Introduction: phenomenological origin of the problem of intentionality

Intentionality is the term used by Edmund Husserl to characterize, initially, the structure of a certain class of experiences that he called “lived.” In line with the phenomenological design of Husserl’s thought, the structure in question on his view is emphatically not empirical. Its structure is therefore neither contingent nor something that can be made manifest by the appeal to the sensible components of experience. Rather, the structure of intentionality is essential, in the precise sense that that term expresses 1) the invariant directedness to an object other than that directedness and 2) the object itself of that directedness. Points 1) and 2) taken together are determinative of the most basic element of the class of lived-experiences: “By ‘intentionality’, we understand the distinguishing property of lived-experiences: ‘being consciousness of something’” (Husserl 2014, 162).

Lived-experiences involve a particular self-relation of the subject undergoing the experience to the manifestation of the experience itself.

All my lived experiences are related to me, as the same I, but also by my lived experiences all objects which are constituted in them as object-poles are related to me. Of course every reflection which I relate to myself and every synthesis of reflections in which I find myself as identical is itself a lived experience and makes me objective—objective for me.

(Husserl 1977, 159)

For both Husserl and those either working in or critical of the philosophical tradition he initiated, the precise character of the self-relation determinative of lived-experience is controversial. Specifically, what is controversial is whether the self-relation is intrinsic to the conscious moment of lived-experience or whether what is required for this self-relation is a distinct act of self-reflection upon lived-experience’s givenness. The status of this self-relation as the sine qua non for experience to manifest itself as lived, however, is uncontroversial. Intentionality, then, is the term introduced by Husserl to characterize the phenomenological structure, which is to say with him, the phenomenological “essence” of the class of conscious lived-experiences whose subjective mode of consciousness is characterized by the correlation of an original directedness to an object and the object of that directedness.
Contemporary philosophical discourse about intentionality in both the analytic and continental traditions, in addition to its systematic preoccupations, recognize intentionality as a fundamental philosophical concern in Ancient and Mediaeval philosophy, but not in the modern period. Both discourses credit Franz Brentano with reviving the terminology of intentionality in the late 1800s and acknowledge Husserl's development and criticisms of Brentano's account of the phenomenon. This discourse, however, is misleading. Prior to Husserl the terminology of intentionality was not ubiquitous. The word “intentionality” (intentionalitias) first appears in the 14th century in the work of Hervaeus Natalis (Doyle 2009). There, intentionality is a relation of a knowable or known object to an act of the intellect's understanding. The relation intrinsic to intentionality for Natalis is, as such, “a being of reason” (Doyle 2009, 269). Natalis situates his account of intentionality within the more prevalent Mediaeval terminology of first and second intentions, wherein a first intention is a concept directed to a thing in rerum natura and a second intention is a concept understood by the intellect insofar as it is known in an act of its understanding. Second intentional concepts include intentionality according to Natalis, regardless of whether its object is first or second intentional. Intentionality itself therefore becomes known for Natalis in the intellect's reflection upon its own act together with its relation to first and second intentional objects. In Brentano, there is no talk of intentionality but only that of the inexistence of the intentional object that is characteristic of every mental phenomenon, which he calls variably “relation to a content, direction upon an object (which is not here to be understood as a reality) or immanent objectivity” (Brentano 1973, 88).

In both Mediaeval philosophy and Brentano, then, what counts as intentional is exclusively either the relation of an object to an act of the intellect or the relation or direction to an immanent (mental) object. Both of these formulations contrast with Husserl's account of intentionality, which, while related to the notion of mental relation, introduces a novel account of that which makes possible something like a mental relation in the first place. For Husserl, then, intentionality exhibits the essential structure originally responsible for the correlation between the mind's directedness to an object and the object in which that directedness terminates. Crucial to what is exhibited by this structure is what Husserl will call the “noetic” awareness proper to consciousness, which is patently not a conceptual or mental relation but a mode of “seeing”—which is irreducible to seeing in the sense of visual perception—that is responsible for a concept or something mental manifesting a relation to something objective in the first place. Significant in this regard are three radical departures from the Mediaeval concept of intentionality and Brentano's intentional inexistence. One, the direction of the relation determinative of intentionality is reversed from its direction in Natalis, as for Husserl it moves from the mind and the noetic awareness responsible for its directedness to the object. Two, Husserl's account of the non-conceptual (noetic) awareness responsible for the intentional relation characteristic of intentionality is completely novel and has no precedent in the Mediaeval account of intentionality or Brentano's account of the intentional object. And, three, the articulation of intentionality in terms of the invariant correlation between its moment of non-conceptual awareness and the object of that awareness again is completely novel and therefore unprecedented in the tradition that precedes Husserl.

