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HUSSERL AND FREGE *

To be sure, we still have philosophical congresses. The philosophers meet but, unfortunately, not the philosophies. The philosophies lack the unity of a mental space in which they might exist for and act on one another.¹

Edmund Husserl summarized the state of academic philosophy in 1929 with these words; but, from our contemporary perspective, they also sound amazingly prophetic.

Recently, though, there have been efforts to find a "mental space" in which the philosophical insights of Gottlob Frege and Husserl, <529> and also perhaps the traditions they fathered, "might exist for and act on one another." That such a space does exist for Frege and the early Husserl is generally recognized. They studied and criticized each other's works, they corresponded, they were both opponents of naturalism, psychologism, and relativism, and they shared interests in the foundations of logic and mathematics. It is a disputed thesis, however, that Husserl's more distinctively phenomenological views also belong to this same mental space. I believe that they do, and that properly situating them there can improve our understanding of both Husserl and Frege. My focus in this paper is on Frege and the early Husserl, emphasizing especially some issues on which they differed. I contend that Husserl's early project, on which he and Frege clashed, also guides the course of his later work. And so I argue that the issues that bind Husserl and Frege to a common mental space are also relevant to a proper understanding of Husserl's phenomenology, especially his notion of noema and its relation to Frege's notion of *Sinn*.²

¹ *Cartesian Meditations*, Dorion Cairns, trans. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973), p. 5.

² For other relevant discussions, see: Dagfinn Føllesdal, *Husserl und Frege* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1958); Michael Sukale, *Comparative Studies in Phenomenology* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1976); Tyler Burge, "Sinning Against Frege," *Philosophical Review*, LXXXVIII (1979): 398-432; Hans Sluga, *Gottlob Frege* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); J. N. Mohanty, *Husserl and Frege* (Bloomington, Ind.: University Press, 1982); David W. Smith and Ronald McIntyre, *Husserl and Intentionality* (Boston: Reidel, 1982); and Dallas Willard, *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge* (Athens, Ohio: University Press, 1984).

* Presented in an APA symposium of the same title, December 28, 1987. Robert Sokolowski was co-symposiast, and Donn Welton commented; see this *Journal*, this issue, 521-528 and 535/6, respectively, for their contributions.

Let us begin with the period up to 1900, when Husserl and Frege were explicitly interested in the same topics, logic and mathematics, and the issue was – or, for Husserl, became – psychologism. As is well known, Husserl’s book on the foundations of arithmetic was reviewed by Frege, who roundly criticized it as psychologistic. Whatever the degree of justice in this charge, Husserl’s own terminology and his conception of the project of investigating the foundations of arithmetic invited it. Husserl held that a philosophical understanding of arithmetic requires a clarification of the nature of arithmetical *thinking*, of the mental processes that make it possible for us to have thoughts about numbers and their interrelations. He criticized Frege’s explanations of concepts for failing to “enable us to reproduce in ourselves those mental processes which are necessary for the construction of the concept.”³ Husserl himself sought to describe the basic concepts involved in primitive mathematical thinking, as manifested in counting small numbers of perceptible objects, and then to show how the concept of number itself is derived from reflection on such primitive acts of counting. He characterized all <530> these concepts, including the concept of number, as “contents” of presentations (or acts) and he characterized the enterprise as an investigation of the “psychological origin” of the concept of number. Frege’s response, of course, was that Husserl’s project conflated concepts, which are objective, and presentations, which are subjective, and so rendered numbers themselves subjective and private affairs of individual thinkers.

