

Phenomenology—Background Issues and Influences

Concerns About and Reactions to the Modern Philosophical Tradition in the West

There was growing concern emerging in the mid-19th century about the reliance on **reason** to resolve philosophical, scientific, and social problems in an overarching and comprehensive way. The critics of this so-called “rationalist” philosophy, led by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, were reacting to a line of philosophical thinking in the West starting roughly with Descartes and continuing through Hegel. [11]¹

1. Some of the assumptions on which this critical reaction is based are
 - a. the view that **“traditional philosophy is bankrupt”**, needs radical revision and redirection, and must “begin again”; [12]
 - b. a need to emphasize the **individual** rather than rational categories and general laws;² [12]
 - c. a shifting emphasis on **individual responsibility** and a refusal of all attempts to explain away individual behavior by appeal to universal laws; [13]
 - d. a complementary emphasis on individual **human freedom** (perhaps more apparent in Kierkegaard and Sartre than in Nietzsche). [13]
 2. The **phenomenological** reaction to rationalism — Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre — placed more emphasis on metaphysics and epistemology than on logic, mathematics, and natural science. [13]
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The Search for Certainty and “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science”

Let’s begin with Husserl’s formulation of “the problem of the **possibility** of cognition”, from the first lecture on *The Idea of Phenomenology*:

Cognition in all of its manifestations is a psychic act; it is the cognition of a cognizing subject. The objects cognized stand over and against the cognition. But how can we be certain of the correspondence between cognition and the object cognized? How can knowledge transcend itself and reach its object reliably? [Husserl, IP, 15.]

Husserl wrote *The Idea of Phenomenology* in 1907, a brief follow-up to his first major work, the *Logical Investigations*. The central focus of IP was on the possibility of cognition and the formulation of a “presuppositionless” approach to knowledge, i.e. with no **unexamined** starting points or principles. (See IP, p. 15, and below.)

Husserl learned a great deal from René Descartes and Descartes’ search for a foundation for knowledge, one so solid that it would be on as firm a footing as logic and mathematics. Descartes wanted to put philosophy on the path toward absolute certainty, universal agreement among philosophers, and Truth.

But how does one avoid both presuppositions and errors? Descartes believed this could be done only if one started with self-evident facts based on “**clear and distinct ideas**”.

The rules behind his approach, elaborated in the *Discourse on Method* and the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, can be summarized informally as follows:

1. Don’t overstep the bounds of what you know with **absolute certainty**.
 2. Affirm only that which appears to you **clearly** (no obscurity) and **distinctly** (no confusion).
 3. Start with those things you’re **directly** aware of, that is without mediation, inference, or interpretation.
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¹ Unless otherwise noted, page numbers in square brackets refer to Paul Vincent Spade’s class notes on Sartre, on which much of this summary is based. Spade’s text is available online at <http://pvspade.com/Sartre/sartre.html> (Accessed 5 Sep 11.)

² This is, in part, a reaction to science and the search for universal laws of nature, rather than interpretation and understanding of particulars. There was also concern about the strong political emphasis on the state over the individual citizen in Hegel — a primary target of this critique.

More formally, Descartes held fast to two principles:

P1: We can be certain only about those **clear** and **distinct** ideas which are **directly given** to consciousness.

To put it in phenomenological terms, we must appeal only to **descriptions** of the directly given if we are to avoid both overstepping our bounds and risking erroneous judgments. Everything else must be “bracketed” in building a foundation for knowledge. This is the **principle of indubitability**.

P2: Those things that are directly given, and that we’re immediately aware of, are **in the mind** and **mind-dependent**.

Notice that none of this guarantees certainty about the way things **really** are in the **objective** (mind-independent) world. At this stage in the search for certainty, the only things about which we cannot be mistaken are the contents of our own minds where, Descartes believed, **nothing is hidden**. This is what we’ll call his **principle of the incorrigibility of introspection**.

So, in a sense, we might say that for Descartes in the 17th and Husserl in the 20th century, learning to “**see**” precedes learning to “**reason**”. And the only thing, other than the **self**, that we see clearly and distinctly are **mental events** — the contents of our own minds.

