

Husserl and Meaning

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Edmund Husserl's phenomenology is an attempt to explain the relationship between consciousness and the world. Using the concept of *noema*, he articulates a theory of perception accounting not only for visual perception, but for all other acts of consciousness as well. In this theory, all acts of consciousness are *intentional* and therefore interpretations. Because of this, his theory has some interesting implications in meaning theory, specifically textual interpretation. Husserl escapes radical relativism by linking acts of consciousness to intentional objects through noemata, or intensional entities. There may be many interpretations of an object, or a text in this case, however each will always be in some way related to the text. Not just anything someone says about a text will be an actual interpretation of that text. This will become clearer as we examine Husserl's theory of intentionality.

The fundamental concept in Husserl's theory of intentionality is the *noema*. In order to gain a general understanding of the noema, we will first define it in terms of visual perception, keeping, in mind that perception for Husserl is not restricted to sight. Aron Gurwitsch defines the noema as “the object as it is intended”, i.e., as the object in question appearing in a certain manner of presentation ... an object capable ... of appearing in different manners of presentation” (1982, 65). The noema is not itself the object, but it is the object as it is perceived, i.e., perceived in one manner rather than another. Because an object can be perceived in different ways, from different points of view, there will be many noemata referring to the same object. For example, although there is only one tree standing before me, there are many different ways of looking at it, e.g., from the north side, from the south side, from the air, etc.

These several ways of looking at the tree, these noemata, are grouped around a central *core-stratum* to which they all relate. This *core-stratum* is not itself the object, rather the relations between the multiplicity of noemata involved in viewing a single object (Husserl

1982, 218 & §97). By stating this, Husserl is able to account for several different acts of perception involving the same object. For example, though I may see the tree from the north and later the south side, thereby experiencing different perceptual acts with different noemata, I can still say that I see the same tree by virtue of this core-stratum. This complex structure is the *unity of consciousness*.

Having distinguished between the noema and the actual object, we must now mention a third distinction, the *act of perception* itself. For every perceptual act there is one and only one noema. The noema is not itself the act, nor is it ontologically dependent upon the act. Visual perception exists in space and time; when I see, I always see some *thing*, some *where*, some *time*. However, the noema is an ideal, abstract entity existing neither spatially nor temporally. For example, if the tree I am looking at is destroyed, the noema involved in the perceptual act will continue to exist (237).

Up until now we have used the term ‘perception’ in the usual sense to gain a basic understanding of the noema. However, as we mentioned earlier, Husserl does not restrict his definition of perception to sight. Rather, he uses the term *acts of consciousness* to include all other perceptions; for example, remembering, imagining, hallucinating, dreaming.

The structure of consciousness is critical to Husserl’s system. Each act of consciousness, like the perceptual act, has a noema, therefore, it is intentional. It is intended, or directed toward an object. This object need not be a tree or any physical object, it could be a memory, an abstract thought, a fictional story, etc. In each case, the object is called the *intentional* or *intended* object because it is intended by someone, by a consciousness, so to speak. Consciousness, for Husserl, is intentional, i.e., it is always conscious of something. This is the fundamental structure of consciousness for Husserl.

Another important aspect of consciousness, specifically involving visual perception, is its ability to make sense of, or objectivate “raw sense data,” or *hyle* by referring them to their object. Husserl wants to distinguish between non-intentional *stuff*, and acts of intention or perception. The *hyle* are more or less *moments*, or *phases* in a perceptual act that are given sense, or meaning by virtue of the noematic structure of consciousness:

We find such concrete really immanent Data as components in more

inclusive concrete mental processes which are intentive as wholes; and, more particularly, we find those sensuous moments overlaid by a stratum which, as it were, “animates,” which *bestows sense* ... —a stratum by which precisely the concrete intentive mental process arises from the *sensuous which has in itself nothing pertaining to intentionality*. (Husserl 1982, 203)

This idea of consciousness giving meaning to sense data is reminiscent of Kant and his *a priori* categories. How does Husserl’s account differ from Kant’s? Kant posits the “thing-in-itself,” or the *noumenon* that is then filtered through the *a priori* categories of the mind producing a *phenomenon*. The “thing-in-itself” is never experienced. However, in Husserl’s case, there is no noumenon, nor are there *a priori* categories to be imposed upon it. Our knowledge of the object is *transcendental* in that the object of intention and the actual thing out there in the world are not to be distinguished from one another (Smith and McIntyre [quoting Husserl] 1982, 85).

