

## **Direct and Indirect Consciousness**

by

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Edited by Lester Embree, Fred Kersten, and Richard Zaner

### **Editor's Note**

This text is pp. 042343-042354 in the Cairns Nachlass held in the Archival Repository of the Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, Inc. at the University of Memphis. It is a typescript with corrections by the author on several pages. There was originally no title, but there is the date "August 24, 1954" at the head of the first page. It seems the script for a lecture and it seems complete, but there are no indications of its occasion. Since that was when he was beginning in the Department of Philosophy of the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science at the New School for Social Research, it might have been designed to introduce the new professor and might have been presented to the student club, but this is a speculation.

We have added the title on internal grounds and corrected several typographical errors. The transcription was made by Daniel Marcelle, the William F. Dietrich Fellow at Florida Atlantic University during 2003-2006, it was edited by Lester Embree, and their work has been reviewed by Fred Kersten and Richard Zaner.

*The Editors*

The fundamental fact about Husserl's treatment of problems indicated by such words as "sign," "expression," and "indication," is that he deals with them, not as problems concerning objective entities and relations, but as problems concerning one's *consciousness of* what one means as objective entities and relations. This does not distinguish his treatment of the problems in question from his treatment of other problems. It does distinguish his treatment of those problems from the treatment given them by some important contemporaries.

Husserl's approach can be indicated as follows. I am conscious of what I take to be a plurality of things of different kinds; and I am conscious of them in different ways. Thus the manner in which I am conscious of something as of one kind differs specifically from the manner in which I am conscious of something as of another kind. But it can also be the case that I am conscious in different ways of things I mean as similar. Indeed, I can be conscious in different ways of what I mean as one and the same individual. Accordingly, there are, so to speak, two dimensions in which my processes of being conscious of something or other vary. (There are other such dimensions, but we may ignore them for the present.)

In the first place, I may be conscious of something as, for example, a physical thing, or else as a mental process, or else as a proposition. Then, if we examine one of these possibilities—for example, that I am conscious of something as a physical thing—we find that there are many specific modes of consciousness belonging to that general kind. Thus, I may be perceptively conscious of something as a physical thing—tactually perceptive, or seeing, or hearing—or else as I may remember something as a physical thing perceived by me in the past, or again as a thing depicted by a picture I am now

perceiving or remembering, or yet again as something denoted by a verbal expression embodied in marks or sounds I am perceiving or remembering. And, over against all these modes of consciousness we find what we may call “their phantasy modifications”: corresponding to a perceiving, a phantasied or fictive perceiving; corresponding to the consciousness of something as depicted by a perceived picture, a consciousness of it as depicted by a phantasied or fictive picture; and so forth.

Taking another general kind of consciousness—let us say consciousness of something as a mental process—we find an at least roughly corresponding variety of specific modes of consciousness. In case I mean the thing in question as my own mental process, I may be conscious of it as now going on; and this mode of consciousness is, in some respects, like the perceiving of a physical thing. Again I may remember something as a past mental process, in a manner somewhat analogous to the manner in which I remember something as a physical thing perceived in the past. Furthermore, I may understand one verbal expression as denoting a physical thing, e.g., Halley’s Comet, another as denoting a mental process, e.g., my seeing of what I took to be Halley’s Comet. Whether, on the other hand, I could be conscious of a mental process as somehow depicted is a question that need not now concern us.

Regardless of what I am conscious of a thing as being—a physical thing or process, a mental process, or what you will—the manners in which I can be conscious of something fall into two main classes. Either I am conscious of the thing in question *directly* or I am conscious of it *indirectly*—that is, as something that is somehow indicated, or represented, or signified, by something else. For the present we shall not try to differentiate kinds of direct consciousness or kinds of indirect consciousness. Rather

we shall aim at clarifying the general difference between all kinds of direct and all kinds of indirect consciousness.

