it

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Husserl’s lecture on “*Bedeutungslehre*” from the Summer Semester 1908 (Ms. F I 5) and his research notes “*Noema und Sinn*” (Ms. B III 12, esp. fol. 182a, 159b, 173b). These texts have not yet been published. In a letter to Ingarden from April 5, 1918, Husserl says that this change in the theory of meaning belonged to the “decisive insights” (*entscheidenden Einsichten*) attained in the time between the *Logical Investigations* (first edition) and the *Ideas*. [Husserl, *Briefe an Roman Ingarden* *Phaenomenologica* vol. 25 (The Hague: M. Nijhoff 1968), p. 10.]

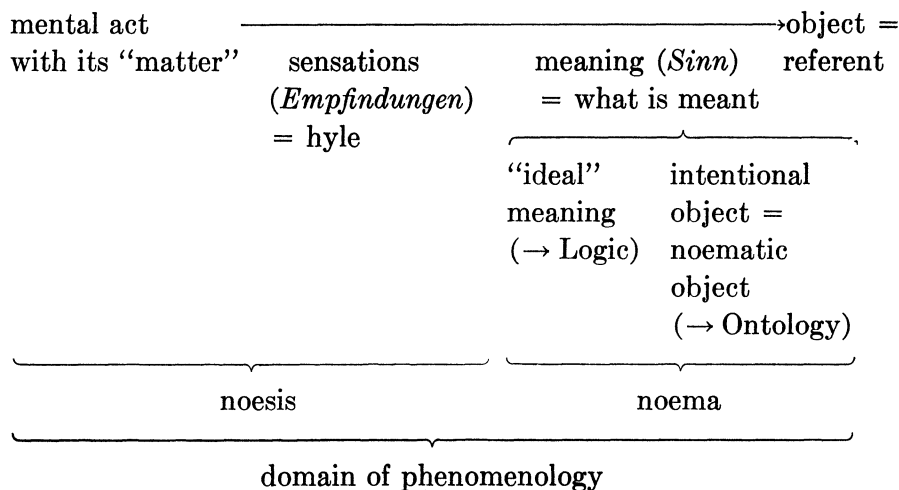
<sup>12</sup> This is the *second* major influence of Frege; the first one concerned psychologism, cf third paragraph of II above.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. D. Føllesdal, “Husserl’s notion of noema,” *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 66 (1969), pp. 680–87.



is nonsense to say that the corresponding noematic object can burn.<sup>14</sup>

Combining the theory of perception with the new theory of meaning we obtain the following comprehensive schema:



As indicated in this schema, phenomenology now officially includes the intentional object within its subject matter: phenomenology is now both noetic *and* noematic phenomenology.<sup>15</sup> It can now be characterized as "*Sinn*"-analysis where different meanings and intentional objects are correlated with (and shown to be rooted in) different kinds of mental acts. This shift from a phenomenology primarily concerned with the analysis of essences to a phenomenology primarily concerned with the analysis of sense is very important. It increases the affinities between phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy, since the latter, especially in its most recent form, can be characterized as meaning-analysis where different meanings of linguistic expressions are clarified by distinguishing different kinds of speech acts. Of course, phenomenology is still concerned with essences, namely with the essences of meanings, intentional objects,

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Ideas* §89; Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press 1970), §70.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Husserl, *Ideas*, §97, English edition, p. 263: "The 'transcendental' reduction practices *epoche* in respect of reality (*Wirklichkeit*); but to the residue thereby left over belong the noemata with the noematic unit which lies in them themselves."

intentional acts and of their relations; but then ordinary language philosophy too is concerned with the *essential* features of meanings and speech acts.<sup>16</sup>

### III

The theory of perception and the theory of meaning also shed some much needed light on the controversial issue of Husserl's transcendental idealism. With the help of the distinction between noesis, noema and referent, the proper domain of phenomenology can be clearly delimited. It includes the noesis and the noema, but not those referents which are external to consciousness: all factual questions concerning external referents have to be bracketed. This bracketing resembles very much the procedure of doubting (though it is not identical with it) which Descartes employed in his *Meditations*. This bracketing is the phenomenological reduction which one performs when one follows the so-called Cartesian way into transcendental phenomenology.

But the characterization of phenomenology as "*Sinn*"-analysis leads also away from Descartes. Descartes, because he conceived of consciousness as a closed box, could be genuinely in doubt whether material objects existed outside this box. His aim was to remove this doubt and to prove that the external material objects, i.e., the subject matter of physics, did indeed exist. Husserl, on the other hand, never doubted that the material world exists. The aim of phenomenology is *not to prove the existence* of the material world, but *to clarify what we mean* when we affirm that the material world exists. The main task of phenomenology is explication. Viewing his task in this unc cartesian way, the phenomenologist has not primarily to perform a phenomenological reduction which *excludes* something from the domain of phenomenology, but he has rather to *broaden* his view

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf. my paper "Language analysis and phenomenological analysis," *Proceedings of the XIVth International Congress of Philosophy* vol. 2, (Vienna: Herder, 1968) pp. 247–53. With the introduction of a notion of sense which is akin to (though not identical with) the Fregean notion Husserlian phenomenology also becomes more easily comparable to logistic philosophy. In my paper "The world as noema and as referent," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 3 (1972), no. 1, pp. 15–26, I have tried to show that the notion of referent in logistic semantics corresponds to the notion of a certain kind of noematic object in phenomenological semantics.

by bringing into view the meaning constituting capacity of transcendental consciousness.

According to the transcendental idealism of the later Husserl, what we mean (or rather: what we can mean *meaningfully*) when we say that the material world exists, is that, guided by the Kantian idea of an all-encompassing synthesis, we are in fact able to continue the constitution of the noema of *the* material world, i.e., of a noema which is intersubjectively "valid." But this intersubjective "validity" does not mean that this noema has a referent. Husserl's position is similar to Berkeley's, both philosophers claim that the notion of an autonomous material world in the realist's sense is an absurdity. But whereas Berkeley could claim that to accept such a world was to infer the existence of a totally unknowable "I know not what," Husserl's position is significantly weaker. For a phenomenologist who is a realist does not think that the material world is a hidden "thing-in-itself," but he conceives of it as the direct referent of ordinary experience. Husserl can therefore not object that such a realist's world would be *totally* unknowable, he can only point out that necessarily such a world could only be partially known by man. He can only claim that such a realism with respect to the material world is still irrational because it accepts something that has in principle always an unknown *residue*. A realistic phenomenologist might retort that only with respect to finite human reason is there always such an unknown residue, that for divine reason nothing in the material world is unknown. But Husserl insists that the notion of an exhaustive divine intuition of *material* things is an absurdity; for him a *material* thing is by definition something which can only be known in the limited perspectival ways of perception.<sup>17</sup>

But, Husserl is not a solipsist.<sup>18</sup> Though for the later Husserl the noema of the material world has no referent, the noema of an *alter ego* (in the sense of another transcendental subject) normally does have a referent. There is a genuine phenomenological justification for this assumption. As a matter of fact we have the experience of

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Ideas*, pp. 123, 125, 386.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff 1960), fifth meditation; *Crisis* §54; at present three Husserliana-volumes with texts on intersubjectivity dating from 1905 to 1935 are in print: vol. 13–15 *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*, edited by Iso Kern (The Hague: M. Nijhoff).

living in *the* material world which is the same for everybody, i.e., our noema of the material world has the feature of intersubjective “validity.” This means that it has to be understood as being the product of and for a community of rational subjects and that solipsism must be wrong.

*University of Notre Dame.*