

SEMIOTICS IN HUSSERL'S *LOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS*

Husserl begins the first of his *Logical Investigations*¹ by examining what he calls "The Essential Distinctions." The first distinction he makes is between two kinds of sign, indications and expressions, *Anzeigen* and *Ausdrücke*. Notice how he proceeds here at the start of his phenomenology, at the point where he is analyzing consciousness and defining his terms for the very first time. He does not begin his philosophy by looking inward at consciousness. His access to intentional acts is not by introspection. Rather, his access is through the public, palpable, and worldly phenomena of signs, both indicative and expressive. Signs are public things, they are "outside" the mind: they are sounds, marks, arrangements of objects, a wave of the hand, a pile of stones. It is by examining such public things that Husserl gains access to intentionality and makes distinctions within it.

However, signs are not simple public things like rocks or trees; besides being material things, they involve the presence of mind, they involve and therefore reflect the activity that lets them be signs. By starting with signs, Husserl begins his philosophy in the most felicitous way possible, with something that is a material entity but is also saturated with the presence of thinking.

To describe how things can become signs for us, Husserl appeals to a concrete, ordinary experience. Both in the Fifth Investigation and in an essay he wrote in 1894, Husserl presents the following situation: we are looking at some arabesques and admiring their intricacy. Suddenly we realize that these elegant marks actually are words; they spell out someone's name or make some statement.² For this change to occur, we must have begun to "intend" differently; we no longer simply perceive, we now read or interpret the marks as saying something. Our new intention is different from the one we were engaged in until that change occurred: the new intention goes beyond what is immediately present; it begins to intend not just these marks but, say, Winston Churchill or the Gare St. Lazare, and this same new intention changes the marks from being fascinating curlicues to being words.

The new kind of intention that establishes a sign as such is not something we feel; we do not somehow palpate the difference between signifying and perceiving. Signifying and perceiving are two kinds of intentionality, but they become visible in what they do, not in themselves. When we try to analyze, philosophically, the difference between a sign and a percept, we do not look at the intentions directly, we do not look at the signitive act and then the perceptual act, we do not introspectively discover

¹ Citations will be from E. HUSSERL, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, 2 volumes (abbreviated as LI).

² See LI, 566, and E. HUSSERL, "Psychological Studies for Elementary Logic," trans. R. Hudson and P. McCormick, in *Husserl. Shorter Works*, ed. P. McCormick and F. Elliston, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 137.

qualitative differences among our intentionalities. We get at the intentionalities by looking at signs and contrasting them with ordinary perceived objects; the differences between signs and perceived things allow us to discover differences in the intentionalities that are correlated with them. To put it into Husserl's later terminology, we first register a noematic difference and thereby become able to discover a noetic difference. This approach remains with Husserl throughout his philosophical career and it also remains with phenomenology throughout its history. Contrary to widespread opinion, phenomenology is not introspective. It gets at the mind not directly but through the mind's presence in and with things.

After he distinguishes between indication signs and expressions, Husserl spends the first pages of *Logical Investigations* talking about indication. I will not follow him in this. I will begin with the study of the other branch of the distinction, with expression, and will turn to indication later on.

I. WORDS AND WHAT THEY EXPRESS

The paradigm of expression is the linguistic sign, the word. When we recognize some sounds or marks as really being words, many new dimensions come into play. Let us suppose that we are surrounded by mere background noise and suddenly realize that somebody is saying something in that noise; or, let us say that we are looking at what seem to be random marks on paper and suddenly we realize that there is a message written into them. The physical sounds or marks now "contain a meaning," and they are being used to "refer" to something. They embody both meaning and reference, but they do so not by themselves, by their own material weight or by their own independent being. They contain a meaning and exercise a reference because *we* are signifying and referring through them, and because we realize that *someone else* has signified and referred through them. The change from being a mere sound or mark into being an expression thus involves the presence of a signifying activity, along with the introduction of a meaning and a reference. Thus, the sign is not just there all by itself; it could not stand alone; surrounding it, radiating from it, are three essential components: the signitive act that makes it a sign, the meaning, and the reference.