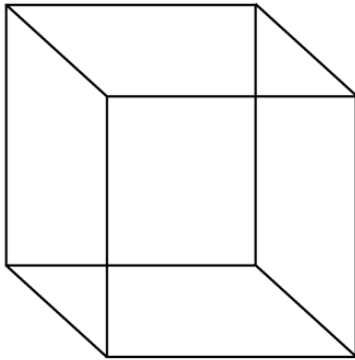
The next crucial step is to show that these mental events can **accurately represent** the world outside the mind — what Husserl calls “the problem of cognition”.

Unfortunately, Descartes’ attempt to establish this next step, and with it his **foundation** for knowledge of the external world, fails. For if we set aside his proofs for the existence of God as unconvincing or unsound, then how are we to know with certainty that the contents of the mind are accurate representations of the external world outside the mind? We can’t. There is no way to **compare** ideas and real things to see if they **correspond** to one another. We can’t step outside the mind to gain unmediated access to real things then somehow bring that back into the mind to see if they match our mental representations. And what Descartes is left with is precisely what he set out to avoid — the **problem of solipsism**.

Kant, Husserl, and the Theory of Constitution

So the fundamental question remains: “How can we be sure that the world **as we experience it** corresponds to reality?” In Husserlian terms the question is posed in the following way: “How is cognition possible? What is the relation between cognition and the object cognized?” Thus, phenomenology examines what **science** and **common sense** take for granted and engages in a **critique** of natural cognition. It requires that we see things in a completely new way.

In the 18th century, Immanuel Kant took up this epistemological challenge by distinguishing “things-as-they-appear”, the **phenomena** of human experience, from “things-in-themselves”, which Kant called **noumena** — those things that lie beyond human perceptual experience. The phenomena — things as they appear to us — were understood by Kant as the **product** of the raw material of **sensation** and **interpretation**, the result of a human perspectival “view from somewhere”.



The illustration on the left reveals the familiar ambiguity created by the drawing of a transparent cube — the so-called “Necker Cube”. The cube can be seen in one of two mutually exclusive orientations — from above left, or from below and to the right.

Which view you see at any given moment is **determined** by your mind. It makes no sense to ask which is the correct one. There is no absolute, objective fact of the matter, and therefore **no answer** to that question. This shows that one’s consciousness, or what Kant calls the **Transcendental Ego**, is an **active** agent, not a passive agent as Descartes assumed.

Note that the interpretations imposed on the raw material of sensation, in a very fundamental sense, begin with the **a priori concepts** of the Understanding — the **Categories** — discussed in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here is a table with the full list.

Table of Categories

Quantity	Quality	Relation	Modality
unity	reality	substance & attribute	possibility
plurality	negation	cause & effect	existence
totality	limitation	reciprocity	necessity

Note: Kemp Smith’s translations of the Kantian categories “inherence & subsistence”, “causality & dependence”, and “community” are listed here as “substance and attribute”, “cause & effect”, and “reciprocity”.

According to Kant, a necessary condition for the possibility of experience is that consciousness — “the ‘I think’ — must be capable of accompanying all our representations”.³ Every phenomenon, description, and thought is necessarily from a perspective or “point of view”. That means that all of our concepts and the phenomena we experience “carry with them an implicit reference to *ourselves* and to our point of view”. [20f] Kant’s crucial point here is that one’s perspective, or point of view, is **contributed** by the mind.

Thus, our concepts and descriptions **cannot in principle** apply to **noumena**, because noumena do not share the self-reference or constitutive character of phenomena. [21] The claim that you could see something both **from** your own perspective and **not from** your own perspective — from “a God’s-eye point of view” — is contradictory.

