

# The Opening of Intentionality

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“It is intentionality which characterizes *consciousness* in the pregnant sense of the term and which, at the same time, justifies designating the whole stream of mental processes as the stream of consciousness and as the unity of *one* consciousness....Under intentionality we understand the own peculiarity of mental processes ‘to be the consciousness of something.’” (Husserl §84)<sup>1</sup>

“The phenomenological analyses of intentionality (be it Husserl’s, Heidegger’s or Merleau-Ponty’s) all entail such a fundamental rethinking of the very relation between subjectivity and world that it no longer makes much sense to designate them as either internalists or externalists.” (Zahavi 2004: 53)

## Introduction

“Intentionality,” the term used in much of phenomenological philosophy to describe the defining act of consciousness, was first resurrected from the mediaeval scholastics by Brentano and then emended by his student Husserl. It became the basis of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology and the so-called “mark” of consciousness. Like many concepts outlined in Husserl’s extensive work it appears deceptively straightforward: by intentionality “we understand the...peculiarity of mental processes ‘to be the consciousness of something’” (§84). However, it takes only a cursory reading of any number of Husserl’s texts to grasp the concept’s

*Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, School of Languages, Cultures, and World Affairs, College of Charleston*  
Volume 5, 2006: pp. 227-246

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arrant and often confounding complexity. As the fundamental act of consciousness, intentionality is the basis of our “relatedness” to the natural world. Taking a radical conceptual step away from Brentano, Husserl is able to dissolve the problematic subject-object dichotomy that plagued his teacher’s work, the problem of how the physical object is represented in the mind. Husserl thus formulates a concept of intentionality that links world and mind in a porous reciprocity, each one bleeding into the other to the extent that they can no longer be considered in isolation. Because intentionality plays this interdependent role between consciousness and the natural world, meaning emerges as contingent upon both the natural world *and* consciousness. Intentionality, thus rendered, provides the basis for the invalidation of internalist/externalist paradigms. It signals the opening of consciousness to the natural world, an opening wherein both subject and world emerge as interdependent (Zahavi 2004).

This is, however, a rather recent interpretation, and it runs against years of preceding exegeses of Husserl’s text. Unfortunately, the frequent vagueness, apparent inconsistencies, and indefinite use of terminology that riddle Husserl’s oeuvre allow for a plurality of legitimately based interpretations to emerge from his work. This essay will explore three prominent interpretations of intentionality, offering radically different notions of the intentional act. The first two, informally known as the East and West Coast interpretations, suggest externalist and internalist views of meaning generation, respectively. The third, Dan Zahavi’s, seeks to refute the understanding of Husserl’s phenomenology in either internalist or externalist terms. According to Zahavi’s interpretation, to which I am partial, Husserl can be read as preceding much of 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy in his radical positing of the interdependence between the subject, the world, and meaning that arises through the intentional act.

### **Intentionality Proper<sup>2</sup>**

As conscious beings, we approach existence in a specific way: we approach the world consciously; we are aware. Not only are we conscious of ourselves; we are also aware of a world that exists externally to our minds. We are conscious of objects that occupy the natural world. We are aware of memories, dreams, and objects of our imagination.

Consciousness, then, is characterized by a nearly continuous directedness towards things; we are always mentally directed towards something. Put differently, consciousness always “intends” something. Intentionality is this directedness of consciousness towards some thing, some object. For example, whether simply perceiving or even loving, doubting, judging, hating, being certain or pleased, our attention is always directed towards something (e.g. love of the loved, hate of the hated, etc.).

Intentionality’s role as a defining property of consciousness does not, however, mean that all mental events are necessarily intentional. General sensations, for instance, are often not of something that can be objectified (e.g., both anxiety and pain can be indeterminately directed). Even more apparently indirect are the indeterminate mental acts that take place during states such as dreamless sleep or coma. Still, it can be said that vast majority of mental events not only have an intentional quality but they have one that is analyzable.

