

HUSSERL AND ABSENCE:
A DERRIDIAN READING OF HUSSERL'S
INTENTIONALITY

Karl Shurts

The traditional modernist view of the world divides it into subject and object and explains it in terms of one or the other. Husserl, however, argues that we never encounter a subject apart from an object, and thus cannot account for the world except in terms of both; there is neither pure subjectivity nor pure objectivity. In other words, there is no such thing as a subject without an object, and vice versa. Thus, when I see, I always see some *thing* in some manner or another. To be conscious is to be conscious *of* something. Central to Husserl's theory is the *noema*, the thing *of* which we are conscious, *as such*. The noema, then, is not the empirical object in the world, but that object perceived *as such*, the object as it is *intended* from a certain perspective; therefore, the noema is purely an *ideal* object whose ontological order is radically different from objects in the world (*Ideas* §§88-9, 215-7). This distinction will be important to our discussion of Husserl's theory of intentionality.

Husserl divides the noema into two components: *Sinn* (sense or meaning) and *Gegebenheitsweise* (way of givenness).¹ For Husserl, *Sinn* is the component that can be expressed in language, the foundation of meaning in oral discourse. Once it is expressed linguistically, he will call it *Bedeutung*. The *Gegebenheitsweise* is a general term for defining the various ways in which the noema appears, or gives itself to consciousness. It involves the many modes of consciousness in its intending. As an essential component of the noema, the *Gegebenheitsweise* is the aspect that Husserl maintains is never present in the linguistic expression of the noema (the *Bedeutung*); it is never itself explicitly expressed (*Ideas* §126, 299-300).² We will later see what exactly characterizes the *Gegebenheitsweise* and in what way it is not present in oral discourse. We will also see how this component of the noema is a kind of *absence*, similar to what Jacques Derrida develops in his discussion of writing.

For Husserl, the *Gegebenheitsweise* characterizes the noema by determining its presentation to consciousness. However, in the expression of the noema, it is not present; it remains unexpressed or *absent*. In language it is a mark of excess because in every expression the *Gegebenheitsweise* is that which exceeds, or remains beyond, the limits of language. Nevertheless, Husserl maintains that this aspect, which is essential to the noema, is *nonexcessive* to consciousness; it is absolutely present to self prior to language (*Bedeutung*).

¹In *Logische Untersuchungen* he calls them *Materie* (*Sinn*) and *Qualität* (*Gegebenheitsweise*), using *Sinn* to refer to the whole noema. See *Zweiter Band*, V, §20, 425-431.

²Cf. *Logische Untersuchungen*, *Zweiter Band* VI, §2, 546-7.

However, we will see, according to Derrida and contrary to Husserl's claim, that the *Gegebenheitsweise* is never purely present to self because presence itself is grounded in *ideality*, the possibility of infinite repetition, or iterability, which is characteristic of both noema and *Bedeutung*. For Husserl, there is absence only in expressed *Bedeutung*, not in unexpressed noema; yet through iterability we discover an absence already at work in both—we discover an *other* that cannot ever be made present to consciousness, but at the same time determines the way in which presence appears to consciousness.

Before we can see Husserl's concept of *Gegebenheitsweise* as a mark of the *other*, we must first understand what Derrida means by absence and iterability, and how they characterize writing, and ultimately all experience. In "Signature Event Context," Derrida explains that communication has traditionally been defined as the transportation of ideas from the speaker to the hearer. This transportation privileges the voice, or oral discourse, and subsequently the self. Writing, then, as a form of communication, becomes simply an extension of speech where our voice, our "self" extends beyond the realm of *present* oral communication. We make our voice, our communication as present to self become present to someone else through writing. Inscription, then, is not an attempt to write to the future, or to what is not here, but to bring what is *absent* into *presence*, the presence of self. Writing, and thus all of experience, is reduced to this presence characterized by the voice, the voice of the subject.

However, Derrida points out that even this traditional definition of writing presupposes the *absence* of the reader, but that this absence is merely "a continuous modification, a progressive extenuation of presence. Representation regularly *supplements* presence" (SEC 85). Nevertheless, this presupposition suggests that absence is more fundamental to writing than traditional thought allows. Absence is not only presupposed but is the essential foundation that gives rise to the written sign. Where the modernist view will define writing in terms of presence and the voice of the subject, Derrida will here define writing in terms of an absence that is not a simple modification of presence.