Nevertheless, Husserl wants to maintain this distinction between “sensuous data” and intentional acts, or acts of consciousness. However, unlike Kant who maintains that every perceptual act has a noumenon as its foundation, Husserl remains undecided as to whether all acts of consciousness must have a hyletic foundation. He leaves this possibility, open continuing to affirm the importance of *hyle* in phenomenology:

On the other hand, we leave it undecided at first if the characteristics essentially making up intentionality can have concreteness without having sensuous foundation. Be that as it may, this remarkable duality and unity of sensuous and intentive plays a dominant role in the whole phenomenological sphere. ... Phenomenological considerations and analyses which specifically concern stuff [raw sense data] can be termed *hyletic-phenomenological* ones just as, on the other hand, those relative to the noetic moments can be termed *noetic-phenomenological* considerations and analyses. (Husserl 1982, 204–7)

Therefore, acts of consciousness are always directed toward some *thing*, not to an unknowable entity as in Kant. This directedness or intentionality is the foundation of phenomenology: “to the things themselves.” This is clearly Husserl’s point of view: “The concept of intentionality, apprehended in its undetermined range, as we have apprehended it, is a wholly indispensable fundamental concept which is

the starting point at the beginning of phenomenology" (202).

Before we can see how Husserl's theory applies to textual interpretation, we must further define Husserl's concept of noema. Husserl discusses two aspects or components of the noema: *Sinn* and *Gegebenheitsweise*. Generally, *Sinn* is the component that accounts for an act's directedness to its object and can be shared by other noemata having the same object. This sharing is essential to the *core-stratum* and the *unity of consciousness* mentioned earlier, which enable us to be conscious of an object in different modes, yet still refer the same thing. For example, I may look at a tree from one side and later from another, each of these acts has a noema which in turn have their *Sinns*. However, in this case, the two acts of perception share the *Sinn* by virtue of the intended object and the unity of consciousness (Husserl 1982, §97). Although the term '*Sinn*' is used by Husserl to denote a component of the noema, it is also used to refer to the whole noema itself.

Gegebenheitsweise accounts for the way, or mode, in which an act correlates to its object. It is the aspect that grants the noema its individuality in that it is not shared by other noemata with the same intentional object. This mode, or way of appearance is the act's *thetic* character. For example, referring to the tree mentioned earlier, I may actually look at it from several different angles on one day, see it in a picture on another, or simply think of it later on. All of these acts have different thetic characters. The ways in which they appear are different in every case. This *Gegebenheitsweise*, or "way of givenness," is different in each case, thus accounting for the individuality of each act of consciousness. These noemata are thus related through their *Sinn*, and unrelated in their mode of appearance. In this way, no two noemata will ever be exactly the same. This distinction will be important later in our discussion of textual interpretation.

With respect to meaning theory, the noema, as an intentional entity is another term for meaning in general. Husserl says: "The noema is nothing but a generalization of the idea of meaning (*Sinn*) to the field of all acts" (Føllesdal [quoting Husserl] 1982, 74). In German, *Sinn* can mean "sense," "meaning," or even "mind." *Sinn*, as mentioned earlier, can also be a synonym for the whole noema, according to Husserl. It need not be restricted to a single component of the noema. The noema, then, because it is intentional or directed by someone to something, is a meaning, a volition or willing (Husserl 1982, 233). It is also then, an interpretation because it is intending one meaning rather than another.

For example, in my viewing of the tree from the north side, I interpret the tree as a tree seen from the north side and not from some other perspective.

From our discussion of the noema, it follows that every intentional act of consciousness is a meaning and therefore, an interpretation. In other words, every act of consciousness, with its noema, that we intend is also an interpretation of an intentional object, or the thing intended. Husserl distinguishes here between an intentional object, or the thing in actuality, and an intensional entity, or the full noema.

