

A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism

Edited by

Hubert L. Dreyfus

and

Mark A. Wrathall

5

Intentionality

J. N. MOHANTY

Beginnings

Intentionality has occupied a central role in modern phenomenology beginning with Edmund Husserl. But, at the same time, its precise nature and status have been a matter of controversy within the larger philosophical movement. Even within Husserl's own philosophy, its analysis, function, and interpretation have had a long, winding, and extremely complex history. In this chapter, I will try to follow some of these controversies and lines of development, looking specifically at work by Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty.

We now know that the concept of intentionality antedates Brentano's lectures on psychology, that we find it in the scholastics, and far back in Aristotle, such that even Brentano's famed statement about it has Aristotelian overtones. However, without stopping to trace that fascinating history of the concept, let us be satisfied with citing the passage in which Brentano's formulation first surfaces:

Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) in-existence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction upon an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as an object within itself; although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, and so on.

This intentional in-existence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. We can, therefore, define mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena that contain an object intentionally within themselves. (Brentano 1973: 88–9)

Interpreting this justly famous paragraph has led to various problems. We must, first of all, be clear about what he means by "mental phenomena" (correspondingly, by "physical phenomena"); we should also be clear about what he means by "object" and by that phrase "intentional (or mental) in-existence of an object." We are also left wondering how and in what sense mental phenomena can "contain an object intentionally within themselves." Mental phenomena for Brentano are mental *acts*,

designated by such verbs, or rather gerundial nouns, as “believing,” “perceiving,” “desiring,” and “hoping” – not, to be sure, mental contents such as images or sensory data. The former alone are intentional in his sense.

It is generally thought that Husserl took over the thesis of intentionality from Brentano, and then considerably modified it. As Brentano’s pupil, Husserl attended Brentano’s lectures on psychology and certainly would have learned about the concept of intentionality. However, as recent researchers have shown, Husserl did not introduce the concept of intentionality in his own work until years later. At last, in 1894, we find him, finally overcoming, after a long struggle beginning with his *Philosophie der Arithmetik*, Brentano’s “immanentism.” He does this by discovering for himself that presentations (*Vorstellungen*) were of two kinds: *intuitive* (where a content is given in the act although even here he recognizes that when an external object is given, the whole system of contents corresponding to such an object goes far beyond the contents which are actually immanent to the act) and *representative* (in which the represented object is not at all immanent). The latter sort of *Vorstellung* is rather directed toward the intuition of what is *not* given.

With this, he had discovered a concept of intentionality which is directed toward a transcendent object, and which is “fulfilled” when that object is given. He also discovered the same intentionality in the heart of intuitive presentations as pointing to what is not yet, but can be, given. With the overcoming of “immanentism,” the basis was laid for the *Logische Untersuchungen* (the *Logical Investigations*).

Husserl’s Theory of Intentionality

Overview

In the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl introduced the thesis of intentionality in three stages. In the First Investigation, he begins with a semantic thesis, a theory of meaning, in connection with “expressions.” In the Fifth Investigation, he takes up the theme of consciousness, and directly relates to the Brentanian thesis. He defines the notion of “act,” rejects Brentano’s immanentism, and sharply distinguishes between the content and the object of an intentional act. In the Sixth Investigation, all this is taken up into the concepts of knowledge as fulfillment of intention, and of truth as evidence. We will briefly expound the theory in these three stages.

First, the semantic theory, on the face of it, bears a close resemblance to Frege’s, but we shall avoid the hasty conclusion that he may have derived it from the latter. He formulates the theory thus: “Each expression not merely says something, but says it *of* something: it not only has a meaning, but refers to certain *objects* . . . the object never coincides with the meaning. Both, of course, only pertain to an expression in virtue of the mental acts which give it sense” (Husserl 1970a: vol. I, 287). An expression refers to its *object* via its meaning. The meaning, here called *Bedeutung*, is later said to be an *ideal* entity, a species whose instances are the acts intending it – *ideal* in the sense that it is not spatio-temporally individuated and is closer to what some philosophers call “abstract” entities.