Frege’s review highlighted a problem for Husserl’s conviction that the ultimate concern of philosophy is the analysis of experience: that very conviction threatens to turn philosophy into a study of the subjective and so to conflict with an objective and non-relativistic account of knowledge and of things known. However the review may have influenced Husserl’s actual views, his subsequent writings are much more sensitive to the issues Frege raised. But there is an important sense in which Husserl never abandons the kind of project which Frege criticized. While agreeing with Frege that concepts and meanings are objective and intersubjective, Husserl never relinquishes his view that they are *contents* of acts. For Husserl, the analysis of concepts remains tantamount to the analysis of experiences. What Husserl does come to see, with or without Frege’s help, is the need to develop a non-psychological notion of content more adequate to his philosophical purposes. Husserl’s later work can be seen as increasingly refined attempts to clarify his initial project, to distinguish it from psychology as a new discipline called “phenomenology,” and to extend it to the investigation of experiences of objects of all kinds.⁴

³ Edo Pivcevic, “Husserl versus Frege,” *Mind*, LXXVI (1967): 162.

⁴ See Husserl’s reiteration of this project in his *Phenomenological Psychology*, John Scanlon, trans. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1977), pp. 14-33.

The first major revision of this project is Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (1900),⁵ which includes an explicit discussion of linguistic sense. Husserl articulates there a number of theses with which Frege could agree. Senses are distinct from referents and from subjective mental processes. Senses are "ideal," nontemporal and nonspatial, entities. Having a sense is essential to any meaningful expression; having a referent is not. Expressions with different senses may have the same referent. And the sense of an expression determines its referent. But there are also differences in their views; the most significant ones for our purposes concern the "ideality" of senses and the relation of senses to acts. For Husserl, senses are *universals* that acts *instantiate*; for Frege, they are *ideal particulars* that acts *apprehend* or "grasp."

<531> Let us consider Frege's views first: there are two conflicting tendencies in what Frege says about the relation of senses to acts, and Husserl's views represent one way of resolving this conflict. On the one hand, Frege takes great pains to deny any ontological relation between senses and acts. Acts exist in the realm of the mental, which he equates with the subjective and private, while senses – though "ideal" rather than spatial or temporal – are just as objective and intersubjective as physical objects. Furthermore, Frege sometimes suggests, when senses do enter into relations with acts, they do so in the same sort of way that physical objects do, i.e., by being *objects* of acts of appropriate sorts. Physical objects can be perceived; "thoughts" can be apprehended and judgments can be made about them. When a thought is apprehended, Frege says, "something in [the thinker's] consciousness must be *aimed at* the thought."⁶ And a thought or sense remains just as "external" to an act of apprehending it as a physical object does to an act of perceiving it:

The expression 'apprehend' is as metaphorical as 'content of consciousness'. . . . What I hold in my hand can certainly be regarded as the content of my hand but is all the same the content of my hand in a quite different way from the bones and muscles of which it is made and their tensions, and is much more extraneous to it than they are (*ibid.*, p. 530, n. 7).

And of course thoughts and other senses can be referred to just as any other objects can be. On the other hand, Frege sometimes suggests a more intimate relation of senses to acts. Although senses *can* be referred to, that is not their customary semantic role: expressions more frequently refer to ordinary sorts of objects, and the fundamental role of senses is to direct a reader's or hearer's thinking, not to the thought or sense itself, but to these customary referents. In this spirit, Frege relates the sense of an expression to a "mode of presen-

⁵ John Findlay, trans. (New York: Humanities, 1970). Hereafter abbreviated LI.

⁶ "The Thought," A. M. and Marcelle Quinton, trans., in E. D. Klemke, ed., *Essays on Frege* (Urbana, Ill.: University Press, 1968), p. 531.

tation” of its referent. And his attempts to show differences in sense among expressions always turn on differences in the cognitive information about the referent that those expressions would ordinarily convey. These aspects of Frege’s discussion suggest that senses do not simply play the role of objects in acts in which *senses themselves* are apprehended, but that they also play some role in acts in which other objects, the *customary referents* of expressions, are experienced.