The Husserlian origin of intentionality's formulation as the correlation between a non-conceptual directedness and the object of that directedness means that the contemporary philosophical discourse's positing of “intentionality” as a problematic in traditional philosophy has its basis in an unacknowledged and distorted interpretation of Husserl's novel formulation, which it then projects back into the putative traditional accounts of intentionality. These putative accounts of “[t]he problem of intentionality [which] is the problem of explaining what it is in general for mental states to have content, as well as the particular conditions responsible
for specific variations in content” (Caston 2008, §2), claim that the problem can originally be found in the Pre-Socratic philosophers and then traced in Ancient philosophy’s subsequent development (Caston 2008, §§3–6). In line with this, however, it has to be stressed that before Husserl there is no account of a non-conceptual origin of intentional directedness, but only the Mediaeval “being of reason” status of the intentional relation of the object to act of the intellect or Brentano’s reference to an immanent (mental) content characteristic of the intentional object. Husserl’s non-conceptual formulation of the intentional directedness as that which is responsible for the intentional relation or reference is therefore reconfigured in contemporary discourse in terms of the related but not identical problem of an objective reference or relation.

One significant result of the unacknowledged appropriation and distortion of Husserl’s account of intentionality is that both Husserl’s phenomenological formulation of intentionality and the resources of the phenomenology he developed in order to address it philosophically are passed over in silence. What is overlooked are the three major aspects constitutive of intentionality that remain constant in Husserl’s phenomenological account of it from his early logical investigations until his final writings on the intentionality of historical meaning.

Three aspects of the original problem of intentionality overlooked in contemporary discourse

The first and most important aspect of Husserl’s account of intentionality that is overlooked in most contemporary philosophical discourse—non-phenomenological as well as phenomenological—is the non-equivalence of the consciousness of which it is the essential structure and the mind. The mind, whether conceived ontologically in terms of the inner object determinate of the interiority of inner perception (or of the terminologically equivalent object of introspection), or psychologically as a dimension of empirical nature, is rejected as the source of intentionality by Husserl from start to finish. It is so because the phenomenon of consciousness proves to exceed that of specifically mind-dependent phenomena by encompassing both psychological and physical phenomena. This is to say that for Husserl the intentionality of consciousness is composed by an original directness to intentional objects that manifests the appearance of both mental and physical phenomena (Husserl 1970a, Appendix 4). As such, intentionality is in essence coincident with neither of one of them as it—minimally—encompasses them both.

The second aspect of Husserl’s account of intentionality that is overlooked by most contemporary philosophical discourse is the non-conceptual nature of both the intentional directedness element of intentionality and the conditions inseparable from this directedness’ origination. These conditions, like the directedness that issues from them, are manifestly not conceptual. That is, they are no more conceptual than the vision in which visible objects appears is itself a visible object. Rather, both these conditions and the intentional directedness that issues from them are in essence self-referential phenomena. As such, they can only appear when the very same non-conceptual intentional directedness apprehends itself in a reflective modification that redirects the direction of its intention 1) away from its intentional object to 2) itself as the source not of that object but of the explicit consciousness in which it is made manifest. The systematic, which is to say with Husserl, rigorously scientific, articulation and execution of the reflective method operative in the self-referential character of the apprehension of intentional directedness and its conditions, together with the articulation of its non-conceptual essential structure, represents a crucial task of the phenomenological investigation of intentionality. “[R]eflection is a name for acts in which the stream of lived-experience with all its manifold manifestations (inherent [reellen] aspects of lived-experience, intentional elements) will be able to be grasped and analyzed in an evident way” (Husserl 2014, 142).
And, finally, the third aspect of Husserl’s account of intentionality frequently overlooked in contemporary discourse is its transcendental dimension. As a transcendental phenomenon, intentionality is responsible for the unity of the manifold stream of lived-experience. “It is intentionality that characterizes consciousness in the precise sense of the term and justifies designating the entire stream of lived-experience at the same time as a stream of consciousness and as the unity of one consciousness” (Husserl 2014, 161). As such, the transcendental dimension of intentionality is responsible for the unity of both consciousness’ directedness toward aspect and that of the object of this directedness. Because both of these aspects of intentionality are inseparable from consciousness before and after the transcendental reduction that exhibits intentionality’s transcendental dimension, a crucial aspect of Husserl’s phenomenological account of intentionality is his answer to the question of how transcendental consciousness is distinguished from psychological consciousness. At issue in this absolutely crucial distinction for Husserl is the difference between the intentional structure of psychological and transcendental consciousness.