In the Fifth Investigation, the Brentano thesis is addressed. Between the widest concept of “consciousness” as the totality of one’s mental life, and the narrowest concept

of it as one's inner perception of one's mental experiences, Husserl cuts out a middle region consisting only of intentional experiences which he designates by the technically defined term "act." By insisting on the *terminus* "act," he wants to free the notion of intentional experience from the idea of a specific sort of activity, especially an act of the will.

Husserl, however, disagrees with Brentano's thesis that all experiences are intentional. There are, he insists, experiences or, in Brentano's words, mental phenomena which are not intentional, for example, "sensations and sensation complexes" (Husserl 1970a: vol. II, 556; translation modified). He prefers to drop Brentano's use of the term "mental phenomena," in view of the ambiguities that surround his doctrine of "inner perception." The location "intentional experience referring to an object" should not be construed as meaning that two things are present in experiences, an object and an intentional act directed toward it. Only one thing is present, an intentional experience, and "(I)f this experience is present, then *eo ipso* and through its own essence (we must insist), the intentional 'relation' to an object is achieved, and an object is 'intentionally present'" (Husserl 1970a: vol. II, 558). He thus rejects a relational understanding of intentionality. He is *not* trying to understand *how* consciousness (which is allegedly within me) relates to an object out there. There is no intentional experience without already having an intentional object. Likewise, the alleged consciousness that is to achieve its relation to an object is already, to begin with, consciousness of this object and of no other.

An important aspect of the concept of intentionality, as it is elaborated in the Fifth and the Sixth Logical Investigations, is that it is presented in the context of a theory of perception. As it now stands, the theory, in very simple outlines, amounts to this: the intentional object of perception transcends the act of perceiving. The act, however, has its immanent contents, which are also called "primary contents," which are sensory complexes, later to be called hyletic data. The intentional act has then two functions, one built, as it were, upon the other: it first confers sense or meaning upon the primary contents, and thereby objectivates, or makes possible an object, to which *then* it intentionally refers (in this account, "first" and "then" are to be understood not in a chronological sense but in a logical order). This is how one should understand this crucial text: "Apperception is our surplus, which is found in experience itself, in its descriptive content as opposed to the raw existence of sense: it is the act-character which as it were ensouls sense, and is in essence such as to make us perceive this or that object" (Husserl 1970a: vol. II, 567). This perceptual model is extended by Husserl to understanding an utterance: here, too, a meaning-giving act supervenes upon the presented acoustic "primary content"; the latter is interpreted, resulting in the auditor's grasping of a meaning. We now understand why Husserl would say later that although Brentano was the discoverer of intentionality, he did not see the objectifying role of intentionality.

In the last phase of the theory of intentionality, as it is developed in the *Logical Investigations*, the discussion of intentionality is undertaken in the context of *knowing*. The distinction between meaning intention and meaning fulfillment, already introduced in the First Investigation, is extended beyond logical thinking to all objectifying acts. Intentionality may now be said to be *striving* after truth and as a temporal process.

The meaning as noema

Husserl's manuscripts written between 1906 and 1910 abound in various ways of articulating this new theory of meaning, which was made possible by Husserl's momentous discovery of the "epoché" in 1905. With the subjecting of the object in the natural attitude to the reduction, the component of doxic positing or belief which belongs to every act which confers on the object its being-character (e.g., "real," "possible," "imaginary") now becomes available for study; Husserl calls it *noesis*. Its correlate becomes the object *in the how of its givenness* together with its thetic characters, now called the *noema*. The noema is also said to be the *Sinn* of the act. We thus arrive at the famed thesis of noesis–noema correlation, which is often said to be the essential feature of intentionality. Husserl speaks of the noema as the phenomenologically reduced object, as the intended as such, especially as the perceived as perceived, as the ideal-identical *Sinn* or meaning of the act, as the appearing object, etc.

Let me now give a rather simple analysis of the structure of what Husserl calls *the full noema*. Although Husserl sometimes calls the full noema *Sinn*, *Sinn*, "in the most pregnant sense," is the noematic nucleus to which belong all the objective predicates constituting the "how" of the object's givenness. The full noema includes the nucleus with its central point, the X, and the thetic character which is then the *posited meaning*. This thetic character is, in general, predicates corresponding to the doxic quality of the act whose noema we are considering. This X is to be construed neither as the substance underlying the objective predicates, nor as a phenomenon apart from the latter predicates, but as a component of the *meaning* of the act, by virtue of which the predicates are unified as "belonging to one and the same thing." It indicates a *function* whose concretizations are different in different cases.