Frege leaves it completely unclear how senses play this second role. They certainly do not do so simply by being apprehended as objects, <532> for to apprehend a thought is not in itself to know or pass judgment on a truth value, and one can grasp the sense of a singular term without having a presentation of its referent. Nor does it seem plausible to suppose that we intend ordinary objects only by intermediately apprehending a sense and then passing to the object by means of some second act, say an inference or judgment. Thus, it seems that in addition to being apprehensible objects, senses must also be related in some more intimate fashion to acts in which objects other than senses are intended. For to play the second, and I think primary, role Frege gives to senses, a sense must be “in” an act in a way more like bones and muscles are in the hand: not in it as what it grasps but as that by virtue of which it grasps what it does. Husserl’s explicit concern is to relate senses to acts in this second way, while at the same time preserving their objectivity.

Like it or not, Husserl’s account in LI is much clearer on this issue than Frege’s. Although linguistic senses can be apprehended in acts that take them as objects, that is not their primary relation to acts. Primarily, senses are *contents* of acts in which ordinary sorts of objects are intended, and linguistic expressions achieve their semantic properties only by virtue of their relation to such intentional presentations. Language is a medium for publicly “expressing our thoughts” and so enabling others to consider the very same object that we are considering. And this is possible because the *sense* we linguistically express is the “intentional *content*” of the underlying act; it is not the *object* of that act, not something that we apprehend or otherwise intend in the act, but that “in” the act that makes it a presentation of a certain object in a certain way. Husserl calls this element of content the act’s “*Auffassungssinn*.” As content of the act, it gives the act its intentional character; and, as expressed sense, it gives the expression its referential character, its character of referring to a certain object in a certain way. Thus, in Husserl, the relation of sense to “mode of presentation” is explicit.

But, if the sense of a referring expression is tied to a mode of presentation of the referent by being the *content* of an act that presents the referent in that “mode”, has Husserl not lost the other tendency in Frege’s discussion of sense? Has Husserl not construed senses in some subjective “psychological” way, and so simply given up on their objectivity and given in to psychologism? The answer lies in a distinction Husserl had come to make

even prior to LI: a distinction between the “real” and the “ideal” content of an act. Real content is specific and unique to a particular act, while ideal content is independent of that act and shareable by different acts, even acts <533> of different persons. The sense of an expression is the expressed *ideal* content of an act, and so is not something subjective or private. If this sounds mysterious, Husserl’s solution to the mystery is marvelously simple. *Universals* are ideal entities, shareable by the different individuals that instantiate them, and, on Husserl’s view, they are ontologically independent of those individuals. The ideal content of an act is a universal, Husserl says, the act’s property of presenting a certain object in a certain way; whereas the real content of the act consists of those temporal constituents which literally make up the act and in which that property is instantiated.

LI provides an elegant resolution of the tension in Frege’s characterization of senses and in Husserl’s own earlier thought. As universals, senses are just as objective, just as ontologically independent of particular acts and particular “thinkers,” as Frege’s senses. Also, like Frege’s senses, they can themselves be apprehended in appropriate acts. (For Husserl, though apparently not for Frege, this apprehension is a type of “intuition”.) But, as universals rather than ideal particulars, Husserl’s senses also do closer commerce with acts than that: they are *instantiated* in ordinary acts where ordinary objects, not these senses themselves, are intended.

Husserl himself was nonetheless not satisfied with his account of senses, or ideal contents, as act universals. That account yields, in effect, an “adverbial” theory of intentionality (and reference). An act’s intending a particular object in a certain way is due, not to there being some relation between the act and an object, but to the act’s having a certain nonrelational property: the property of intending such-and-such object in such-and-such way. By the time of *Ideas* (1913),⁷ Husserl has replaced this adverbial account with a more detailed explication of how an act comes to have this property: an act is intentional by virtue of a relation between the act and the act’s “noema.” But this does not mean that Husserl has abandoned all he said about intentionality in LI. Like the intentional content of an act in LI, an act’s noema is an “ideal” entity which Husserl characterizes as a sense or Sinn. [Strictly speaking, Husserl calls just one component of the noema – the component that determines which object an act intends and which properties it is intended as having – a “Sinn” or “noematic Sinn” (see esp. §§88, 89, and 91), but he characterizes the whole noema as a sense of another kind, a “Satz” <534> (§133).] Thus, as in LI, an act is intentional by virtue of its relation to a sense or Sinn. What has changed is Husserl’s conception of the