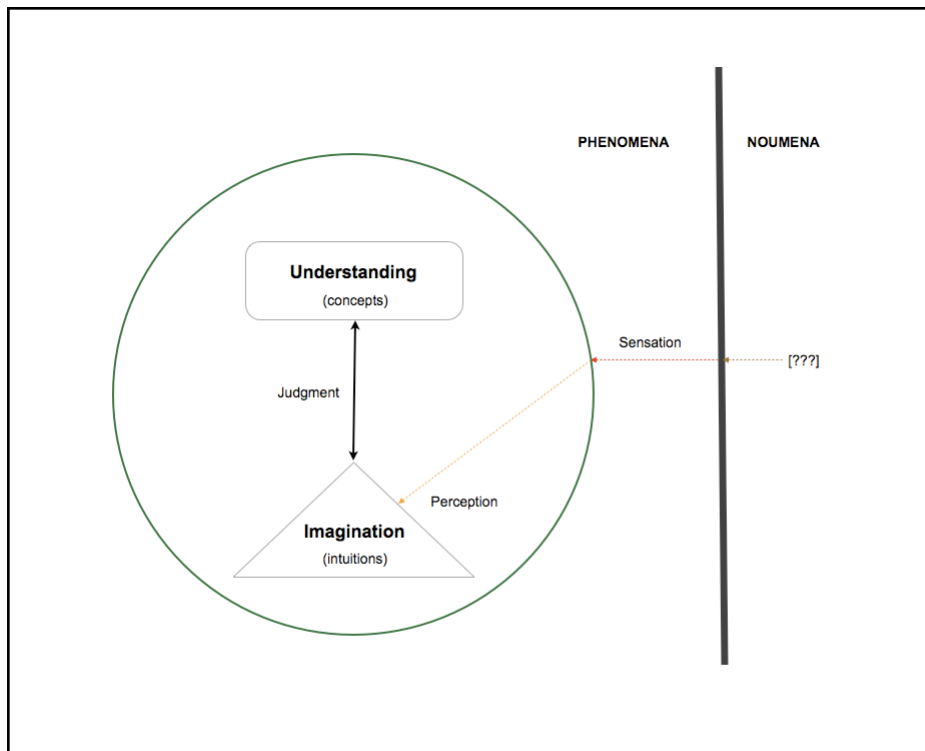
In other words, what we’re dealing with here is not a common epistemological problem about whether your mind correctly or incorrectly represents a particular state of affairs. Our minds and the categories **determine** the way things appear to us. Thus, Kant claims, it makes no sense to even **ask** if our concepts apply to things-in-themselves.

Of course, Kant thought that there must **be** noumena that **cause** the raw material of sensation and, hence, play a role in our phenomenal experience. But that’s all we can say. Whether he was right is another controversial matter. (Note that “cause” and “existence” are inherent *a priori* concepts of the Understanding. To apply them to things-in-themselves is incoherent on Kant’s own theory.)

But—and here’s a major concern—if we **abandon** the concept of the noumenal world altogether, we can’t solve the problem of solipsism, which was Kant’s reason for taking this approach in the first place. If we

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B131 (Pluhar 177).

accept Kant's phenomenal world but deny the existence of the noumenal, we're left with Idealism—the view that all reality is “in the mind”.



Schematic Representation of Kant's Model of the Mind

Summary

So here's what we have so far:

1. I take as my foundation for knowledge a description of those things of which I am **directly** aware and about which I could not possibly be mistaken — **phenomena** or things **as they appear to me**. [16]
2. The phenomena which are directly given are **mental** events and **mind-dependent**.
3. If you add in Kant's theory of constitution, you have the additional claim that what appears in consciousness is **determined** by the mind. [19-25]
4. It follows that we can talk coherently **only** about **phenomena**—things as they appear to us. Any talk of things **as they are in themselves** violates the principle of constitution (3 above) and must be avoided.

But if I can only be sure of what is **directly** given to consciousness, and if the directly given object of consciousness is "**in the mind**", how can I know for sure that a thing as it appears to me is a reliable indicator of the real object "**outside the mind**"?

Husserl's Approach to the Problem of Solipsism

In *The Idea of Phenomenology*, Husserl contrasts what he calls the “natural attitude” with the “philosophical attitude”. [27; IP 13ff]

In the **natural attitude** one is caught up in the everyday world of things in a relatively uncritical and unreflective manner. This applies **both** to the practical world of “common sense” and the world of modern science. [28f]

Science from the natural standpoint

1. uncritically accepts the disinterested objectivity of scientific explanation based on hypothesis formation, model building, experimentation, logical reasoning, and internal coherence of a theory; and
2. assumes cognition is possible in assuming a correspondence theory of truth linking objective facts and scientific theories.