Now, I will distinguish between (i) the psychological noema, (ii) the logical noema, (iii) noema as a semantic function, and (iv) the transcendental noema. The psychological noema may be identified as the total content of the appearing object prior to "epoché." It is distinctly different from the object that is presented. The logical noema is the noematic *Sinn* consisting of the nucleus and the objective predicates ascribed to the object. It is logical inasmuch as its ideality makes logical discourse possible. Propositions, syllogisms, and theories are noemata in this sense. From the semantic point of view, the noema is a function whose arguments are possible worlds and values are individuals in the actual world. The transcendental noema is the object as it appears within the epoché. There is, then, no distinction between the transcendental noema and the object. The sense of constitution of the object varies from one interpretation of the "noema" to the other.

Subsequent developments of Husserl's theory

Further developments of Husserl's theory of intentionality were stimulated by his discovery of and growing concern with the horizontal characteristic of every act as well as of its noema, by his continuing, and developing, researches into inner time-consciousness, and both leading to the realization that the act-intentionalities, having noetic-noematic structure, are surrounded and penetrated by intentionalities which are not acts.

Let us recall that intentionality, for Husserl, constitutes the object by conferring meaning upon the non-intentional stuff or *hyle*. Using now the idea of *noema*, we can say that one and the same object is constituted by the noematic nuclei of those acts carving out, as it were, a common and shared area. This notion of constitution and the theory of intentionality associated with it surely underwent some revision, though not radical change, in later years of Husserl's thinking. It does appear that many aspects of intentionality came to be revised without, however, radically affecting the central core of the theory.

Heidegger on Intentionality

For about fifteen years, Heidegger was captivated by the *Logical Investigations*. The key concepts in the *Investigations* which he isolated for special attention are "intentionality," "categorical intuition," and "a priori." While Brentano set him on his philosophical path as much as he also influenced Husserl, it was Brentano's essay on the concept of Being in Aristotle – "On the Manifold Sense of Being in Aristotle" – and not his lectures on psychology, which determined his thinking. This explains why early on he sought to give an ontological interpretation to those three key concepts.

In the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Heidegger points out several misinterpretations of intentionality (Heidegger 1982). The most pervasive misinterpretation is to construe it "as an extant relation between two things extant, a psychological subject and a physical object" (Heidegger 1982: 60; translation modified). To the contrary, intentionality belongs to the structure of the subject. But then, a second misinterpretation arises when we construe the intentional experiences of the subject as being immanent to the subject, and there, in order to explain how immanent experiences can be of a transcendental object, end up by regarding the objects of intentionality also as immanent to the subject – in which case, intentionality becomes something that occurs within the subject. However, intentionality is neither objective, nor subjective. It is indeed prior to, and "more original" than both, the subject and the object.

It seems that while defending the thesis of intentionality, Heidegger's goal, toward which he moves slowly over the years, is to overcome the Husserlian version of it. When he rejects "erroneous objectivism" and "erroneous subjectivism" and sets aside any construal of it as a relation between two "extant" entities, clearly he is reformulating, in his own language, Husserl's rejection of objectivism as well as of psychologism. He still has to find a way to articulate his own distinctive position. He does this by asking what is the *ontological status of intentionality*, which on his view Husserl left indeterminate. Heidegger asks us to think of intentionality more radically. How is it possible for the subject to escape the confines of its immanence and relate to the other? Or, even, why does a subject "require" an object, and conversely? This relating must belong to the ontological constitution of the subject itself. Intentionality must belong to the existence of Dasein. It is of the nature of Dasein that it exists in such a way that it is "always already with other beings" (Heidegger 1982: 157).

Dasein's "transposition" of itself to the things is possible because its very nature is *transcendence*. This leads Heidegger to a discussion of *temporality*, especially to what he

calls the “ecstatic-horizonal constitution of temporality” (Heidegger 1982: 314). What we have in the end is the following order of foundational dependence:

Temporality → transcendence → being-in-the-world → Intentionality

In this chain, the preceding member founds the succeeding. Intentionality is only a surface phenomenon of deeper ontological structure.