However, when defining intentionality as consciousness’s directedness towards an object — as Husserl’s predecessors were wont to do — a potential problem arises. For this definition seems to imply that intentionality is relational (i.e., composed of two related entities). However, intentionality should not be conceived of as relational in this traditional sense. It is not an affective relationship between an isolated subject and an opposing object. Nor is the intentional act a mental process. Husserl instead considers intentionality to be the act or property of a subject constituting an object in its consciousness. As I will explain in further detail below, to render the term as relational would require the existence of objects between which a relation could be made — in this case, a subject and an object. Granting this relationship would give rise to a multitude of ontological difficulties in describing and defining an object’s existence within consciousness, for it would necessarily entail a treatment of the physical object’s representation in consciousness.

Furthermore, when we speak of intentionality we do not speak only of our consciousness of an object. We must also inevitably speak of our consciousness of those intended objects as intended in a meaningful way — we intend towards objects *as* objects. For instance, not only do we detest the detested, but we are conscious of the detested (an object) *as* detested. We become aware then that the intentional act has a meaning-bestowing capacity. But exactly where, or when, meaning

arises in the intentional act is the cause of much of the disagreement between the interpreters of Husserl. To understand the roots of this dispute, we need first to clarify the use of the term “intentionality” prior to its adoption by Husserl.

### **Brentano’s Influence**

It is well known that Husserl largely adopts the term intentionality from his mentor Brentano, whose incidental treatment of the term thus ironically became arguably one of his greatest contributions to the field of phenomenology (Moran 40). Their relationship is well documented, and the power of Brentano to instill his students with an interest in the themes of his own philosophy is evidenced by the work of many of his notable followers (e.g. Meinong, Twardowski, Marty) (Moran 43). However, the extent of Brentano’s influence on Husserl should not be exaggerated. For while Husserl adopts the term and the loose framework of the Brentano’s concept of intentionality, his own development of the concept marks a monumental break from the influence of his teacher.

Writing in the second half of the 19th century, Brentano resurrected the term from its use in medieval philosophy. The term “*intentio*,” or concept, as used by medieval scholastics, can itself be traced back, via Aquinas, to Aristotle’s epistemology. The medieval use of the term, though, displays a seminal divergence from Aristotle’s use which implies direct knowledge of perceived objects, or “penetration further into things in their own non-human reality” (Hedwig 329). Instead of an epistemological penetration into the physical object, the term as adopted by the scholastics and thus by Brentano implies a split between the object perceived and the perceiving subject. In an often-quoted passage, Brentano writes:

Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the scholastics of the Middle Ages referred to as the intentional (and also mental) inexistence of the object, and what we... would call relation to a content, direction upon an object (which here is not to be understood as a reality) or immanent objectivity.  
(88)

It is important to note both the extremity and the unfortunate ambiguity

in Brentano's definition. For instance, his assertion that "every" mental phenomenon is characterized by intentional directness to an object is a rather sweeping claim, one that is overturned by calling attention to indeterminate mental events like those mentioned above. Anxiety is certainly a mental phenomenon that does not necessarily refer to an object.

But a more important problem with Brentano's concept of intentionality involves his use of the word "inexistence." Because Brentano's intentionality asserts a relation between a subject and an object, it seems to imply the existence of both entities. Notable ontological problems arise, however, when trying to define the status of intentional objects that have no physical existence, such as the objects of imagination or hallucination. Take, for instance, an imagined centaur. The centaur exists in the mind in some sense, but Brentano continuously ran aground when attempting to define the exact sense of this existence. To remedy the dubious status attributed to objects of imagination, he gives all mental objects, even those who bear no direct reference to the natural world, the nebulous label of mental "inexistence." But simply labeling mental objects in this way does not explain what they are, or how we distinguish between "mental objects with physical referents" and "mental objects without physical referent," such as hallucinations or imaginary beings (McIntyre and Smith 1989). How are we to determine if the mental objects physically exist?

It is this kind of problem that Husserl's reformulation of the concept of intentionality is meant to address. His remedy lies in fundamentally altering the relationship between the mind and the natural world posited by Brentano. But the various interpretations of Husserl disagree about the nature of this remedy. They disagree about whether he on the one hand *solved*, or, on the other, *circumvented* Brentano's ontological problem. While all three interpretations hold that Husserl escapes the ontological problems raised by Brentano's concept of intentionality, the claims they assert stand in such opposition to one another as to present fundamentally different conceptions of phenomenology.

