

# Theory of Intentionality<sup>1</sup>

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Edited by Lester Embree, Fred Kersten, and Richard M. Zaner

The “*theory of intentionality* in Husserl” is roughly the same as *phenomenology* in Husserl. Intentionality – or, as I prefer to say, intentiveness – is almost the only subject of what Husserl called “*phenomenological analysis*”. His descriptions of intentiveness (call them “theory” if you will) are the principal part of his *philosophy*. Even his so-called transcendental phenomenological *idealism* is little more than the outcome of a faithful *account* of intentiveness as he eventually saw it.

This paper offers a summary *description* of only a few general features of intentiveness as it appeared to Edmund Husserl after he had been examining it for more than forty years. The *sense* of my description, I believe, is the same as that of Husserl, though I have attempted to observe and describe the *phenomena* that Husserl's statements are *about*, rather than merely to translate those *statements* into English.

If I direct my attention reflectively to the present and immediately past temporal extent of my mental life, I find this life to be changing from

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<sup>1</sup> *Editor's Note*: This paper was delivered by Dorion Cairns in the Symposium on “Theory of Intentionality in Brentano, Meinong, and Husserl” at the Fifty-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Western Division of the American Philosophical Association held at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, on Friday, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1959. The other two papers scheduled were by Roderick M. Chisholm of Brown University and D. Burnham Terrell of the University of Minnesota. Fred Kersten was present and remembers that Cairns's paper was well received, but the only significant discussion that arose from it was with Charles Hartshorne and revolved around an apparently long-standing dispute between them as to the legitimacy of the idea of givenness in Husserl. He also relevantly recalls that Cairns once began a lecture on intentionality at the New School by saying, “In the beginning was not the Word, nor in the beginning was the Deed, but instead in the beginning was Synthesis.” That was how he interpreted and presented Husserl in the late 1950's. This text has been edited by Embree from a transcription of the original handwritten manuscript made by Mr. Edward Rackley, the emphases are Cairns's, some changes have been made within brackets, and the sources of notes have also been indicated. Their work has been reviewed by Kersten and Zaner.

moment to moment in many respects. But I note also that, no matter how widely it varies, each of its successive partial extents is intrinsically an *awareness* of things, an awareness of them as other than the given extent itself or any of its really immanent components. Equivalently stated: The reflectively observable stretch of mental life is, as a whole and in each of its phases, an *intending* of things; it is (to revive an obsolete expression) *intensive to things*. Thus it has the intrinsic *quality* that Husserl called “*Intentionalität*”, the quality that we may call, in English, “*intentionality*” or “*intentioniveness*”.

In these statements I use the words “awareness”, “intending”, and “things” to express very *broad* senses.

The word “*thing*” I use to express the sense in which anything whatever is something. Some *things* exist, and other things are non-existent. Some things are possible; other things are impossible. Some things are real; others are ideal. In short, anything that can be *meant*, anything that can be *intended* in any manner, is *ipso facto* a *thing* in this broadest sense of the word.

“In each of its successive component extents the observable stretch of my mental life is an awareness of things”. In this sentence not only the word “things”, but also the word “awareness”, is used to express unusually broad senses. Ordinarily, when we use the word “awareness”, we are referring only to mental processes in which you, or I, or some other ego, is engaged and is thus aware of or, as we say, is conscious of things to which the mental processes are intensive. Such processes, however, make up a particular discriminable *current* in the full stream of my mental life; they go on in a milieu of mental processes in which *I* am *not* engaged, processes that are *not* conscious in the narrowest sense, but which nevertheless are intrinsically

intentional to things. For example, while I have been engaged in thinking about the general nature of intending, a process of tactually perceiving the floor in contact with my feet has been going on. But up to that time when I recalled that I desired to give this example, *I* was not aware of the floor. Nevertheless, that perceiving, as I can now observe recollectively, was already intrinsically a floor-perceiving, *it* was in itself intentional to the floor and was, in this broad sense, an awareness of the floor, albeit an awareness that was not conscious in the narrower sense. *Now*, however, the continued tactual perceiving of the floor has *become* conscious also in the narrower sense, it is now in a *pregnant* sense, *my* awareness of the floor: Its later extents have an observable “egoic” quality, which is a new determination of its intentionality.