Incidentally, Husserl's doctrine of the signifying act as establishing meaning is elegantly confirmed by Paul Bloom in his book, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words*.³ Bloom shows that association alone is not sufficient to explain how children learn to use words. If a mechanical sound were to be regularly produced when a child experiences a certain kind of object, the child would not take the sound to be the name of the thing. Instead, children learn what words are and what they mean when they grasp the fact that someone is intending the object through the use of the sound: "young children will make the connection [between sound and object] only if they have some warrant to believe that it is an act of naming—and for this, the speaker has to be

³ P. BLOOM, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000.

present.”⁴ Bloom speaks of “the child’s own ability to infer the referential intentions of others.”⁵ In Husserl’s terminology, the child accepts certain sounds as words when he takes them to be animated by a speaker’s signitive intentionality.

One of the first points that Husserl makes concerning expressions is that they can occur in the absence of the thing to which they are used to refer. I might look out the window and say, “There’s a police car in the driveway.” I perceive the police car, but you, who hear me say these words, may not be looking out the window; you don’t see the car, and yet you understand what I have said. You can possess the meaning even if you don’t perceive the referent. The meaning, therefore, cannot be located in the perceptual or intuitive activity associated with the expression. The meaning must lie in another act, in what Husserl calls the signifying or meaning-bestowing act. In this way, he works out another of his “essential distinctions,” that between the signifying act and the intuition, or between the empty intention and the fulfillment. He says, “Let us take our stand on this fundamental distinction between meaning-intentions void of intuition and those which are intuitively fulfilled.” (LI, 281).⁶ Once again, a distinction is achieved not by somehow looking at two different kinds of acts and seeing differences among them, but by looking at what the acts have done or accomplished or achieved. Husserl looks at how we interact with the world and how we communicate with one another, and in this wider context he distinguishes between empty and filled intentions.

The next step is to investigate the expressions themselves and to ask how they are structured. Husserl insists that the expression is not just the physical sound or mark; rather, it is the composite made up of the physical phenomenon and the meaning. He says, “The word ‘expression’ is normally understood . . . as the *sense-informed* expression.” (LI, 281).⁷ Thus, the expression *four legged animal* is made up of both the phonemic stratum and the meaning contained in it.

Expressions, therefore, according to Husserl, are composed of both sound and sense. Let us go on to ask one more question, one that will play a strategic role in our argument. The question is: What do expressions express? At first glance, the answer to this question might seem obvious. We would probably be inclined to say that expressions express their meaning, the meaning that informs them. But Husserl does not accept this reply; he explicitly rejects it, even while recognizing how natural and obvious it might seem: “One should not, therefore, properly say (as one often does) that an expression *expresses its meaning* (its intention).” (LI, 281). But if an expression does not express its meaning, what does it express?

⁴ P. BLOOM, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words*, 64.

⁵ P. BLOOM, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words*, 84.

⁶ This contrast is more clearly drawn in the Sixth Investigation (LI, 680).

⁷ Ferdinand de Saussure has a similar idea, claiming that the sign is composite, and the signifier and the signified are its two components. However, he works primarily not with the public expression but with the mental image and hence with a private language or mental speech. For him, it is the *image acoustique* that is the signifier, not a publicly uttered sound, and the concept is the signified. See F. DE SAUSSURE, *Cours de linguistique generale*, ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye, Paris: Payot, 1962, 99.

At this point, things get complicated. Recall the distinction between the signitive act and the intuitive act that fulfills it. If I say, "There's a police car in the driveway," you can understand what I say even when you are not looking at the driveway or the car. The car and driveway are absent to you, and yet you intend them in an empty intention and you possess the meaning that is part of this expression. However, your empty intention can be fulfilled. You can turn around and look into the driveway, and you then see the car. The intuitive act by which you do this is intrinsically related to the empty, signitive act you carried out when you understood my words. The intuitive act fulfills the empty intention, and the empty intention, in principle and by its nature, is geared toward fulfillment, even though in fact it may never be fulfilled. Both acts, of course, intend the same object; they have the same reference.