How is this absence not a return to presence? Derrida points out that this absence is not merely the fact that the person I am writing to is not here; rather this absence is a kind of *absolute* absence, because if the person to whom I am writing is present in any way, then writing will not be constituted as writing, but merely as another form or extension of speech, of the voice. Derrida wants to rescue writing from this characterization by calling attention to its *iterability*:

... this distance, division, delay, *différance* must be capable of being brought to a certain absolute degree of absence for the structure of writing, supposing that writing exists, to be constituted. It is here that *différance* as writing could no longer (be) an (ontological) modification of presence. My "*written communication*" must, if you will, remain legible despite the absolute disappearance of every determined addressee in general for it to function as writing, that is, for it to be legible. It must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the addressee or of the empirically determinable set of addressees. (SEC 90; my emphasis)

For writing to be writing it must be iterable, i.e. readable by someone else. Even if something is written in a code that no one seems to be able to decipher, the code, *in principle*, could be broken and the message read; otherwise it is not writing.

Because writing is iterable, it is not simply a modification of presence. The possibility that anyone at all who is *not* present could read it lies in every experience of it in the present; at every moment in presence there is always already an absence. This break with presence is important for Derrida because it reveals the way in which we cannot limit meaning to a unique authority, or author. We have already seen the way in which the reader is absent in writing, but we can also see how the author himself disappears in inscription. He writes not only because the receiver is not present, but because of the possibility of his own absence; he writes so that he may be heard in his absence, in his non-presence. In the presence of writing we find absence, the absence of the author. Thus, writing itself is grounded in the very possibility of the absence of any unique authority that could delimit writing to one particular meaning. The possibility of having such an authority in writing that could limit meaning in this way disappears in its very creation.

Another consequence of writing's break with presence is its break with any context in particular as the authority of its meaning. Much like the author who disappears in inscription, the "original" context also becomes absent in the very moment the text is written, not simply because that particular context is past, but because there is no rule, or cipher, to decode the message and thereby recreate the context in which it was written. Certainly there are codes and rules; however, no rule can completely limit a text to a *unique* meaning. If there were such a rule, a way of resurrecting the original context, then we could isolate a particular meaning to a particular addressee from a unique author; and we have already seen how iterability enables writing to break with any specific addressee and authority. Writing can have meaning aside from any determined reader, and thus from any *unique* context. The meaning of the mark or sign in writing is not "used up" in its inscription; it can be used in different contexts with different meanings. Writing must be able to break with its "original" context and the author, otherwise it is not writing (*SEC* 91-2).

Derrida claims that writing thought of in this manner should be the model for the way we understand speech, not vice versa. Ultimately, he will claim that this re-thinking of writing will be the model for all experience as well. To help him do this he discusses another kind of absence, the absence of the signified, or the referent. Language is a system of signifiers that appear to have meaning because they seem to point to some *thing*, some referent. The word "dog" means what it does because it refers to the four-legged animal in my front yard. However, Derrida states that words have meaning only through their *difference* from other signifiers, from other words. We know what "dog" means because it belongs to a system where meaning is derived from the differences between its parts, between other meanings. Derrida concludes:

The first consequence that can be drawn from this is that *the signified concept is never present in and of itself*, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is in-

scribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. (*Différance* 63; my emphasis)

Thus the signified is never fully present to consciousness and can never be made so because language is essentially a chain of signifiers that always refer to and differ from that which they want to make present. In other words, if the thing, or signified were present, we would not need language, or signs to *re-present* it. Thus, because language is a chain of signs, it reveals the absence of what it refers to and *creates* presence: (1) its own presence; and (2), through it, the *mediated* presence of the signified. Thus, signs bring the referent into presence, but this presence is not pure, or immediate, rather it is mediated by signs, by indication. Thus, the signified as such remains absent.