What is at stake in it for Husserl is nothing less than providing a philosophical foundation for the unities of both intentionality’s directedness and the object of its directedness. This is the case because, absent the making of the fundamental distinction between psychological and transcendental consciousness, the unities of the multiplicities manifested by intentionality cannot but not be understood to have the status of the mental being proper to psychological reality.

To be sure, pure psychology of consciousness is a precise parallel to transcendental phenomenology of consciousness. Nevertheless the two must at first be kept strictly separate, since failure to distinguish them, which is characteristic of transcendental psychologism, makes a genuine philosophy impossible.

(Husserl 1960, 32)

Thus, insofar as the unities in question are the objectivities determinative of the exact sciences or ontological unities discovered by the natural sciences, the psychological understanding of the intentional consciousness in which they are given results in what, for Husserl, is the biggest challenge faced by phenomenology: psychologism. “[T]he expression psychologism is more appropriate to any interpretation which converts objectivities into something psychological in the proper sense; and the pregnant sense of psychologism should be defined accordingly” (Husserl 1969, 169).

In what follows, the discussion of Husserl’s account of intentionality is divided into three phases that track the development of his thought. Thus, his psychological, pure transcendental, and genetic-historical formulations of the problem of intentionality are discussed. The discussion concludes with a brief account of Heidegger’s critique of the phenomenological originality—in the sense of its philosophically foundational claim—of Husserl’s account of intentionality.

### Husserl’s psychological account of intentionality

The core of Husserl’s descriptive psychological account of intentionality focuses on a crucial phenomenological distinction internal to the structure of lived-experience, which characterizes its intrinsic (reell) and non-intrinsic (irreell) aspects. Lived-experience for Husserl is a temporal whole composed of parts that intrinsically belong to that whole, in the precise sense that “they can be found in its immanent temporality” (Husserl 1977, 132). Husserl characterizes this intrinsic relation of belonging in terms of the parts’ intrinsic inclusion in the temporal unity characteristic of the whole of the lived-experience. This means that the manifold of those parts, which he characterizes in terms of 1) hyletic data (“data of color, data of tone, data of smell,
data of pain, etc., considered purely subjectively, therefore here without thinking of the bodily organs or of anything psychophysical” [Husserl 1977, 128]), 2) the “intentional characters” (Husserl 1977, 133) of that hyletic data, and 3) the synthesis of those intentional characters into appearances of objectivities, “have an intrinsic [reell] unity of lived-experience and a certain peculiar species (Art) of being bound to one another, which is called the synthesis of appearances” (Husserl 1977, 132). The phenomenal relation between these intrinsic parts, which are “ever new” (Husserl 1977, 132) and “temporally separated” (Husserl 1977, 132) contrasts with the phenomenal relation between the appearing object that appears in and through them. The latter, despite its appearance in the manifold parts intrinsic to lived-experience, is not manifold but maintained by Husserl to be “one in numerical identity” (Husserl 1977, 132). Thus, while no intrinsic (reell) part can be identical with another, owing to its temporal discreteness as a phase belonging to the manifold whole of a lived-experience, the appearance of the object manifest in each part, as a phase of that manifold, is not intrinsic to that manifold, a status Husserl captures with the word irreell (non-intrinsic). It is so in the precise sense of its identity being maintained despite the manifold manner of its appearance. Husserl puts it this way:

But if we restrict ourselves to what is exhibited and shown within the streaming perception itself, we see, then: the synthesis of streaming appearances in the same object [im selben Objectk] … has the marvelous specific property on the one hand of being an intrinsic [reell] synthesis and on the other hand containing in every phase something non-intrinsic [irreell], namely, of having “in” itself in separated phases evidently the same numerically identical object which is called non-intrinsic [irreell] in relation to the immanent synthesis of lived-experience. It could also be called ideal in this relation because it is evidently the same, whereas the separate phases of lived-experience cannot intrinsically [reellen] contain anything identical.