The group informally known as the "West Coast" interpreters of Husserl (McIntyre, Smith, Dreyfus, and Miller) are largely informed by Follesdal's 1960's groundbreaking reading of Husserl, which focuses on what Husserl calls the "noema" as a mediating entity between subject

and object (Follesdal 1982).<sup>3</sup> In opposition, the “East Coast” school of thought (Sokolowski, Drummond, Hart, and Cobb-Stevens) rejects the apparent remedy of the noema-as-mediator, and holds instead that to conceive of intentionality as a referential act would be a grave misunderstanding of Husserl’s text. For this interpretation, the West Coast school’s misunderstanding of the noema rests on a prior misunderstanding of a more basic Husserlian concept, the phenomenological reduction or “epoché.” Sokolowski writes of the West Coast interpretation that not only “is [it] incorrect, it reveals a misunderstanding, not only of the noema, but also of Husserl’s idea of intentionality, his transcendental reduction, and his idea of philosophy” (Sokolowski 524). We should, therefore, begin with the epoché in order to understand the phenomenological concept of intentionality.

### **The Epoché as a Method for Investigation of the Intentional Act**

The epoché is perhaps Husserl’s most celebrated concept and the method with which to enter into absolute transcendental knowledge. As is signaled above, however, it is also one of the most disputed phenomenological concepts. In his own writing Husserl provides numerous attempts to correct the many erroneous interpretations of the epoché. Even these later clarifications, however, are abstruse enough to provide sufficiently fertile ground for a number of interpretations to flourish.

The phenomenological reduction consists in a stepping away, so to speak, from what Husserl calls the “natural attitude.” Instead of positing, as the natural attitude does, a naive kind of ontological realism, the phenomenologically savvy subject turns towards consciousness in order to investigate the act by which the objects of the natural world are presented for it. Husserl calls this the “bracketing” of the natural attitude. He writes:

*We put out of action the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude; we parenthesize everything which that positing encompasses with respect to its being: thus the whole natural world which is continually “there for us,” “on hand” and which will always remain there according to consciousness as an “actuality” even if we choose to parenthesize it. (§32)*

Within the epoché the world is still, in a manner of speaking, held at hand. It is now simply held without judgment. After conducting the reduction we enter into a realm of phenomena, one which is free from any of the presuppositions of the natural sciences and, furthermore, of any sort of traditional metaphysics.

The epoché consists neither in a sort of Cartesian doubt, nor a denial, of the existence of the world. Instead, the bracketing of the natural world is a purposive neutralization of belief. And it is only through this neutralization of belief in the natural world that we are able to investigate the essential features of consciousness (Ströker 99). Therefore, all belief, possibility, probability, or certainty, all judgments, are neutralized and considered mere positing. They are maintained but acknowledged as judgments; they are considered as neutral assertions and are given to consciousness in their fullness. By rendering our habitual positing powerless, the epoché allows the natural world and our emergent beliefs to be separated and thus investigated in isolation, regardless of their relational connection.

This idea of isolating the natural world from our beliefs about it is agreed upon by most scholars of Husserl. But what the extent of the epoché exactly is — what the reduction entails — is still cause for dispute. In fact, a clear articulation of what it means to bracket the world is still missing in Husserl's writings. Are we to withdraw from the natural world completely, paying no heed to physicality, and consider only the immanent structures of consciousness? If so, then how are we to account for the resulting abyss that stands between consciousness and the natural world upon effecting the epoché? Furthermore, how are we to account for meaning bestowal? Still further, how are we to account for intentional reference to objects after effecting the epoché; for if there is an abyss between consciousness and the world, how are we to cross it? There are, again, two predominant interpretations of the nature of the reduction.

On the one hand, the West Coast interpretation holds that the epoché is a radical shift in advertence from an intended external object to the same object as it is presented within consciousness. We are to completely stop our preoccupation with objects of the natural world and direct our attention solely to those ideal referents manifest within

consciousness. According to the West Coast interpretation, then, after the epoché is effected consciousness stands remote and disconnected from the natural world, absolute in its insularity.