Because of the absence of the signified in language, we see that the signified is *nonessential* to the meaning of writing or speech. Husserl himself points this out in his discussion of apparently meaningless statements such as "a square circle," in *Logical Investigations*.³ In this case the codes or signs can be manipulated so that there is no signified at all, where the words or symbols do not refer to anything *at all*. However, these manipulations are not meaningless (*sinnlos*); they still have meaning in that they are contradictory, or simply false. Thus we see that language *means*, has meaning, necessarily without the presence of a signified; its absence is essential to language as a chain of signifiers. Derrida concludes from this discussion:

This structural possibility of being severed from its referent or signified (and therefore from communication and its context) seems to me to make every mark, even if oral, a grapheme in general, that is as we have seen, the nonpresent *remaining* of a differential mark cut off from its alleged "production" or origin. And I will extend this law even to all "experience" *in general*, if it is granted that there is no *pure* experience, but only chains of differential marks. (*SEC* 94; emphasis in original)

Derrida's claim that absence and iterability pervade all experience becomes important in our analysis of Husserl's theory of intentionality. Husserl, however, wants to claim that in consciousness there is no absence; the whole noema, as the foundation of meaning, is absolutely present to consciousness without mediation. However, we will see that, even for Husserl, a kind of absence is essential to intentionality, and thus to the experience we find in consciousness.

For Husserl, every act of consciousness, and thus every experience, has a noema, some *thing* of which we are conscious in a particular way: "... every intentional experience has a noema and therein a meaning [*Sinn*] through which it is related to the [intended] object ..." (*Ideas* §135, 322). The concept of noema is critical to phenomenology. Through it Husserl attempts to ground *pure meaning*, to find the pure logical grounds of experience that gives rise to all experience in general. What will constitute *impurity* for Husserl is the indicative

³Zweiter Band. I. §15, 58-62. Also see Derrida's discussion of this in *SEC*, 95.

aspect of language, which “falls outside the content of absolutely ideal objectivity, that is, outside truth” (*Speech* 30). It is clear to him that meaning is possible without indication, and this will constitute uncontaminated meaning.⁴ Thus, the noema is defined as the ideal object that grounds pure meaning, uncontaminated with indication because, as ideal, it is absolutely present to consciousness, to self.

Thus, consciousness does not have an indicative relation with the noema because the noema does not exist in an *outside* that consciousness would need to refer to in order to have meaning. As consciousness intends the noema, it understands it in the same moment (*im selben Augenblick*).⁵ To be conscious is to be conscious of a noema, of an ideality, but not in any indicative way because in consciousness there is no distance between pure meaning (noema) and self. For Husserl, the noema is the entity that is absolutely present to self *prior* to its expression in language, and therefore must be ideal—non-existent in the exterior, empirical world where all we find is indicative communication. The noema must be present to self in this way or it could not be the grounds for language in general. For Husserl we begin with pure experience, pure meaning, and then, because of its presence to us, we are able to express it, or make it exterior. The pure presence of the noema to self is the pure experience that grounds the possibility of oral discourse, or speech.

Thus, for Husserl, there is no absence in consciousness; however, he will claim a certain kind of absence in speech. As I mentioned earlier, the noema is divided into two components: *Sinn* and *Gegebenheitsweise*. *Sinn* is the component that is expressed as a *Bedeutung* in language, in speech. Husserl holds that any noematic *Sinn* can, in principle, be expressed linguistically:

Anything “meant as meant,” anything meant in the noematic sense (and, more particularly, as the noematic core) pertaining to any act, no matter which, is expressible by means of “significations.” (*Ideas* §124, 295).⁶

Gegebenheitsweise is the way, or mode, in which the noema presents itself to consciousness; it *characterizes* the way in which the noema comes to be (*Ideas* §92, 222-6).⁷ It includes

... the degree of clarity with which the object of an act is intended, the features of the object that are singled out for attention, the “intuitional fullness” (if any) of the act, and the act’s “thetic character.” (McIntyre and Smith 89)

⁴*Logische Untersuchungen*, Zweiter Band I. §1, 30-1.

⁵*Logische Untersuchungen*, Zweiter Band I. §8, 43.

⁶Cf. *Logische Untersuchungen*, Zweiter Band, §2, 546-7.

⁷Cf. *Ideas*, §91, §99, §132, §133.

Husserl claims that these characteristics are not, and in fact *cannot* be expressed in language. For him, the substratum, the noema, cannot be duplicated exactly in speech because in its expression in language it becomes changed, contaminated by indication. Prior to speech, the noema is not contaminated with indication because it is absolutely present to self, thus rendering indication useless.⁸ However, in the stratum of oral discourse the noema becomes altered by acquiring an indicative shell. Thus *every* aspect of the noema is not expressible in speech:

It is inherent in the sense of the universality belonging to the essence of expressing that all the particulars of the expressed can never be reflected in the expression. *The stratum of signifying is not, and of necessity cannot be, a kind of reduplication of the substratum.* Whole dimensions of variability in the substratum do not enter at all into the expressive signifying; they, or their correlates, do not indeed "express themselves" at all: thus the modifications of relative clarity and distinctness, the attentional modifications, and so forth. (*Ideas* §126, 300; my emphasis)