⁷ *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Erstes Buch (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1950). Translations from this work are mine; cf. *Ideas*, First Book, Fred Kersten, trans. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982).

kind of ideal entities senses are: noemata and noematic Sinne are not universals, not properties of acts, but ideal particulars. In this respect, Husserl's conception of sense has moved closer to Frege's. And noematic Sinne are more "Fregean" in another way as well: they are complex structures of senses organized in various syntactic (Husserl says "categorical") patterns (see esp. §§130/1). For Husserl, it is by investigating the complexities of these sense structures that we uncover the complexities in the ways objects are presented to consciousness.

The "Fregean" turn in Husserl's conception of sense necessitates a change in the way senses are related to acts. Since noematic Sinne are not properties of acts, the relation of a Sinn to the act that "has" it cannot be the relation of instantiation. How, then, *are* noemata, and specifically noematic Sinne, related to acts? Are noemata only related to acts as objects toward which acts may be directed? Some interpreters say so. But those interpreters invariably play down Husserl's characterization of noemata as senses, the continuity he sees between this notion of act-sense and the notion of linguistic sense, and the idea that Husserl's notion of sense is interestingly similar to Frege's. And no wonder. For noemata must then either themselves be the objects that our ordinary acts intend or be intermediate objects, the intending of which somehow directs our acts to ordinary objects. To suppose that senses of a Fregean sort play either of these roles in intentionality seems quite bad phenomenology.

But, now, although I believe there are close similarities between Frege's and Husserl's notions of Sinn, what Frege called "aiming at" a Sinn is not the only, or the primary, way that Sinne enter into relations with acts on Husserl's conception of Sinn. Noematic Sinne are not the objects, but the *ideal contents*, of ordinary acts in which ordinary objects are intended. On Husserl's conception of content in *Ideas*, the "real content" of an act includes what he now calls a "noesis": it comprises the "phases of experience" which "bear in themselves the specific character of intentionality" (§85, p. 208). The noesis, Husserl says, is a "Sinn-bestowing stratum" in the act. The Sinn itself, the noematic Sinn, is related to this real noetic content, neither as a property that it instantiates nor as an object that it is directed toward, but as the Sinn it "bestows". Husserl introduces the noema and distinguishes it from the noesis in §88 under the heading "Real and Intentional Components of Experience," and he refers the reader to discussions of sense and content in LI. §97 of *Ideas* is entitled "The Hyletic and Noetic Phases as Real, the Noematic <535> as Non-Real, Phases of Experience." In §129, Husserl again correlates the noesis-noema distinction with the discussion of content in LI, and, in §133, he explicitly relates the noema to the earlier concept of ideal content. Husserl distinguishes both the noesis and the noema, as "components" or "phases" of experience, from the object intended in an act, and he says that both are found by reflecting on the act itself (see esp. §§87-90).

Husserl's new conception of intentional content as an ideal particular does, of course, present a problem: the problem of just how real and ideal content are related. To call it the relation of "bestowal" is not in itself very illuminating, but Husserl may simply have thought this relation *sui generis* and so not explicable in more familiar terms. One thing is clear, though: if noemata are ideal contents, then a noema is not an object apprehended or otherwise intended in the act whose content it is. In Frege's metaphor, it is not like the object grasped by the hand, but like the structure of the hand which is necessary for its grasping whatever it does. Husserl's project prior to *Ideas* was to find a way to tie sense to content, and meaning analysis to act analysis, in just this intimate fashion. *Ideas* continues that project.

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