The phenomenological reduction gives access to a transcendently reduced consciousness: the “residuum,” as Husserl calls it. The residuum is unaffected by the nullification of the natural world, and it is because the residuum of absolute consciousness is unaffected by the nullification of the natural world that we identify consciousness as constitutive of this world. If we push this further, as Husserl does, it follows that “*no real thing*, no being which is presented and legitimated in consciousness by its appearances, *is necessary to the Being of consciousness itself*” (§49). This is indicative of the existence-independence of intentionality posited by McIntyre and Smith. As the authors write, “the intentionality of an act is independent of the existence of its object — even when it *is* related to something extra-mental” (McIntyre and Smith 150). Through the epoché, then, consciousness is given to the observer as possessing absolutely autonomous Being (absolute in its purity or separability from the natural world). But the West Coast interpretation goes even further in asserting not only that the epoché proves consciousness to be absolute in its separation from the natural world, but also that after conducting the epoché we are able to operate in complete isolation — without any reference to the natural world. That is, once we employ the epoché we enter into pure transcendental consciousness without any concern for the formerly inhabited physical world. Once we make this shift, we are able to investigate ideal objects, essences, and the structures of consciousness, all as absolutely and purely given to consciousness.

As a result, this interpretation holds that the phenomenological reduction exposes two different and separable realms: the natural world and consciousness. To its credit, the interpretation is certainly not lacking in textual evidence. Husserl himself speaks about the epoché in terms of a radical separation of consciousness and the natural world. “In so far as their respective senses are concerned,” he writes, “a veritable abyss yawns between consciousness and reality” (§49). And to bridge this abysmal separation, this radical severing of the natural world that is revealed by the epoché, the West Coast believes that an abstract mediating entity called the noema intentionally refers back to the truncated objects. And it is only after effecting the epoché, when we have cast physical



objects away from our advertence, that we reveal in their place the objects' appropriate noemata. That is, only after conducting the phenomenological reduction, and severing ourselves from concern with the natural world are we able to investigate meaning.

On the other hand, the East Coast interpretation of the epoché posits a change in *attitude* instead of a shift of regional attention. That is, in opposition to the West Coast interpretation which insists on a withdrawn reflection on objects' representations within consciousness, the East Coast interpretation of the epoché stresses maintaining our concern with physical objects while shifting our attention to the objects' intentional constitution in consciousness. With the physical objects remaining (but bracketed) we are able to analyze them *as* they are posited. This view can be seen as a sort of transcendental attention to the natural world. Sokolowski writes:

The objects remain for us in our new, philosophical stance, only now we see objects in the correlation with ourselves and our intentionality. We can now analyze objects, but we analyze them noematically, as correlated to noeses. *We do not turn away from objects to noemata.* (527, italics added)

The residuum emphasized by the East Coast interpretation is not to be considered in isolation from the object of consciousness (i.e., the physical object). And although Husserl writes about the autonomy of consciousness, or the ability for consciousness to exist without positing the natural world, this is not to say that we should deliberately ignore the natural world while performing the epoché. Instead, after effecting the epoché, we simply cease our habitual bestowal of belief on the natural world. In the description of the epoché already quoted above, Husserl seems to contradict the West Coast interpretation when he writes that "we parenthesize everything which that positing encompasses with respect to being: *thus the whole natural world* which is continually 'there for us,' 'on hand' *and which will always remain there according to consciousness as an 'actuality' even if we choose to parenthesize it*" (§32, last italics added). That is to say, even when we bracket the natural world, even when we neutralize our belief in it, it will remain as known. The physical world will remain as an object of concern to consciousness.

When we adopt the attitude of the epoché we no longer live naively in experience. Instead we investigate the constitution and makeup of our experiences. This is, in fact, the basic foundation of the East Coast interpretation: that we must continually bear in mind the world in its actuality while we investigate the way in which it is given to consciousness. Interestingly enough, when we adopt the epoché, our naive realism itself becomes revealed as part of the experience we investigate (Drummond 93).