Husserl believes that these intensional entities can be expressed in language. For him, every linguistic expression is an intensional entity, or noema expressed. This meaning expressed in language is called a *Bedeutung*, as opposed to the *Sinn* of a noema. Both are meanings; the former is characterized as expressed, the latter is not defined in terms of linguistic expression. Meaning does not lie in the words expressed, rather they are an integral part of noemata, which are in turn aspects of our mental processes. For Husserl, language serves to make public the intentional acts of consciousness: “All expressions in communicative speech function as indications. They serve the hearer as signs of the “thoughts” of the speaker, i.e., of his meaning-giving (*sinngebenden*) mental processes (*psychischen Erlebnisse*)” (Smith and McIntyre [quoting Husserl] 1982, 83).

These meaning-giving mental processes involve consciousness’ ability to objectivate, give meaning, or make sense of objects toward which they are directed. Much like consciousness gives meaning to hyletic data, it also gives meaning to words. The meaning it gives is the *Sinn* or the intensional noema, and the meaning expressed is the *Bedeutung*. Words are animated, so to speak, by virtue of the noematic structure of consciousness. Husserl explains:

In speaking we are continuously performing an internal act of meaning (act of meaning=Meinen), which fuses with the words and, as it were, animates them. The effect of this animation is, that the words and the entire locution, as it were, embody in themselves a meaning (Meinung), and bear it embodied in them as their sense (Sinn). [In] the act of meaning (Meinen) ... there is constituted ... the meaning (Meinung)—that is, the *Bedeutung*, the *Sinn*—expressed in the locution. (Smith and McIntyre [quoting Husserl] 1982, 85)

Although Husserl says that every linguistic expression is a noematic

Sinn expressed, the *Gegebenheitsweise* or *thetic* character the other component of the noema, is not expressed in language. In fact, it can never be expressed except within a different “speech-act” mentioning or describing the *thetic* character other. The latter act always takes place earlier than the former in time. For example, if I say “That man is a good writer,” the *thetic* character is the unsaid “I judge that ...” aspect. This aspect can only be expressed by saying another sentence: “I judged that this man is a good writer.” However, we note that even this last sentence has itself a *thetic* character: “I judge that I judge that ...” which is not expressed in the words. Husserl maintains that although the *thetic* character of a noema is not expressed, it remains an essential part of the noema and therefore the linguistic expression as well. The *thetic* character is, as it were, “understood,” and essential to the meaning given to the linguistic expression.

Another important point should be mentioned here regarding meaning. Although *Bedeutung* is a noematic *Sinn* expressed linguistically, it remains essentially part of the noema, which is an ideal entity. Therefore, we might ask at this point how we could ever know this ideal meaning in order to express it in language. To answer this question, Husserl discusses what he calls *phenomenological reduction*. The ability to bridge the gap between this ideal entity and language rests in the noema’s close relationship to consciousness. Phenomenological reduction is consciousness’ ability to know noemata and thereby be able to express them linguistically. Although acts of consciousness and noemata remain ontologically different, as stated earlier, their existences coincide so closely that we never find an act of consciousness without a noema to accompany it.

This point has many implications in meaning theory. Meaning is not a part of the words expressed, rather it is a part of the underlying noema which animates those words. This noema is or comes to be in conjunction with an act of consciousness; one is never found without the other. Furthermore, this act is always directed toward an intentional object as such. Thus, meaning and interpretation do not exist outside of this intimate, complex relationship between noema, act of consciousness and intended object.

Specifically, how does all this relate to textual interpretation? For Husserl, like anything else, a text can also be an intentional object. Thus, a text does not itself have meaning, since meaning lies in the noema of the *act* of reading, interpreting, etc. If this is the case, and meaning does

not lie in the text, how does Husserl's theory avoid radical relativism, if at all? How does his theory prevent anyone from saying that anyone's and everyone's interpretation of a text is correct since the text itself cannot serve as a criterion for verification?