(Husserl 1977, 134)

That is, the intentional object is constituted as something that is not intrinsic (reell) in the precise sense that: 1) it does not share the non-identity of the subjective phases of the intentional manifold that composes the temporal unity of lived-experience, and 2), unlike the intrinsic (reell) inclusion of those phases in that temporal unity, the intentional object is not an intrinsic part of that unity. The phenomenal result of 1) for Husserl is the invariance inseparable from objectivity, in the exact sense of the appearance of the intentional object that manifests it remains one and the same throughout the variations of the “flowing” or “streaming” synthesis of the non-identical intrinsic (reellen) phases of lived-experience that exhibit the appearing of the object’s appearance. And the phenomenal result of 2) is the transcendence inseparable from the objective appearance, in the exact sense of its not being an intrinsic (reell) part of the lived-experience in which it nevertheless appears.

Husserl’s psychological account of the distinction between the intrinsic and non-intrinsic parts of the unity of lived-experience, which was first formulated in his logical investigations at the turn of the 20th century, forms the basis for both his initial and all subsequent accounts of intentionality. Husserl characterizes the source of the non-identity of the unity of the intrinsic (reellen) parts of the immanent dimension of lived-experience as the intentional act, from which issues precisely the peculiar directedness aspect of intentionality. The non-identity of the flowing manifold of those parts, together with the immanent temporal character of their unity, is what is responsible for the non-conceptual nature of its intentional directedness. It is also responsible for Husserl’s use of metaphors in its descriptive characterization. In addition to the metaphors of “flowing” and “streaming” used by him to capture the non-conceptual temporal unity intrinsic
(reell) to the manifold aspect of lived-experience, he also uses the metaphor of a “ray,” as in “ray of regard” (Blickstrahl), to describe the intentional directedness that issues from the intentional act and terminates in the object of which it is conscious.

The intentional object, in virtue of its not being an intrinsic part of the immanent unity of lived-experience, is likewise for Husserl not an intrinsic part of the intentional act that is the source of that unity. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the transcendent status of the intentional object’s non-intrinsic (irreell) unity vis-à-vis the intentional act, that unity still belongs—in some sense—to lived-experience in Husserl’s view. It does so precisely insofar as its intentionally objective unity is something that appears, and indeed, can only appear nowhere else other than to the ray of regard characteristic of the intentional act’s directedness, which is also to say, with Husserl, to its intentionally peculiar “consciousness of.”

It is, however, a triviality to characterize Husserl’s account of intentionality in terms of its invariant “consciousness of.” In addition to the distinction between the intrinsic and transcendent parts of lived-experience, Husserl’s psychological account of intentionality distinguishes the quality of the intentional act from the matter of its intentional object. The quality of the intentional act is characterized by its kind, with the most original kind being perception, followed by memory and anticipation. In addition, there are the act qualities of judging, signifying, phantasizing, symbolizing, wishing, willing, as well as affective act qualities like emotion and valuing, etc. The intentional matter characterizes both what appears as the intentional object and the how of its appearance. The same act matter, in terms of what appears, can appear in different kinds of acts; for example, the first volume of the Logical Investigations can appear in the perception of a copy on my desk, in the memory of having read it once, in the anticipation of reading it again, in the valuation of it as profound, in the judgment that it represents a pre-philosophical phase of Husserl’s thought, etc.

In the kinds of acts other than perception, the act matter presents its object in what Husserl calls an empty intention. In such acts, the intentional directedness of the act refers to an intentional object that itself appears in a way that its very appearance refers beyond what appears to the acts that give it originally. The latter acts according to Husserl intuitively fulfill the meaning intended by the intentional object’s empty intention in what he characterizes as a synthesis of overlapping (Husserl 1970a, 199). In such a synthesis, the meaning of the emptily intended “what” determinative of the act matter extends over the act that originally presents the content of that meaning. The extent of the synthetic overlapping is measured by Husserl in terms of the degree of adequation that ranges between the poles of completely adequate and inadequate overlapping, or, equivalently, of adequate and inadequate evidence.