The difference between the two interpretations, we can now see, lies in their interpretations not only of the extent of the epoché, but also of the very structure of intentionality revealed after effecting the epoché. The West Coast interpretation of the reduction understands the intentional act as requiring a mediating entity, the noema, that enables consciousness to direct itself accordingly. In opposition, the East Coast school of thought interprets the epoché neither as a withdrawal from the natural world nor as requiring a mediating entity within intentionality. Instead the East Coast school holds that the epoché allows us to maintain an active participation in the natural world, rendering the noema as dependent on (rather than referring to) the natural world. It is these divergent conceptions of the noema that we next turn to.

### **The Noema**

After effecting the epoché, we are able to investigate the very structures of consciousness. Some of the first things that we will notice after conducting the epoché are the doxic and thetic attributes of intentionality. We deny, doubt, affirm, believe, love, hate, desire, detest. These intentional stances are a vital part of the intentional act; they are the meaning-endowing portions of the act, the noeses. However, there is another part to the intentional act other than sense-bestowal (the noesis, or noeses): there is also the object as sense-endowed (the noema, or noemata). The noeses and the noema always work in conjunction, so that while intentionality is the consciousness of an object, meaning lies in consciousness's noetic directedness towards an object *as* something: the noema (i.e. as existing, as certain, as valuable, or as the sum of all of these positings).

As is already apparent, the concept of consciousness's generation of meaning within the intentional structure is exceedingly complex. At

each part of the sense-bestowal there are many levels, or strata (named noetic-correlates or noematic-correlates), and even after extensive analysis in *Ideas I* Husserl does not succeed in clearly articulating the various doxic and thetic attributes smuggled into either side of the meaning generating process. Nor does he arrive at sufficiently clear definitions of the noesis and the noema.

The West Coast interpretation takes Husserl's noema to play a referential role within the intentional act. This interpretation of the noema is able to rid intentionality of all its previous ontological hang-ups. Implicit in this interpretation is the assumption that Husserl wants to *solve* Brentano's problem and, therefore, treat his ontological difficulties by simply reformulating the intentional act. The solution lies in the consideration of the noema as a mediating entity. Most interpreters of the West Coast school have taken Husserl's noema to be roughly tantamount to the Fregean "sense" (*Sinn*).<sup>4</sup> According to this interpretation, when intending a physically existing object, we refer first to its noema and then through the noema to the existing object.

More importantly for the West Coast school's argument, when we consider the noema as a referential entity, we are ostensibly able to resolve Brentano's problem of intending objects without physical existence. Intending the object through a mediating entity, we are able to dispense with the need for the physical object to exist. The noema stands in, so to speak, for the non-existent object of imagination as if it were a physical object. In the case of the imagined object, then, the intentional act stops at the noema. The noema of an imaginary object is intended (appears in the mind) without any further reference to the natural world.

That an object may appear in the mind without having any sort of existence may, at first, elude comprehension. However, the concept becomes clearer when we come to understand how the West Coast reading interprets what Husserl means by both terms, "noesis" and "noema." Again, the noesis serves as a meaning-bestowal stratum within the intentional act while the noema is an ideal entity, a meaning (roughly). The content of intentionality must always be thought of in both of these terms. One cannot be generated without the other. As Husserl writes, "for each noetic moment, especially to each positing noetic one, there corresponds a moment in the noema" (§129). Together, they

account for the directedness of intentionality.

There is, among the dominant interpretations, a general consensus about the role of the noeses. When intentionality is considered as the directedness of consciousness towards objects via a noematic mediating entity, the noeses are those strata of intentionality that constitute this ideal entity. For instance, the noeses are not the object as believed but the believing strata of intentionality. They form, when combined together with other noeses, the object as believed (the ideal entity which allows for reference). And when intentionality is considered the directedness of consciousness towards imaginary object, the noeses constitutes the noema in entirety. Noeses change with every passing moment.

Furthermore, as McIntyre and Smith write, “[t]he noesis, then, is literally a temporal part or constituent of an act’s specific phenomenological make-up” (158). At every moment consciousness generates a new noema (or adds to one previously conceived) through its noeses. Noemata, on the other hand, are not momentary. They can be recreated again and again. They are the abstract entities which correspond to the noeses and through which consciousness has a referential relationship with physical objects. This much is explained above.