Furthermore, if there are wishings that are unconscious in the Freudian sense – that is to say, wishings that are inaccessible to reflective observation – even they are, in the broadest sense, *an awareness* of things; in that wishings are wishings *for* things, [they] are wishingly intentional to them.

It is in this broadest sense, then, that I assert that my mental life is an *awareness* or a *consciousness* of things.

In the chief current sense of the expression, “to intend something” is to purpose something; and the like is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of all derivative expressions. By this time, however, it is surely apparent that purposings are only one *species* of intendings, in the sense I express by this word. The intentionality peculiar to purposings is only one species of the quality I mean by the word “intentionality”. Not only purposings, but also perceivings, rememberingings, expectings, lovings, and fearings are intendings and thus have intentionality. They are intentional *to* things, they are intrinsically

qualified as having *objects*, as having *senses*, which are not real constituents of them.

A few more preliminary remarks, by way of clarification.

1. In the phrase “intentionality of *consciousness*” the word “consciousness” is used *concretely* as a name for what I have called “mental life”. The distinctive quality of mental life is its *consciousness* of things; therefore, by metonymy, mental life itself is called consciousness. But consciousness, in the broadest *proper* sense, *is* itself intentionality; is the *quality* that I call intentiveness.

2. Already, in his *Logische Untersuchungen* [second edition, II, 1, p.372, unchanged from first edition, II, p.352], Husserl pointed out that, although the word *Beziehung* (relation) may be unavoidable in talking about intentionality, it is nevertheless misleading.

In intentional mental processes an object is meant, is aimed at. That involves no more than that certain processes are present, which have a characteristic of intention. ... Only one affair is present, the intentional process, whose essential descriptive characteristic is precisely the intention. If this process is present, with its psychic concrete fullness, then the so-called “intentional relation” to an object is effected *ipso facto* ... And naturally such a process, with its intention can be found in consciousness even though the object does not exist at all and, perchance, *cannot* exist (L.U., V. *Unters.* §11 [Cairns’s trans.]).

Surely, for the reasons indicated in this passage, we should at least *attempt* to avoid calling intentionality a relation. And the obvious alternative is to call it an inherent quality of mental processes.

3. Mental life *intends* things; and *things* – as intended – are the *objects*, – they are *intentional* objects – of mental life. Things, *as* intended, are, in other words, the *objective senses* of the mental processes that are intrinsically intensitive to them. One *need* not – indeed one *cannot* – look beyond the reflectively observed intendings themselves, to find their intentional objects.

Seeing a mirage – seeing distant water that would disappear if one were to perceive one’s body as near where the water appears – that seeing is *intrinsically* a water-seeing. “That water” as intended in it, more specifically, as seen or *visually* intended in it, is its intentional object. “That water” is the objective *sense* of the seeing – a sense that can be, so to speak, “read off” the seeing, though the seeing itself is anhydrous.

But, in precisely the same manner, seeing that wall, which presumably would still be seen if I perceived my body approaching it, is intrinsically a wall-seeing; and the sense “that wall” can be “read off” the seeing in precisely the same manner. Qua object of this seeing, and of the actual or possible other intendings, *that wall* is an intentional object, although at the same time, a presumably existent reality. I am not conscious of two walls; on the one hand, the wall which is the objective sense of my variable consciousness of “a wall” and, on the other hand, some wall-in-itself. The things that I may rightly believe to be existent are a *sub-class* of the things intended in my mental life, a subclass of *intentional objects*.

Usually<sup>2</sup> I live straightforwardly in my intendings of things, and ignore the fact that these things are indeed intentional objects. I simply believe in the things I believe in; I do not usually regard them as objects of my believing. I usually *ignore* the intendedness of things, but I cannot eliminate it.

If I observe any given concrete temporal phase of my mental life, I find that it has a *complex* intentiveness, a *multiplicity* of intentional objects.