Let me turn now to the concepts of *meaning*, *Sinn*, and noema, which, for Husserl, have their origin in intentionality. For this purpose, I will go back to Heidegger’s still earlier writings. In his lectures of 1920, he tells us that factual life-experience has the character of meaningfulness (*Bedeutsamkeit*), which consists in three kinds of meaning: *Gehaltssinn* (contentual meaning), *Bezug-sinn* (relational meaning), and *Vollzugsinn* (performance-meaning). The first is the content of what is experienced, the second is relational meaning which lies in the “how” of that content’s being presented or experienced. The third is, for Heidegger, the most important; it consists in the temporal reenactment of the event of meaning. This last is the primary task of phenomenology, the Husserlian “clarification” of sense by returning to the original experiencing moment when the meaning emerges. For Heidegger, it is to return to the historical origin.

Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty’s original contributions to the theme of intentionality may be brought under four headings, “operative intentionality,” “bodily intentionality,” “intentionality and transparency,” and, finally, the relation between consciousness and the world.

Operative intentionality

The intentional act which posits the world or an object in the world is not the primary intentionality. What precedes it is the lived experience of the world “as already there.” Kant held that the categorial constitution of the objective world already presupposes that “the hidden art of imagination” has already constituted the world. The task of understanding is to conceptualize, objectify, and render “conscious” what has already been achieved (Kant 1965). This fundamental, most primary experience (not “act”) of world-constitution is called by Merleau-Ponty “operative intentionality,” following a suggestion by the late Husserl (Husserl 1970b). In Merleau-Ponty’s world, it is “the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and of our life, being apparent in our desires, our evaluations and in the landscape we see, more clearly than in objective knowledge, and furnishing the text which our knowledge tries to translate into precise language” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: xvii). Husserl had treated desires, evaluations, and the like as non-objectifying but still as acts, and as presupposing objectifying acts. Merleau-Ponty, rightly I think, treats feelings, emotions, desires, and evaluations as experiences which are *not acts*, nevertheless intentional in a rather extended sense, and he reverses the Brentano–Husserl relation of priority between objectifying and non-objectifying intentionalities. Merleau-Ponty writes that Husserl’s originality does

not consist in the discovery of intentionality but rather in: “The elaboration of this notion and in the discovery, beneath the intentionality of representation, of a deeper intentionality, which others have called existence” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 121fn.). Note that whereas Heidegger does not want to call this existence or Dasein’s being-in-the-world intentional on the ground that being is not an object, Merleau-Ponty, closer to Husserl, still regards it as the deeper level of intentionality, or as “operative intentionality.”

Bodily intentionality

Although, as is well known, Merleau-Ponty rejects the absolute dualism advocated by Sartre, between consciousness and the world, and situates body in the ambiguous middle, the body is still on the side of the subject (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 5). It is “our point of view on the world.” The subject of perception is not “an absolute thinker,” but the body. The body-subject is not a *thing*, but an intentional movement directed toward the object, or at least is a potential movement. “The body itself is a motor power, a “motor project” (*Bewegungsentwurf*), a “motor intentionality.” As one’s hand moves to grasp a tumbler of water, it is *not* that there is first a thought about raising and stretching one’s arm and then this thought causes a mechanical bodily motion. It is the bodily movement that directs itself toward the object, and this movement has its own *sui generis* intentionality. “Motility,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “is not, as it were, a handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to the point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 139). The intentionality of bodily movement confers the primary meaning on things in the world, which thought subsequently conceptualizes by a process of idealization.

Bodily intentionality has the feature of being “anonymous,” it is not fully transparent to itself, nor is it totally opaque; it is not incurably particular, as characterized by Heidegger’s *Jemeinigkeit*, but has a certain generality about it such that the meanings it confers are empirically general, not strict idealities; it is also characterized by a certain circularity, it both is a project towards the world and also is an openness towards the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 254).