Therefore, the *Gegebenheitsweise* component of the noema is never present in the linguistic expression of the noema's *Sinn*, the *Bedeutung* as an indicative sign. Thus the whole noema, the substratum, is never completely expressed (*ausgedrückt*) in language. In other words, when I express a *Sinn* linguistically, I cannot at the same time express the degree of clarity to which I intend the object, nor can I express the "intuitional fullness," or the perception itself in language. Both of these aspects are much the same as the act's *thetic* character, or its specific mode of presentation. For the purpose of our discussion of absence, we will focus on this particular aspect of the *Gegebenheitsweise*.

If I say "That man is tall," the *thetic* character is the fact that I *judge* that he is tall. The noema is present to me in the form of a judgment. However, the fact that I am judging is not explicit in the expression (*Bedeutung*). I may attempt to express this judging in another statement by saying, "I *judge* that this man is tall." However, we notice that even this expression has a *thetic* character of its own that is not stated: "I *judge* that I *judge* that this man is tall." The expression itself does not contain the *thetic* character of the noema; it remains absent. Every attempt we make to bring this characteristic of the particular noema into language fails because every attempt has itself a noema and thus a *thetic* character of its own that is also absent, or unexpressed. It slips away, if you will, from every attempt to make it present or linguistic.

Although the *thetic* character is always absent in language, it remains essential to the expressed *Bedeutung* of the *Sinn* in the noema. Without this "way of givenness," this mode of presentation, there would be no presentation, no expression. In fact it becomes very strange to talk about a *Bedeutung* without a way in which it comes to be, much the same way it becomes strange to talk about a subject without an object, and vice versa. The noema, and thus the struc-

⁸*Logische Untersuchungen*, Zweiter Band I. §8, 41

ture of consciousness, necessarily intends objects in a certain way: perceiving, judging, remembering, dreaming, etc. Thus, without the "presence" of this *absence* in language there would be no intentionality, no consciousness, and thus no experience. However, for Husserl, this is not an absolute absence because in consciousness the *Gegebenheitsweise* is purely present to self because of its essential constitution in the noema as what is intended. Its presence to consciousness is necessarily prior to the possibility of its absence in expressed *Bedeutung*.

However, we have suggested that, contrary to Husserl, the *Gegebenheitsweise* cannot be present in any way to consciousness, but that it must remain absent, even in the sphere of mental life. How, then, is the *Gegebenheitsweise* absolutely absent to self? To answer this question we will need to look at Husserl's determination of the noema as an ideal object apart from the empirical world. Husserl states:

The tree simpliciter can burn up, be resolved into its chemical elements, etc. But the sense [*Sinn*]*—the sense of this perception, something belonging necessarily to its essence—cannot burn up; it has no chemical elements, no forces, no real properties. ... the circumstance, namely, that the non-existence ... of the objectivated or thought of Object pure and simple pertaining to the objectivation in question ... cannot steal its something objectivated as objectivated, that therefore the distinction between both must be made. [We have] ... the Scholastic distinction between the "mental," "intentional" or "immanent" Object on the one hand, and the "actual" Object on the other hand ... (Ideas, §89-90, 216-8; my emphasis)*

Thus, we find here the classical distinction between mind and body, between the material world and the mental world. That which is in the world is "actual" and that which is in the mind is "non-existent." The noema does not exist in the world; it has no spatial or temporal relations. Its "existence" is reduced to mental life where it remains an ideal object free from change. However, for consciousness, that which is most real is the noema, for that is what consciousness intends, or knows. At the core of this determination we discover the possibility of infinite repetition, or iterability. The noema, as ideal, does not change and can thus be present to consciousness indefinitely. Therefore, pure presence in consciousness is founded on ideal presence (noema) to self-presence (mental life), "where ... 'consciousness' means nothing other than the possibility of the self-presence of the present in the living present" (*Speech 9*).⁹

It is this very determination of the noema as ideal that will prevent Husserl from claiming that presence as pure self-presence is the foundation of language and all experience. The essence of the ideal is its iterability. Derrida states:

⁹Cf. *SEC*, 6.