In line with Husserl’s initial account of the intentional essence of lived-experience in accordance with the protocols of a phenomenological psychology, he distinguished that aspect of the intentional object that is an intrinsic part of the intentional act from the aspect transcending it. That part intrinsically belonging to the act he characterized as the “intentional content” and that which transcends it he reserved the term “intentional object.” This distinction, however, proved problematical, as it highlighted an ambiguity in Husserl’s methodological self-understanding of psychology. On the one hand, he radically distinguished the descriptive aspect of its method from the method of explanatory psychology. He did so on the basis of the latter’s cognitive concern with the causally determined contingent reality of the psycho-physical reality and the former’s concern with the intentional essence of lived-experience. Because the latter essence, however, includes both intrinsic (reell) and non-intrinsic (irreell) parts, the status of both the distinction between and the character of the intentional content and intentional object is ambiguous. It is so, depending on whether their meaning is correlated, respectively, to the act’s intrinsic (reell) or non-intrinsic (irreell) parts or, again respectively, to the whole of the act’s parts and that which is external to those parts and thus transcends them.
Husserl's transcendental phenomenological account of the intentionality of pure consciousness

Husserl sought to resolve this ambiguity with the phenomenological epoché and reduction, which in his view methodologically transforms the psychological immanence of intentionality into an immanence that is transcendentally phenomenological. Husserl believed this is accomplished with the recalibration of intentional immanence, from that which is intrinsic to the intentional act to that which is evidently manifest in the whole of the intentional structure of lived-experience. Immanence so reconfigured now includes for Husserl both the intrinsic (reell) and non-intrinsic (irreell) parts of lived-experience, which means that, when considered transcendentally, the non-intrinsic (irreell) transcendence of the intentional object has the phenomenological status of a "transcendence in immanence." It also means that there is no longer any methodological basis for distinguishing intentional content from the intentional object, as the latter is transcendentally reduced to its givenness in the former.

Husserl's transcendental account of intentionality no longer characterizes it in terms of the essential structure of a class of lived-experiences but rather as the essential structure of the transcendentally phenomenologically reduced region of pure consciousness. In line with this and in accordance of the latter’s correlation not just to the manifold of intentional objects but also to the phenomenon of the world within whose horizon such objects appear, Husserl's account of the intentionality of transcendental consciousness introduces fundamental distinctions not found in his psychological account of intentionality. The first and most important distinction is that between “actual” (aktuell) and “non-actual” (inaktuell) modes of intentionality.

We again recognize then that inherent in the essence of all lived experiences—taken always in a completely concrete way—is that remarkable modification that converts consciousness in the mode of a currently actual (aktuell) turn toward something into consciousness in the mode of non-actualization and vice versa.

(Husserl 2014, 61)

The former is characterized by its intentional regard actively thematizing the intentional object, such that the appearance of the latter is made explicit. For Husserl, then, in its actional modality, “the lived experience is so to speak ‘explicit’ consciousness of something that is, for it, objective” (Husserl, 2014, 61). Husserl explicitly identified intentionality’s actual modality with the structure of the Cartesian term “cogito” (Husserl 2014, 62). Henceforth, Husserl's use of the term “act” in connection with intentionality refers to its actual mode, or what is the same, to the cogito. The latter, non-actual mode of intentionality is characterized by its intentional regard's non-thematizing consciousness of its intentional object and the latter’s consequent non-thematic appearance. This intentional mode is initially invoked by Husserl to characterize the how of the appearance of the world-horizon and then, eventually, the non-thematic horizon that structures, essentially, the background of the actual mode of intentionality. In line with this, Husserl comes to articulate the inner and outer horizon of the cogito: the inner refers to the non-thematic field of intentional objects that, in accordance with essential necessity, can be made thematic by a shift in the direction of the thematizing intentional regard; the outer refers to the world-horizon whose non-objective mode of appearance, in accord with essential necessity, does not lend itself to thematic givenness. This is the case because the world-horizon appears as the non-objective background within which the multitude of individual objects belonging to the world appear.
Husserl’s genetic-historical account of intentionality