The complexity of its intentiveness has two main aspects. The objects of the given phase fall accordingly into two classes. In the first place, any given phase intends *other temporal phases*, as earlier or later phases of the same stream of mental life. More particularly: any phase is a *retentive* intending of some things as earlier than itself and a *protentive* intending of others as later than itself. If we go on to speak in this manner, and say that *retentiveness* and *protentiveness* of mental life in all its temporal phases, we must not let our words mislead us.

The earlier phases are not *really* retained in, not *really* contained in the later phases. Retentiveness is a kind of intentiveness. In other words, any particular phase of mental life is a consciousness of earlier phases. This *retentiveness* is indeed a really intrinsic quality of each phase; but the phases that are said to be retained are not *really* inherent in later phases.<sup>3</sup>

The *present* phase, the now-phase, of my mental life is *retentive* of *past* phases and *protentive* of future phases of my life. But any past phase is not retained as having protended subsequent phases, including the present

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<sup>2</sup> *Editor's Note:* This paragraph, except for the last sentence, was marked for deletion.

<sup>3</sup> *Editor's note:* In later lectures and manuscripts, Cairns replaced *retentiveness* with *retrotentiveness* in order to parallel *protentiveness* and spoke of *X* as *retrotentive to Y*, etc.

phase. Analogously, any future phase is not protended as a phase that will retain antecedent phases, again including the present phase.

By virtue of this retentiveness and protentiveness, which is a quality of each phase, the flux of mental life is no mere succession of temporal phases, related as merely earlier and later, like the phases of a physical process. On the contrary, the earlier and later phases of mental life are among the intentional objects of each of its temporal phases.

So much for the first of the two main classes into which the objects of any concrete temporal phase of the stream of consciousness are divided.

In the *second* place, any such phase intends things as *outside* the flux of my mental life. Things thus intended are intended more particularly as things of different kinds (for example, physical things, other minds, social groups, formal or material universals, facts, propositions, sentences). Furthermore, they may be intended in a variety of manners (believingly or disbelievingly, approvingly, volitively, perceptively, apperceptively, memorially, symbolically, and so forth). Each of these various modes of intending were analyzed and described by Husserl. I shall not repeat any of his descriptions of specific kinds of intending. It is, I believe, more important to attempt some explanation of the *synthetic* character that is found in all intendings. As Husserl wrote in his *Cartesianische Meditationen*:

Brentano's significant discovery that intentionality is the fundamental characteristic of psychic phenomena can be made fruitful only by an elucidation of the peculiarity that we call synthesis. (II. *Med.*, §17. [Cairns's trans.])

Let me begin by noting that each phase of mental life, in being intensitive of other intensitive phases, is intensitive also to their objects. Thus each phase has not only a multiplicity of *primary* objects (such objects as we have already mentioned) but also a multiplicity of *secondary* objects, that is to say, objects that are primary objects of other phases. Accordingly, no phase of mental life intends its objects as *exclusively* its own; each intends its objects as also objects of other actual or possible phases of the same stream of consciousness.

*Continuous synthesis of something immanent.*<sup>4</sup> Consider three successive temporal phases of mental life *A*, *B*, and *C*. *C*, the latest of these phases, includes a retaining of the just past phase *B* and also a retaining of the earliest phase *A*. Moreover, *C*'s retaining of *B* is a retaining of *B* as, in turn, retaining *A*. Thus *A* is both a primary and a secondary object of *C*. But, in this last phase, *C*, *A* as retained in *C* is also identified synthetically with *A* as already retained in the just past phase, *B*.

That is to say: *C* includes an identifying synthesis of *A* as retained in *C* with *A* as previously retain in *B*. In other words: *C* includes a consciousness of now-retained *A* as *the same as* previously-retained *A*. Moreover, *C* includes a consciousness of now-retained *A* as non-identical with now-retained *B*. In other words, *C* includes a *differentiating synthesis* of retained *A* and retained *B*. If we now turn our attention to a still later phase, *D*, we find that it includes a retaining of *C*, as having all this complexity. Thus, as our attention moves along the flux of mental life from earlier to later phases, we find that it includes a *continuous synthesis*, such

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<sup>4</sup>*Editor's note:* This title is taken from an excised passage in order to parallel the use of shoulder titles below.



that, in each phase, each earlier phase, as it becomes more distantly past, is continuously identified as itself and distinguished from others.