But now that we grasp the meaning of the term noesis, we are able to more clearly understand the role of the noema within the West Coast’s interpretation. Husserl himself divides the noema into two parts: a noematic *Sinn*, and a thetic component. It is the *Sinn* that most interests the West Coast reading, for the *Sinn* is largely what can be taken as the meaning of the noema and the product of the noeses. McIntyre writes that “the *Sinn* itself, the noematic *Sinn*, is related to this real noetic content, neither as a property that instantiates it nor as an object that it is directed toward, but as the *Sinn* it ‘bestows’” (534). The noema is that meaning, that combination of sense, generated by any number of multiple noeses, and “whose role is to determine just which object an act represents and precisely how it represents it” (McIntyre and Smith 159). That is, the noemata are a veritable shell of meaning; they are the object as judged or the object as doubted, but not the object. The noema arises as a result of the directedness of the noesis and it arises as a referential entity.

It may now be clear how, according to the West Coast interpretation, the combination of numerous noeses (forming a noema) can constitute an appearing imaginary object within our consciousnesses. Take, again, for instance, the imagining of a centaur. The imaginative act is spontaneous; it is not intentional in the same way as the intentional act that refers to a physical object. In the imaginative act the centaur exists neither inside nor outside the mind. The mind does not intend the centaur as an object, but instead constitutes the centaur. That is, the centaur, as noema, is generated by the noeses of the intentional act. The intentional act does not direct itself but, instead, spontaneously constitutes the imagined centaur. “We do indeed deal with psychological products,” Husserl writes of phenomenology, “[o]ne might even add that it is similar to the case of *arbitrary functions*: the flute-playing centaur we freely imagine is precisely our objectivational formation” (§23). In other words, constituting a physically non-existent object through the act of imagination is possible because of the spontaneous noetic generation of the noemata. A Fregean reading of Husserl then apparently solves the ontological problem of imagined objects.

But if the Fregean interpretation of Husserl’s noema has such a powerful explanatory use what, then, is the East Coast interpretation’s qualm with this view? The issue can be roughly defined along the lines of an internalist/externalist debate (Zahavi 2003). From the East Coast perspective, the Fregean interpretation of an intentional noema, when coupled with a severe truncation from reality within the epoché, produces a dangerously internalist stance. The danger would be an internalism that leads to a disconnected view of meaning generation (one that has no connection to reality), and a subject that is cut off from the life-world. A further objection to the West Coast interpretation has that it is unable to take into consideration demonstrative statements, which purport to gesture directly at the natural world (Zahavi 2004). But the epoché directs us to pay no heed to the natural world, thus rendering demonstrative statements targetless.

A similar criticism has also been directed at an internalist account of descriptive statements and their apparent inability to refer directly to objects. Because the noema mediates between consciousness and object, its referent must be extremely specific in order to refer to only one object. The difficulty becomes apparent if we think of the noema

in terms of linguistic reference à la Frege. Zahavi quotes Kripke's example: "most people, when they think of Cicero, just think of a *famous Roman orator*, without any pretension to think either that there was only one famous Roman orator or that one must know something else about Cicero to have a referent for the name" (2004: 43-4). In other words, to consider the noema as the West Coast reading wants, may lead to references of such ambiguity that we refer to a variety of objects. On this interpretation reference to specifics becomes extremely difficult.

Furthermore, the East Coast interpreters no longer consider the object's ontological status within consciousness to be of paramount importance. Of greater importance is consciousness's interaction with the external natural world. By dismissing this interaction as proscribed by the epoché, Sokolowski argues, the West Coast line of thought misses what is new and important in Husserl's work: "Someday the Fregean reading of Husserl will be used as a case history in hermeneutics, an example of how a fixed paradigm cannot manage to interpret something different from itself in anything except its own — the paradigm's — terms, so that it overlooks what is original in the new doctrine" (728). What is original in Husserl's new doctrine, for the East Coast interpretation, is exactly the concept of intentionality in its connection to the natural world. The noema, according to this alternative reading, is not a different entity than the intended physical object. It is instead the same object considered differently. The noema is contingent upon the natural world instead of being internally generated. It is the product of our interaction with the world external to consciousness.