Intentionality and transparency

Sartre famously regards consciousness, which is, in his jargon, so fully intentional that its entire being consists in being directed toward the world, such that in itself it is sheer nothingness, it has no contents, no Husserlian *hyle* nor Husserlian noema. Being fully intentional, it is also fully transparent to itself. Intentionality implies complete transparency, and excludes all opacity. Being-in-itself is both non-intentional and opaque. Rejecting such oppositional thinking, Merleau-Ponty regards intentionality as always *a matter of degrees*, and so also is the transparency of intentional subject (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 124–5). Intentionality never grasps its object in its totality, nor it is completely aware of all its background and presuppositions. An absolute positing of the object, we are told, would mean “death of consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 71).

Consciousness and the world

The idea of intentionality seems to suggest an initial separation of consciousness and the world, and then an attempt to reconnect them. On Merleau-Ponty's view, this is a mistake. We are "through and through compounded of relationships with the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: xiii). We are intimately bound to the world by "intentional threads." This tie can be loosened, as by the epoché, but cannot be cut off – which explains Merleau-Ponty's recognition that we need the epoché, but a complete reduction is not possible. I think he saw clearly that the pure subject of classical transcendental philosophy and the pure object of classical science are both products of *thinking*, and it is by rejecting both that we begin to see that embodied and situated consciousness and the pre-objective perceived world are two aspects of the same intentionality.

An attempt to reconcile the various perspectives on intentionality

I may now bring this account of intentionality to a conclusion by way of ordering the different approaches to this topic in a sort of hierarchical order. We may begin with a psychological thesis along Brentano's lines, characterizing all mental *acts* as containing within themselves a directedness toward an object, a directedness which cannot be explained otherwise than by recognizing this as an irreducible and intrinsic feature. The next stage in our thinking would consist in trying to accommodate this feature within a naturalistic-causal framework à la Sellars and Dretske. If both the "immanentism" of the Brentano thesis and the physicalism of the causal account fail, then we have to find a place for what is important in each. The intentional content must be grounded in the natural and the cultural orders, and intentionality in Dasein's being-in-the-world, especially in its temporality. The representative content of the Brentano thesis has to be grounded in the non-representational, but actional projects of the Dasein. Finally, the opposition between a mentalistic representational theory of intentionality – both theoretical as well as practical and affective – as a transcendental-constitutive function, according to which the intentional content is not an internal representation but a publicly sharable meaning, and the world in which Dasein finds itself is the product of prior constitutive accomplishments of an intentionally implicated community of egos. With this progressive deepening of our understanding of the nature and function of intentionality, the relevant philosophical *problem* continues to be transformed.

References and Further Reading

- Brentano, F. C. (1973) *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (trans. A. C. Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and L. L. McAlister). New York: Humanities Press (original work published 1874).
- Chisholm, R. (1972) Intentionality. In P. Edwards (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (pp. 201–4). New York: Macmillan and Free Press.
- Chisholm–Sellars correspondence (1972) In Ausonio Marras (ed.), *Intentionality, Mind, and Language*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Dreyfus, H. (ed.) (1982) *Husserl, Intentionality, and Cognitive Science*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/Bradford Books.

- Føllesdal, D. (1969) Husserl's notion of noema. *Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (20), 680–7.
- Gurwitsch, A. (1966) *Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time* (trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson). New York: Harper & Row (original work published 1927).
- (1982) *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (trans. A. Hofstadter). Bloomington: Indiana University Press (original lectures delivered 1927; original work published 1975).
- Husserl, E. (1962) *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (trans. B. Gibson). New York: Collier/Macmillan (original work published 1913).
- (1970a) *Logical Investigations* (trans. J. N. Findlay). New York: Humanities Press (original work published 1900–1).
- (1970b) *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (trans. D. Carr). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press (original work published 1954).
- (1993) *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (trans. D. Cairns). Boston: Kluwer (original work published 1931).
- Kant, I. (1965) *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. N. K. Smith). New York: St. Martin's Press (original work published 1781).
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception* (trans. C. Smith). New York: Routledge (original work published 1945).
- (1964) *The Primacy of Perception* (trans. J. M. Edie). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press (original work published 1947).
- Mohanty, J. N. (1964) *Edmund Husserl's Theory of Meaning*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- (1982) *Husserl and Frege*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- (1985) *The Possibility of Transcendental Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Searle, J. (1983) *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Welton, D. (1983) *The Origins of Meaning: A Critical Study of the Thresholds of Husserlian Phenomenology*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.