*Continuous intensive synthesis of transcendent things.* Our last example was a case of continuous intensive synthesis of things intended as *immanent*, namely: phases of the stream of mental life itself. But we find continuous intensive syntheses also of things intended as *transcendent* [of the stream of conscious life]. Consider, for example, the sensuous perceiving of this ash-tray. As the perceiving goes on, it is continuously a perceiving of this thing, perceived in the present phase, as identically the thing perceived in the past (and now retained) phases of the perceiving. At the same time the perceiving is continuously a perceiving of this thing as not identical with other things perceived simultaneously with it. Thus the perceiving is at the same time a continuous *identifying* and a continuous *differentiating* synthesis of the things intended. Let us examine the perceiving more closely, at the same time varying it either in fact or in phantasy.

I perceive the ash-tray visually, now as near my co-perceived body, now as far from my body, but continuously as self-identical and, moreover, as in itself, *unchanging*. Meanwhile, as I can observe if I shorten the focus of my attention, the quasi-objective visual *appearance* of the objective thing changes. Nevertheless, throughout this changing appearance, from near or far, from this side or that, the thing itself is intended as one and unchanging. I now perceive it *tactually*, as in contact with my co-perceived fingers. The thing visually perceived is forthwith quite simply identified with the thing tactually perceived, though the tactual appearance of the thing is different from its visual appearance. The like is true, not only of the thing, but also of any perceived feature of the thing: its shape, its color, or the shape or color

of one of its surfaces. Any of them is perceived as one and unchanging through a multiplicity of changing appearances, which normally are not themselves objects of attention. The *appearance* of the color or the shape itself is perceived as one and the same throughout.

Further complexities are introduced if something is perceived as *itself changing* in some respect. But still, throughout perceived objective changes, there is a continuous identifying synthesis of the thing as now present and the thing as presented in earlier phases of the perceiving.

What is true of a sensuous perceiving is true also of a clear recollecting of something as previously perceived. As the remembering goes on, the thing is continuously intended as the same throughout a variety of remembered appearances, e.g., as a far from or near to my likewise remembered organism.

Indeed, the like is true of a clearly *phantasied* perceiving or remembering.

Incidentally, it should be noted that we have not begun to give an *adequate* description of sensuous perceiving or of either its memory modification or its phantasy-modification. All these types of intuition are, for example, “one-sided” – they intend their objects as having more to them than is strictly perceived, remembered, or phantasied. And, with respect to these merely appresented features, they are likewise syntheses of identification. For example, an unseen side of the seen thing is continuously intended as self-identical and as different from the seen side.

Indeed, we shall find continuous synthesis of identification and differentiation exhibited in any consciousness of anything of any kind.

*Discontinuous identifying and distinguishing syntheses.*<sup>5</sup> Besides the *continuous* intensive syntheses just considered, we find *discontinuous* ones, and these too are either identifying or differentiating intensive syntheses. An example should make this clear. I see a man and identify him with a man I remember as seen yesterday. In itself, the present seeing is a continuously identifying intensive synthesis. And the like is true of the past seeing. But the seeing now and the seeing yesterday are a discontinuous seeing, yet the man *seen now* is now continuously identified with the man seen yesterday. Naturally this identifying synthesis is effected on the basis of a continuously present *retaining* of yesterday's seeing, while the present *seeing* is going on.

There are, of course, other such syntheses: something perceived now and something expected earlier. Something recollected now and something recollected earlier. Something intended as depicted and something perceived.

The intended unity and self-identity of anything, as an object of consciousness, are objective "correlates" of an identifying, unifying, *intensive synthesis* of some kind. This is true of *particular* things, as they stand out from a background or within a field – for example, particular physical things as they stand out within co-intended physical nature as a whole. Or, at a quasi-objective level, particular patches of color (or sounds) as they stand out within the purely visual (or purely auditory) field. More fundamentally, it is true of any particular temporal phase of one's stream of consciousness, as an object of a retentive synthesis in each subsequent phase.