In the case of modes of consciousness of something as physical, perceivings of it now and rememberings of it as past-perceived are modes of direct consciousness; whereas the consciousness of something as a physical affair depicted by a picture (which, for its part, I see, or fictively see, or remember) is an indirect consciousness of that thing of which I am conscious as something depicted. The consciousness of something as a physical thing denoted by a genuinely or fictively spoken word is likewise an indirect consciousness, so far as it is a consciousness of the thing meant as what is denoted.

Already we have touched on two points at which Husserl's general account differs from other accounts that are widely accepted. The first of these points was indicated by our statement that, over against the perceiving or the remembering of something and, indeed, over against the consciousness of something as depicted or as denoted, we find what was called a “phantasy-modifications” of each of these modes of consciousness. The second was indicated by our statement that not only the perceiving of something but also the remembering of something as past-perceived is a mode of direct consciousness. The first of these indicates a perhaps novel distinction between so-called phantasy modifications, on the one hand, and that specific kind of phantasy modification which consists fictively perceiving something as an image or picture of something else. The second indicates Husserl's opposition to the widely held opinion that remembering involves images. It is related to his theory of perception as not involving such images or “ideas.” Both points are of fundamental importance for his whole theory of indirect consciousness in general and for his treatment of the specific phenomena commonly

indicated by such words as sign, indication, symbol, and image. Let us elaborate the second of these points and, in so doing, confine our attention to various modes of consciousness of things as physical.

In this sphere the contrast between the modes of direct and the modes of indirect consciousness is presented most clearly and simply when we compare seeing what we take to be a physical thing itself and seeing what we take to be a picture of that thing. The consciousness of a thing as itself seen is what we call “direct.” The consciousness of a thing as depicted by a picture is what we call “indirect.” This distinction between direct and indirect consciousness is found regardless of whether the object of consciousness is meant as past or present. Looking into a mirror, I mean the seen images as depicting contemporary physical events, which may well be, at the same time, objects of a direct perceiving consciousness: I see what I take to be a mirror-image of my hand and, at the same time, I see what I take to be my hand itself. Thus I have a direct consciousness of something as “an image” and, simultaneously, both an indirect and a direct consciousness of something else as “my hand.”

In the case of consciousness of something as past, a like difference is to be found. The parallel is obvious when one compares seeing what one takes to be a picture of an event one remembers with remembering that event, i.e., being directly conscious of it itself as past-perceived. But, instead of genuinely seeing a picture of the event, I can fictively see such a picture—in other words, I can phantasy seeing such a picture. And then I can compare the consciousness of the depicted event, as depicted, with the consciousness of the same event as past-perceived. The latter consciousness is observably direct in just the same way as any perceiving, notwithstanding the fact that the event is

meant as past. The consciousness of the event as represented by a fictive picture is, on the other hand, indirect in just the same way that the consciousness of the event as represented by a perceived picture is indirect. This consciousness of something as represented or depicted by a fictively perceived picture does not indeed involve consciousness of one of the various things commonly called “images.” On the other hand, what we have called a direct consciousness of an event as past-perceived involves no consciousness of something else as an image of it. To be sure, one can not only remember directly in this manner but also, and at the same time, conjure up a fictively perceived image of what one means as the same thing. Indeed, one can not only remember directly but also phantasy remembering directly—as one is prone to do when the thing as genuinely remembered is vague or fragmentary. But the differences between these modes of consciousness and a non-fictive direct consciousness of something as past-perceived are directly observable and describable differences.

The prejudice against the fact that things can be directly remembered as we believe we perceived them in the past; the prejudice in favor of the theory that remembering involves having a representative image of what is remembered—is very strong in most members of the Western cultural community. To many it seems axiomatic that the object of a direct consciousness must be simultaneous with that consciousness—that, in other words, the object of a direct consciousness must somehow exist and, moreover, exist at the same time as the consciousness of it. And from this pseudo-axiom it indeed follows that, if I am now conscious of something as past, I must be directly conscious of something else, contemporaneous with my present consciousness and somehow representing for me the thing I mean as past. The fundamental error in all this