Husserl then says that there is a content to the fulfilling, intuitive act. The content of the intuitive act is, obviously, the police car's being in the driveway. It is the same content as the meaning found in the signitive act, but it has a different modality in that it is part of an intuitive act, a perception, not part of a signitive act. And now we come to the central point. According to Husserl, *what the expression expresses is the content of this intuitional act*. The expression does not express its own meaning; rather, it expresses the content of the act that fulfills the signitive act that constitutes the expression. Husserl says this in the following way: "One might more properly adopt the alternative way of speaking according to which the *fulfilling act* appears as *the act expressed by the complete expression*: we may, e.g., say that a statement 'gives expression' to an act of perceiving or imagining." (LI, 281). This statement of Husserl's, however, is still incomplete, because it only says that the expression expresses the fulfilling act. Later on in the First Investigation, Husserl more precisely says that "the essence of the meaning-fulfillment is the *fulfilling sense* of the expression, or, as one may also call it, the sense expressed by the expression." (LI, 290). He goes on to say that we must assert "that a statement of perception expresses a perception, but also that it expresses the *content* of a perception." (LI, 290).⁸

Husserl's argument is tortuous and highly condensed, and it is made even more complicated in his text because he discusses reference as well as sense, and he adds the notion of ideal meanings, or meanings taken *in specie* and transcending their realization in any intentional act, whether empty or filled. I would like to simplify his argument, to simplify his response to the question, What do expressions express? What he says can be more directly stated, and its importance can be more effectively brought out, in the following way.

⁸ One might raise the further question: What is the relationship between the meaning and the content of the perception? Husserl does not answer this question in *Logical Investigations*, but he does answer it in *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969, §§44–46, where he says that the meaning or sense just is the objective content, the state of affairs, but taken as proposed or supposed. This clarification in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* is a major philosophical discovery and it has been insufficiently treated by commentators on Husserl. See R. SOKOLOWSKI, *Husserlian Meditations. How Words Present Things*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, 43–54, 275–82; *Presence and Absence. A Philosophical Investigation of Language and Being*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, 51–62; *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 99–100.

An expression does not express its own meaning; an expression expresses the content of the perception or intuition that would present the thing or state of affairs corresponding to the meaning of the expression. That is, an expression expresses something we can find in the world; it expresses an object as it can be given in a certain way. An expression expresses not a meaning but a part of the world, as that part can be given to us through a perception or intuition. If I say, "A police car has driven into the driveway," my expression expresses a small—but important and perhaps even urgent—part of the world, the police car's being in the driveway, the state of affairs that you would see if you turned around and looked out the window. My expressions, my words, do not form a closed circle of signifiers and signifieds, they do not live only in intertextuality or interverbosity. They express something that is not merely verbal; they bring something in the world to light. They articulate a part of the world.

This expressive function occurs even when we are not in the presence of the thing being expressed. The words still express the world even when we are in the absence of that part of the world that the words are used to refer to. Expressions always keep their teleological ordering toward the way things are, toward the evidencing of things, even when they are just passed back and forth among speakers in the total absence of the things being spoken about. The signifying acts that establish the expressions as such remain always geared toward the intuitive acts that saturate them.

Husserl further spells out this realistic understanding of words in the Sixth Investigation, where he describes how we intuit things we have named. He says that "the expression seems to be *applied* to the thing and to clothe it like a garment." (LI, 688). He also says that when I call something my inkpot, "the name 'my inkpot' seems to *overlay* the perceived object, to belong *sensibly* to it." (LI, 688). He then adds the remark, "This belonging is of a peculiar kind." Husserl insists, however, that in such recognition, we do not just have the word and the thing or the word and the intuition; we also must have the signitive act that enlivens the word and finds fulfillment in the intuition and is blended with it. The signifying act, the act that makes the word to be an expression, comes between the word and the intuited thing, between the formation of the word and the intuition. Husserl also says that recognition does not mean that we somehow stand back and register a relationship between the thing named and the expression; nor do we merely associate the name and the thing. Rather, recognition is more elementary and more direct; we go right through the expression to the thing and we recognize or classify the thing immediately. As Husserl says, "In this mode of naming reference, the name appears as *belonging* to the named and as one with it." (LI, 690). He says that the word and the intuition are not just two things added to one another: "Phenomenologically we find before us no mere aggregate, but an intimate, in fact intentional unity. . . ." (LI, 691). And of course, although names belong with things and can "clothe them like a garment," they can also function in the absence of things, when they are supported only by their signitive acts, and hence we can speak about things in absence as well as in presence. To prolong the metaphor, you can have the garment just hanging in the closet and not clothing anything, but still it belongs to what it clothes, and it longs to clothe it. The garment may be just hanging there in an empty,

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