First of all, Husserl's theory is not itself concerned with the idea of "correctness" or "verification." For him, there are simply different acts of consciousness having different noemata, which are in turn composed of both common and unshared components. His main point is that each noema is an interpretation, a meaning. To generate a theory of interpretation from his philosophy is not an easy task. However, an answer to the question of relativism asked earlier may be found within the relationship between noema, act and intentional object.

As mentioned earlier it is possible for me to have several acts of consciousness with equal or differing thetic characters directed toward one intended object. It is consciousness' ability to unify that enables me to say that I "perceive" the same object. This is the noetic core-stratum of consciousness. Therefore, it follows that I may have several different interpretations, meanings, or noemata of a text yet still refer to the same text. The interpretations will be different in terms of thetic character and perspective, so to speak. However, it may be that because of this core-stratum and the fact that my interpretations are always directed toward a specific object, i.e. the text, that I am not able to say just anything. All my interpretations have something in common: a noematic relationship with the object to which they are intended. Granted, interpretations are relative to each person's perspective in an act of interpretation, but not radically relative to anything that anyone would want to say.

Husserl's point is that each perspective is related not only to the act of interpretation, but also to the text itself. In this way each interpretation will always be related and thus grounded in the relationship it has with the text.

This may account for differing interpretations within one person's consciousness, however, how do we account for differing interpretations among different people? The answer seems to be linked with linguistic expression. According to Husserl's theory, two people could be intending the same object, but from the same or different perspectives. Whether their thetic characters correspond to each other or not is not important; e.g., I could think of an object and someone could be looking at it directly, yet the intentional object would essentially be the same. The difference would lie in the intentionality, in that I perceive it

in this manner, and he perceives it in this other manner.

Husserl might say that it is through language that we come to understand that we both intend the same object by virtue of the noema, or *Sinn* of each act of consciousness that can be expressed in language. Therefore, in terms of textual interpretation, I can know through language whether someone is intending the same text that I am. In this case, if someone were to say that this essay talks about chicken soup, I could construe either that he is wrong, or that he is intending another object, imaginary, abstract or whatever. Husserl would probably say that the latter is the case.

Therefore, it appears that the boundaries or parameters that enable Husserl to escape radical relativism are the objects of intention themselves by virtue of their being intended by a consciousness coupled with their noematic *Sinn* expressed in language. These parameters are not at all sharp and distinct as they are in an objective theory of interpretation where a single meaning is inherent in the text. Meanings are there, but they are not in the text, nor are they solely in consciousness. Rather they exist in the relationship between the text and the person in the form of intentionality.

One final point should be made about Husserl's theory of meaning. Although he does state that every noematic *Sinn* can be expressed in language, he does not say that every *Sinn* has found expression or that the human mind has the capability to express them all:

There is ... no intrinsic connection between the ideal unities which in fact operate as meanings (*Bedeutungen*), and the signs to which they are tied. ... We cannot therefore say that all ideal unities of this sort are expressed meanings. Wherever a new concept is formed, we see how a meaning becomes realized that was previously unrealized. As numbers—in the ideal sense that arithmetic presupposes—neither spring forth nor vanish with the act of enumeration, ... so it is with ... meanings ... to which being thought or being expressed are alike contingent. There are therefore countless meanings which ... are merely possible ones, since they are never expressed, and since they can, owing to the limits of man's cognitive powers, never be expressed. (Smith and McIntyre [quoting Husserl] 1982, 88)

Therefore, not only can there be several interpretations of a given text, but there also remains many potential interpretations of the same text. Thus, not only can we have several interpretations of, say the Bible,

but we will continually be able to discover new interpretations that have not as of yet been expressed. This theory seems to pull the rug out from under anyone who would claim to have the final and definitive interpretation of any given text.

To conclude, Husserl's theory of intentionality is powerful not only in that it allows for many interpretations of a text, but it avoids radical relativism by grounding acts of consciousness, or interpretations in the text itself as an intentional object and in the noema, the text interpreted as such. This relationship binds all textual interpretations to the text in question, eliminating claims that any interpretation whatsoever is valid.

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