Because the East Coast's interpretation of the epoché allows us to maintain advertence to the natural world, we also find that the noema is generated in our advertence to the external natural world. It is no longer a mediating entity, but instead is itself mediated by external context. Zahavi sums up this externalist interpretation of meaning generation: "the noema does not direct us towards an object which is ontologically distinct from the noema, rather the intended object is itself the most fundamental moment *in* the noema, is itself a noematic component" (2004: 49). According to the externalist account, the noema is the object of the natural world considered *as* meaningful; it is inextricably linked to the present physical object. The noema is, then,

anything given to us as it is given to us as reflective beings: “any thing, state of affairs, feature, aspect, or dimension” (Sokolowski 526). It is neither an instrument of referral nor an abstract entity that can be considered in itself.

On the East Coast interpretation, meaning is no longer internally generated, as the West Coast interpretation holds. Instead it emerges out of an external state of affairs. Meaning is externally determined for consciousness; it is now embedded in the world. It is no longer “given” by the head, but instead is “found” in the world. The Fregean referential theory of meaning is now turned on its head: meaning no longer determines reference from consciousness to natural object, but meaning is now determined for consciousness by reference from physical object (Zahavi 2004: 50). On the East Coast’s externalist interpretation, Zahavi writes, “intentional beings...are the centers of disclosure, permitting worldly objects to appear with the meanings that are their own” (2004: 50). In this reading of the noema we participate in a meaning-laden world, and although our subjectivities are still receptors of generated meaning, they are dependent upon the external world to supply the basis for the meaning. The noema is thus, through our circumstantial placement, contextually dependent on the natural world.

### **The Emergent Noema and the Interdependence of the Intentional Act**

We have come then to a great point of divergence on the interpretations of both the epoché and the noema. The West Coast school of thought interprets the epoché as a radical severance or disengagement from the natural world. The East Coast interpretation refutes this and instead asserts that the epoché entails maintaining a continued engagement with the natural world. From the differing interpretations of the epoché also springs a difference in the concept of the noema. On the former interpretation, the noema is a mediating entity; on the latter, it is an object of the natural world considered abstractly. Accordingly, each interpretation’s concept of intentionality is drastically different. The West Coast school of thought holds that meaning is generated within consciousness. In opposition, the East Coast believes meaning to be contextually dependent on the natural world. For the West Coast reading, Husserl is a kind of internalist; for

the East Coast reading, he is a kind of externalist.

In contrast to these interpretations, Zahavi reads Husserl's conception of meaning and intentionality as one which questions the very internalist/externalist dichotomy. Zahavi's interpretation of Husserl attacks this long-standing division, asserting that such black and white determinations are inimical to Husserl's endeavor: "The phenomenological analyses of intentionality (be it Husserl's, Heidegger's or Merleau-Ponty's) all entail such a fundamental rethinking of the very relation between subjectivity and world that it not longer makes much sense to designate them as either internalists or externalists (2004: 53). But what exactly is this fundamental rethinking of intentionality, and how then does Zahavi's Husserl understand the relation between the subject and the natural world?

Because intentionality is the fundamental act of consciousness, the basis of the stream of the cogito and the perceptual act, it is still that which characterizes our connection with the natural world. However, on Zahavi's interpretation of Husserl, intentionality serves not to operate in a subject/world dichotomy; it instead acts to dissolve the apparent division, placing consciousness in a world with which it actively participates. On all three interpretations, we find as conscious beings that the moment we open our eyes we are intentionally connected with the natural world. However instead of positing a subject that is presupposed to exist, perceive, and think in a natural world, Zahavi emphasizes the co-emergence of world and subject. It is this — the subject's *constitution* of the natural world — that becomes paramount. For Zahavi, it is by perceiving the natural world that our conception of self as subject is formed, and vice versa. Zahavi writes that "reality is not simply a brute fact detached from every context of experience and from every conceptual framework, but is a system of validity and meaning that needs subjectivity, that is, experiential and conceptual perspectives if it is to manifest and articulate itself" (2003: 69). In Zahavi's interpretation of Husserl, the self, the world, and meaning all emerge as interdependent and cannot be considered in isolation.