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<sup>5</sup> *Editor's note:* This title is also taken from an excised passage in order to parallel the use of shoulder headings elsewhere. At this time Cairns used both *distinguishing* and *differentiating* in such ways that it is not clear if they are different or not and if so how one relates to the other.

But it is true also in the case of the *wholes*, the fields within which the particulars stand out: The one identical physical universe, for example, as co-intended in every sensuous perceiving: or the one identical stream of consciousness as co-intended in every retaining or protending of a particular phase of the stream.

*Associative synthesis.* On the basis provided by the identifying and distinguishing syntheses, intensive syntheses of other types are effected. For example, objects of distinguishing syntheses are intended as similar to and different from one another, the case of complete similarity being that of perfect likeness. Here, as on the lower level discussed earlier,<sup>6</sup> *automatic* and *active* syntheses of similarity must be distinguished. Automatic (or “passive”) syntheses of similarity, likeness, or unlikeness, are called by Husserl “*associative syntheses*”.

We shall now attempt to analyze the nature of automatic associative syntheses in detail. To indicate their importance it is enough to point out that they play an essential role in all sensuous perceiving and in all so-called empathy. With the associative intending of one thing as similar to another in some respect presented *in both* of them, they become intended as similar also in respects that *only one* presents. Thus a physical thing perceived for the first time is apperceived as having non-perceived “other” sides. Or again, a physical thing perceived as similar to my organism is apperceived as the physical component of a psychophysical thing. Yet again, any thing whatever is intended forthwith as an object of possible acts of judging about it, because other things have been judged about it.

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<sup>6</sup> *Editor’s note:* This differentiation of levels was not actually discussed earlier, but will be briefly discussed presently.

*Motivation.* In these illustrations I have used the word “because”. The word points to what Husserl calls “a causal relationship in the broadest sense”, i.e., an if-then relationship. However, as a relationship peculiar to the realm of intentionality, he prefers to give it the name, *motivation*. The concept he expresses by the word is obviously a generalization of a specific concept particularly applicable in the volitional sphere: *If* a possible state of affairs is liked, *then* there is at least a tendency to *will* its actuality. Similarly, if one thing is believed to be similar to another in one respect, there is at least a tendency to believe they are similar in other respects.

*Syntactical synthesis.* Besides the *fundamentally automatic* identifying and associative syntheses, there are *fundamentally active syntheses*. These are exemplified in acts of predicative judging, of inferring, of collecting to form groups, of ordering in a series, of counting, and the like. Such acts Husserl calls “syntactical acts”; and the syntheses that are involved in them he calls “syntactical syntheses” or “articulated (jointed) syntheses”. Thus the synthesizing of subject and predicate in an act of predicative judging is a *syntactical* synthesizing. Needless to say, syntactical synthesis presupposes and involves identifying and distinguishing synthesis. In judging that *S* is *p*, I continually intend *S* as identical, while I go on to predicate *p* of *S*. In collecting *A* and *B* and *C* to make a triad, I continually identify *A* and discriminate it from *B*, each being still grasped as identical with itself and different from the other, while I go on to grasp *C* and discriminate it from both *A* and *B*.

Once<sup>7</sup> a syntactical or categorial object has been produced for consciousness by active syntactical or articulated synthesis, it may be

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<sup>7</sup> *Editor's note:* This paragraph was composed at this point, but then, presumably upon consideration of the length already reached of the paper, deleted. We have restored it to the body of the text.

actively grasped as a unit: the judged syntactical fact, the collection, or whatever it is. The consciousness of it, furthermore, is retained; and consequently the syntactical object can be *remembered*, it can, under suitable conditions, “re-emerge” without being actively reproduced. These phenomena of retention and eventual re-emergence of what was first produced by active syntactical synthesis, are called by Husserl “phenomena of *secondary* passivity”. They are thus contrasted with phenomena of so-called “*primary* passivity” – notably the phenomena of passive or automatic identifying and associating synthesis. It is thanks to *secondary* passivity that, as already mentioned, any object of consciousness is intended forthwith as a subject of possible predications or an element of possible collections.

Next to clarification of the general nature of intentiveness, Husserl's discovery that all intending is synthetic, in a quite peculiar sense of the word, is, I believe, his most important contribution to so-called “theory” of intentionality.