

Jean-Paul Sartre

Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology¹

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“He devoured her with his eyes.” This expression and many other signs point to the illusion common to both realism and idealism: to know is to eat. After a hundred years of academicism, French philosophy remains at that point. We have all read Brunschvicg, Lalande, and Meyerson,² we have all believed that the spidery mind trapped things in its web, covered them with a white spit and slowly swallowed them, reducing them to its own substance. What is a table, a rock, a house? Answer: a certain assemblage of “contents of consciousness,” a class of such contents. Oh digestive philosophy! Yet nothing seemed more obvious: is not the table the actual content of my perception? Is not my perception the present state of my consciousness? Nutrition, assimilation! Assimilation, Lalande said, of things to ideas, of ideas by ideas, of minds by minds. The corpulent skeletons of the world were picked clean by these diligent diastases: assimilation, unification, identification. The simplest and plainest among us vainly looked for something solid, something not just mental, but would encounter everywhere only a soft and very genteel mist: themselves.

Against the digestive philosophy of empirico-criticism, of neo-Kantianism, against all “psychologism,” Husserl persistently affirmed that one cannot dissolve things in consciousness. You see this tree, to be sure. But you see it just where it is: at the side of the road, in the midst of the dust, alone and writhing in the heat, eight miles from the Mediterranean coast. It could not enter into your consciousness, for it is not of the same nature as consciousness. One is perhaps reminded of Bergson and the first chapter of *Matter and Memory*.³ But Husserl is not a realist: this tree on its bit of parched earth is not an absolute that would subsequently enter into communication with me. Consciousness and the world are given at one stroke: essentially external to consciousness, the world is nevertheless essentially relative to consciousness. Husserl sees consciousness as an irreducible fact that no physical image can account for. Except perhaps the quick, obscure image of a burst. To know is to “burst toward,” to tear oneself out of the moist gastric intimacy, veering out there beyond oneself, out there near the tree and yet beyond it, for the tree escapes me and repulses me, and I can no more lose myself in the tree than it can dissolve itself in me. I am beyond it; it is beyond me.

Do you recognize in this description your own circumstances and your own impression? You certainly knew that the tree was not you, that you could not make it enter your dark stomach and that knowledge could not, without dishonesty, be compared to possession. All at once consciousness is purified, it is clear as a strong wind. There is nothing in it but a movement of fleeing itself, a sliding beyond itself. If, impossible though it may be, you could enter “into” a consciousness, you would be seized by a whirlwind and thrown back outside, in the thick of the dust, near the tree, for consciousness has no “inside.” Precisely this being-beyond-itself, this absolute flight, this refusal to be a substance is what makes it be a consciousness.

Imagine for a moment a connected series of bursts that tear us out of ourselves, that do not even allow to an “ourselves” the leisure of composing ourselves behind them, but that instead throw us beyond them into the dry dust of the world, on to the plain earth, amidst

things. Imagine us thus rejected and abandoned by our own nature in an indifferent, hostile, and restive world—you will then grasp the profound meaning of the discovery that Husserl expresses in his famous phrase, “All consciousness is consciousness of something.” No more is necessary to dispose of the effete philosophy of immanence, where everything happens by compromise, by protoplasmic transformations, by a tepid cellular chemistry. The philosophy of transcendence thrown us on to the highway, in the midst of dangers, under a dazzling light.

Our own being, says Heidegger, is being-in-the-world. One must understand this “being-in” as movement. To be is to fly out into the world, to spring from the nothingness of the world and of consciousness in order suddenly to burst out as consciousness-in-the-world. When consciousness tries to recoup itself, to coincide with itself once and for all, closeted off all warm and cozy, it destroys itself. This necessity for consciousness to exist as consciousness of something other than itself is what Husserl calls “intentionality.”

I have spoken primarily of knowledge in order to make myself better understood: the French philosophy that has molded us understands little besides epistemology. But for Husserl and the phenomenologists our consciousness of things is by no means limited to our knowledge of them. Knowledge, or pure “representation,” is only one of the possible forms of my consciousness “of” this tree; I can also love it, fear it, hate it; and this surpassing of consciousness by itself—i.e., intentionality—finds itself again in fear, hatred, and love. Hating another is just a way of bursting forth toward him; it is finding oneself suddenly confronted by a stranger in whom one lives, in whom, from the very first, one lives through the objective quality of “hatred.”

So all at once hatred, love, fear, sympathy—all those famous “subjective” reactions that were floating in the malodorous brine of the mind—are pulled out. They are simply ways of discovering the world. Things are what abruptly unveil themselves to us as hateful, sympathetic, horrible, lovable. Being dreadful is a property of this Japanese mask: an inexhaustible and irreducible property that constitutes its very nature—and not the sum of our subjective reactions to a piece of sculptured wood.

Husserl has restored to things their horror and their charm. He has restored to us the world of artists and prophets: frightening, hostile, dangerous, and with its havens of mercy and love. He has cleared the way for a new treatise on the passions that would be inspired by this simple truth, so utterly ignored by the refined among us: if we love a woman, it is because she is lovable. We are delivered from Proust. We are likewise delivered from the “internal life”: in vain would we seek the caresses and fondlings of our intimate selves, like Amiel,⁴ or like a child who kisses his own shoulder—for everything is finally outside: everything, even ourselves. Outside, in the world, among others. It is not in some hiding-place that we will discover ourselves; it is on the road, in the town, in the midst of the crowd, a thing among things, a human among humans.

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Notes:

1. “Une idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl: l’intentionnalité,” in *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), translation by Joseph P. Fell.

2. Léon Brunschvicg (1869-1944), author of *Le progrès de la conscience dans la philosophie occidentale* (1927) and *De la connaissance de soi* (1931). André Lalande (1867-1963), author of *La psychologie des jugements de valeur* (1928) and *Vocabulaire technique ET critique de la philosophie* (originally 1926). Émile Meyerson (1859-1933), author of *Identité et réalité* (1912) and *Du cheminement de la pensée* (1931).

3. Henri Bergson (1859-1941), *Matière et mémoire: essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit* (1896, E. T. 1988).

4. Henri Frédéric Amiel (1821-1881), Swiss philosopher and author of *Journal intime* (1861), E. T., *Amiel's Journal*, trans. Humphry Ward (London and New York: Macmillan, 1891).

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