In order that the possibility of this repetition may be open, *ideally* to infinity, one ideal form must assure this unity of the *indefinite* and the *ideal*: this is the present, or rather the presence of the *living present*. (*Speech 6*; emphasis in original)

Thus the ideality of presence in the life of the ego is the possibility of indefinite repetition in the transcendental life of consciousness where the noema is absolutely present to self. It is in this presence that the noema receives its life and continues to live in its ideality; it is here that the possibility of its iterability does not die, but is eternal. Husserl claims that once the noema is expressed in language it becomes contaminated with indication, with the world. This contamination begins the process of its death. Upon expression it leaves the realm of ideality where it gains its life, its purity, and relinquishes its repeatability, since it is no longer the *same* as it was in the pure presence of the ego.

However not only is ideality (noemata) the essence of consciousness, but it is also the essence of signs as indicators; we discover that, despite Husserl, there is no essential difference between the noema as pure presence to self and signs or indicators, which, according to Husserl, are not purely present to consciousness. Ideality, as the possibility of indefinite repetition, is nevertheless essential to both:

When in fact I *effectively* use words ... I must from the outset operate (within) a structure of repetition whose basic element can only be representative. A sign is never an event, if by event we mean an irreplaceable and irreversible empirical particular. A sign which would take place but "once" would not be a sign; a purely idiomatic sign would not be a sign. A signifier (in general) must be formally recognizable in spite of, and through, the diversity of empirical characteristics which may modify it. It must remain the *same*, and be able to be repeated as such ... (*Speech 50*; emphasis in original)

Thus, the sign must be essentially ideal; it must remain the *same* through changes that take place "around" it. It is a sign because it can be used again and again without, in some sense, changing. What are the grounds for this ideality, for this presence? To answer this question Husserl posits a pre-expressive, pre-linguistic sphere of consciousness, another kind of presence that enables the intentionality of the ego, and thus its absolute proximity to the noema. However, this is merely moving the same problem to another level.

Derrida, however, instead of attempting to ground experience in presence—on any level—will ground it in an absolute absence that *cannot* be made present. Going back to our discussion of writing, the essence of the *ideal*, of signs in general, is the possibility of repetition, of iteration. It is in this iterability that we see the presupposition of an absolute absence of any particular, unique addressee, author, context, etc., not in the absolute presence of noema to consciousness; and it is this absence that gives rise to the sign. Thus, the "presence-of-the-present is derived from repetition and not the reverse" (*Speech 52*). Consciousness, or the *presence-of-the-present* is made possible by ideality; it is not that which intends it, creates it. In this we can see the way in which

indicative signs, as idealities, are the essence of consciousness, not the reverse, which is expressly what Husserl wants to avoid. What are the consequences of this?

First of all, the noema can no longer be thought of as an intention of consciousness since consciousness as pure self-presence is defined by the noema in its ideality. Secondly, where Husserl wants to remove all indicative elements from the sphere of mental life in order to secure pure meaning, we discover that the very essence of mental life is the ideality of the *indicative* sign (we can also say that there is no sign in any sense that is not indicative). Thus, we can say that consciousness is defined by signs, by language as a chain of signifiers. This is, ironically, the reverse of what Husserl's phenomenology wants to accomplish. Phenomenology is an attempt to ground pure meaning apart from indication; this grounding takes place in solitary mental life which is itself already contaminated by indication from the beginning.

Thirdly, we see that because consciousness is constituted by language, absence as the possibility of speech is also the possibility of presence in solitary mental life. Whereas Husserl wants to claim that there is absence only in oral discourse, we see that there is also absence in consciousness, absence that gives rise to presence. The *Gegebenheitsweise*, then, is not merely absent in the *Bedeutung*, but it is also absent in the noema, in its presence to consciousness. It remains absolutely absent, excessive to self despite all attempts to make it present, even in consciousness. In this sense, the *Gegebenheitsweise* is a mark of the *other*, a mark of that which remains outside presence, but is at the same time that which enables presence by determining its presentation to consciousness; absence in this sense is therefore the grounds for consciousness, and thus the possibility of intentionality, of knowledge.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Derrida, Jacques. "Différance." *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. ed. by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- . "Signature Event Context." *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. ed. by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- . *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. trans. by F Kersten. Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982.

———. *Logische Untersuchungen*. 2 Bände. Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1984.

McIntyre, Ronald, and David Woodruff Smith. "Husserl's Identification of Meaning and Noema." *Husserl, Intentionality, and Cognitive Science*. Ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus. Cambridge: 1982.