Thus Zahavi sympathizes with the East Coast interpretation of the epoché, which instead of severing ourselves from the natural world, allows for phenomenological reflection while maintaining concern with the natural world (2003: 60). Like the East Coast interpreters, Zahavi



considers the epoché to be “the fundamental change of attitude [that] makes possible a decisive discovery and should consequently be understood as an *expansion* of our field of research” (2003: 46). And further, “the epoché does not make us turn our attention away from worldly objects, but permits us to examine them in a new light, namely in their appearance of manifestation for consciousness as constituted correlates” (2003: 51). But it is in what is discovered after the epoché that Zahavi breaks with the East Coast reading. On Zahavi’s interpretation of the epoché, intentionality provides the equal co-emergence of the world, self, and meaning. The epoché reveals the natural world’s dependency on the subject, and the subject’s dependency on the natural world.

In this mutual emergence arises meaning, so that — unlike the East Coast interpretation, where meaning is derivative of the world, or the West Coast interpretation, where meaning is given to the world — Zahavi interprets meaning as arising out of the co-emergence of subject and world. In perceptually constituting the natural world the subject also continuously interprets its perceptions:

Husserl suggests that the sensations are interpreted and apprehended with a specific meaning, and that it is this objectifying apprehension that provides me with consciousness of an object...In other words, it is in the interplay between sensations and interpretation that the *appearance* of the object is constituted. (2003: 36)

And further:

Husserl gave up the idea of a static correlation between the constituting and the constituted. As he points out in some of his later writings, the constitutive performance is characterized by a certain reciprocity insofar as the constituting subject is constituted in the very process of constitution. (2003: 74)

In short, through the intentional act the subject both perceives the world and forms a conception of self and world through continuous interpretation (meaning generation). Meaning does not therefore lie in

the insulated mind or the foreign natural world, but in both, interdependently. It is through this generation of innumerable noemata, in the continuous interpretation of experience, that is, in the continuous intentional act, that the natural world and the self co-emerge. In the interpretive, interdependent, intentional act, subject and object allow each other's generation. We are born in intending the natural world, and the natural world is born in being intended.

Thus it is the noema, the meaning generated in the intentional act, which truly questions the subject-object split. For it is through the intentional act of interpretation, the consideration of natural phenomena considered *as* phenomena, that the subject orients itself to the world. While the subject and the natural world emerge simultaneously, the noema orients the subject among the natural objects: it renders the subject as continuously interpretive (in the Heideggerian sense). The very being-in-the-world of a subject includes both world and subject in an open play of meaning constitution. Meaning is therefore not embedded in the world; rather, in being embedded in the world, one is necessarily involved in meaning. It is this interdependency, intentionality itself, which undermines the subject/world dichotomy.

When interpreted in this fashion, Husserl can no longer be considered an internalist or an externalist. In fact, the traditional dichotomy no longer applies to his endeavor. Even when interpreted along West Coast or East Coast lines, Husserl's philosophy is monumentally influential. But it is his radical reconsideration of a traditional dichotomy which gives his philosophy such original power. And it is because of this reconsideration that we can say of Husserl that he anticipated much of what was to come in 20th century philosophy, and, to his credit, published some of the most fundamentally subversive philosophy to date.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Parenthetical citations to Husserl refer to section numbers of *Ideas I*.

<sup>2</sup> As the title of the this subsection suggests, I will attempt to put forward as objective an account of the basic structure of intentionality presented in Husserl's text as possible before going into contemporary

interpretations. This is of course attempting a difficult task, and the following account will doubtless unintentionally reflect my own interpretation of the text.

<sup>3</sup> For a reprint of a number of Follesdal's essays and various other essays in the West Coast vein, see Dreyfus.

<sup>4</sup> Frege's term "sense," derivative of his linguistic theory, is usually coupled with the term "reference," which in this case is roughly analogous to Husserl's intentional object. The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* notes: "The distinction between sense and reference was originally drawn by Gottlob Frege in his 1892 article 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung'....According to Frege, associated with each meaningful expression of language there is a 'sense' (*Sinn*) that makes the expression significant and determines its 'reference' (*Bedeutung*), that is, the entity the expression applies to or designates" (Craig 685).

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