Husserl’s transcendental account of intentionality introduces the Greek terms “noesis” and “noêma” to characterize, respectively, the whole of the actual and non-actual intentional directedness and the thematic and horizontal aspects of the intentional object. In line with the restriction of the intentional act to intentionality’s actual (cogito) modality, Husserl extends his account of intentionality’s source beyond the thematizing act coincident with this modality of lived-experience to include its non-actual and therefore “passive” aspect in his account of its origin as a whole. Husserl characterizes the systematic transcendental phenomenological investigation of the non-actual and therefore passive structure of intentionality as “genetic,” including its correlative non-thematic horizontal intentional object. More precisely, he characterized the passive and non-thematic modality of intentionality as playing a genetic role in the “constitution” of its actual and thematic modality, which he characterized as “static.” Insofar as the passive aspect of intentionality enjoys what Husserl characterized as a “motivational” priority over its actual dimension, Husserl’s transcendental phenomenological analysis of intentionality is characterized by the “zig-zag” movement of its methodological regard. Specifically, it’s characterized by the methodical movement from genetic to static considerations, and back again, as the constitution of actual intentionality’s static structures is exhibited from out of its non-actual, and in this sense “functionally” genetic aspect.

In his last fragmentary works, which are collected in the posthumously published volume Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology (Husserl 1970b), Husserl’s analysis of the transcendental structure of intentionality penetrated beyond the dynamic of genetically functional and static intentional structures to the intentional structure of the passive reception of traditional and, in that sense, historically transmitted meaning. In the confrontation of what Husserl presented as the unrealized foundational demands of transcendental phenomenology’s project to ground scientific cognition with various strands of intentionally historical meaning uncovered by his analysis, a way is adumbrated on his telling to restore the original integrity of knowledge characteristic of the Greek philosophical establishment of Episteme as a cultural norm. And, while Husserl didn’t live long enough to pursue that way in any detail, he was nevertheless able to suggest that the telos of the unity determinative of the Greek establishment of universal science needs now to function as the telos of the fatefully fractured European sciences, if the peculiar intentionality structuring the latter is to overcome the crisis attendant its unity-less multiplicity. In other words, in his last works Husserl uncovered both the historicity inseparable from the origins of intentionality and the unitary telos of those origins’ intentional object that is likewise inseparable from them.

Heidegger’s ontological critique of the phenomenological originality of Husserl’s account of intentionality

Heidegger’s critique of intentionality in Husserl is focused on the question of its phenomenological originality. According to that critique Husserl’s account of intentionality, for all its philosophical originality, was nevertheless phenomenologically limited (Heidegger 1985). Rather than disclose the original phenomenon of phenomenology, on Heidegger’s telling Husserl’s account of the essence of intentionality articulated the structure of the derivative phenomenon of perceptual uncovering. For Heidegger, this phenomenon is derivative in three interrelated ways. One, the region of beings uncovered by its intentional structure, perceptually given natural being, is not ontologically fundamental. Two, its reflective mode of access to those ontologically unoriginal beings is cognitive in a way that conceals their proper ontological grounding in the
world. And, three, the intentional structure of their uncovering, which renders them thematic, limits their uncovering to a single, non-original mode of time: the present. Husserl's account of intentionality, in short, presents, in Heidegger's view, the essential structure of an ontologically non-fundamental region of beings, and it does so while being guided by an understanding of the meaning of their being that is limited to their temporally derivative mode of being present.

Apart from the explicitly ontological formulation of Heidegger's critique, what is most striking about it is that it is limited exclusively to Husserl's presentation of intentionality's actual modality. That is, Heidegger's critique is limited to Husserl's account of the intentionality of the cogito. Husserl's account of its non-actual modality, and the non-thematic articulation of the horizontal structure of that modality's intentional object, therefore, does not figure at all in Heidegger's critique. The fateful reception of Heidegger's critique by the phenomenological tradition as a largely convincing immanent critique proves not only that a great many of that tradition's followers are not careful readers of at least one of Husserl's major texts (Husserl 2014), but also that they, like Heidegger, were unable to keep Husserl's transcendental phenomenology distinct from Descartes' philosophy of the cogito.

References