is the belief that consciousness of something involves the existence, in some manner or other, of something that is the object of the consciousness—if not its existence in reality then at least its existence as somehow in the mind of the person who is conscious of something. It is an error that commonly pervades whole theories of consciousness and not just theories of consciousness of the past or theories of indirect consciousness. The seeing we do in dreams is as direct as the seeing we do in waking life. But the simple truth is that the events seen in dreams are non-existent, even though the seeing of them does exist. The events seen in dreams, I say, simply do not exist. They do not exist, more particularly, as ideas or images “in my mind” except in the metaphorical sense that applies to anything of which I happen to be conscious—a sense that implies no more than that, be they existent or non-existent, I happen to be conscious of them. And in that sense the sun itself is as truly in my mind when I see it as an image of a dragon is in my mind when I phantasy seeing a picture of a dragon. In a strict sense, however, the image or fictive picture is no more in my mind than is the sun itself.

In calling the perceiving of something, or the remembering of something as past-perceived, or the fictive perceiving of something, or again the fictive remembering of some things as past-perceived, modes of “direct” consciousness of the things in question, we have contrasted them all with the consciousness of something as depicted, or denoted, or symbolized, or represented by something else—whether the consciousness of this something else be itself direct or indirect and, furthermore, whether (in case it is direct) it is a perceiving or a fictive perceiving, a remembering or a fictive remembering. And the sense in which we refer to some modes of consciousness as direct, and to others as indirect, must be understood accordingly. This will be clearer if we point out that a

consciousness which is direct in the relevant sense of the word may nevertheless be mediated. For example, the perceiving of something as a physical thing is a direct consciousness but mediated. I am now perceiving my pen directly; but I am perceiving it, so to speak, “through” visual and tactual “appearances”; and, at least in the case of the tactual appearance, there is further mediation, in that the tactual appearance, through which I feel the pen, is there for me by virtue of the fact that I am conscious of sensations of certain kinds as located in my hand. But this mediatedness of sensuous perceivings is a different matter than the indirectness of the consciousness of things as, for example, depicted by other things.

The depictive thing is, so to speak, a “terminal” object, just as the thing depicted is a “terminal” object. And this is the case whether the depictive object be perceived or only fictively perceived, as when I phantasy that I am seeing something that depicts something else. The visual appearance or perspective, through which I look directly at a physical thing is, on the other hand, not a terminal object and not, in the same sense, a picture. I do not look directly through a picture at what it depicts as I look through a visual perspective at what it mediates. A picture or a statue, moreover, can be an existent reality in spatial and temporal and causal relations with other realities. The like is not true of tactual and visual “perspectives.” Obviously, there is an analogy between the relation of appearance to thing and the relation of picture-thing to depicted thing. If there were no such analogy, no one would have confounded them or made their confusion part of a theory.

All kinds and examples of direct consciousness that we have considered are not only direct but also, to some extent, clear or, as we may also say, “intuitive.” In other



words: they are processes of being conscious of part of the directly meant object as not only meant but given. In sensuously perceiving something, I am directly conscious of it in its entirety; but I am conscious of only some parts and qualities of it as given. Or, to put it the other way around, I am directly conscious of the perceived thing as having more to it than it presents; and I am conscious of this more directly, though not intuitively. Again, in the case of a clear remembering of something as past-perceived the thing is never perfectly clear; never is all that, in remembering it, one means as belonging to it, presented “again.”

Moreover, in any perceiving or remembering of something as past-perceived, one is directly conscious also of other things, of something more as lying “beyond the horizons” of what is given, what is intuited. Thus anything that I may be conscious of as an event that I perceived in the past is directly meant as having had its temporal antecedents, contemporaries, and successors. And the broadest expanse of given space is meant as having its likewise directly meant, but non-presented, surroundings.

Nor is the non-intuitiveness of some processes of direct consciousness the same as indefiniteness. The style of what lies beyond the given may be meant with a high degree of definiteness. Thus the future, which is so notoriously invisible, is meant directly as something that will be, at least generically, like the past.

And, on the basis of a direct consciousness of the non-presented, we fill in and extend the horizons of our world by fictive perceivings and fictive rememberings.