The **philosophical attitude**, on the other hand, starts with the problem of cognition and all that entails, including a search for the **pre-theoretical** foundations of knowledge. [30] It investigates

1. the **nature** of cognition, and
2. what it is to be an **object** of cognition.

The **method** for investigating this crucial distinction, according to Husserl, is **phenomenological**. Thus, he claims, the natural and philosophical attitudes are **mutually exclusive**. “You either take the possibility of cognition for granted or you don’t.” [30]

Husserl goes on to define and explore what he calls stages or levels of “reduction” central to his phenomenological method.

Phenomenological Reduction [IP 34]

The first stage is sometimes referred to by Husserl as the **epistemological** reduction (or the **epoché** = “holding off”). In this stage one attends only to “that which is given” = **phenomena**. There are no judgments, inferences, or arguments — only **descriptions**.

This aspect of the method is comparable to Descartes’ method of doubt, which he adopts in order to avoid going beyond the “self-evident” and “given”. Husserl adopts a version of the **first principle** guiding Descartes’ foundationalism in accepting that your thoughts (*cogitationes*) are **directly given**.

Husserl however disagrees with Descartes on what is left after the epistemological reduction. Here he claims Descartes was wrong in assuming the “psychological ego”, which corresponds to one’s “personality” or “self”, survives the reduction. It does not, according to Husserl, but drops out in the process of attending solely to the directly given phenomena. An ego or “cogito”, in some limited sense of the term, survives the phenomenological reduction, but it’s **not the ego of psychology**.

The “**Phenomenological Ego**” (Spade’s term, not Husserl’s) that remains includes not only the data of appearances but also an **individual point of view** or perspective on the data, e.g. from the side, from above, etc. However, the point of view is **not itself a phenomenon** that would be taken into consideration in the phenomenological **description** of things as they appear to us. (Note that the phenomenological ego is comparable to Kant’s “I think...” in the *Critique of Pure Reason* — that which “must be capable of accompanying all our representations”. [34f])

Thus, while the point of view in a mental act is **individual**, it has no psychological characteristics (desire, will, etc.) and is **not personal**. By contrast, the **personal ego** or **psyche** is an object that **can** be described and is the **object of psychology**. [32ff]

So now, on Husserl’s analysis, we have two distinct **orders** of the directly given: the **phenomenal** and the **perspectival**. [34]

Note also that Husserl has yet another disagreement with Descartes over the **nature of phenomena**. Husserl claims phenomena are given to us “with evidence”, which means they are **self-given**, which is the same as what we’re calling **directly given**. Here he and Descartes agree. But Husserl does **not**

agree that everything directly given is a **phenomenon**. To understand why, we need some additional distinctions and another stage of “reduction”, both of which will be useful in addressing the problem of solipsism.

Husserl’s Proposal

He begins this next phase of analysis by distinguishing two senses of “**immanence**” and two senses of “**transcendence**”. These terms are defined, roughly, as follows:

“**immanence**” can be understood as that which is

I1: “inside the mind”, or

I2: “directly given to consciousness” [IP 33]

“**transcendence**” can be understood as that which is

T1: “outside the mind”, or

T2: “not directly given to consciousness” [IP 34, 36]

These related concepts can be understood as a fourfold matrix of possibilities:

	I (immanence)	T (transcendence)
1	inside the mind	outside the mind
2	directly given	not directly given

Now it's clear that I1 and T1 are **contradictories**. A thing can't be inside the mind and outside the mind at the same time. The same is true for I2 and T2.

But this leaves open the question whether the diagonal relations between I1 and T2, or I2 and T1 are **consistent** with one another. Is it possible for something to be directly given to consciousness (I2) and at the same time be outside the mind (T1)? Or is it possible for something to be inside the mind (I1) but not directly given to consciousness, e.g. when it appears as a concept or image — a “representation” — and an inference is required to make an assertion about the thing represented (T2)? [37f, 39, 41.]

Note: Husserl’s approach must be consistent with his own phenomenological principles — he must answer the questions through **description**, not argument. He must find the answers **in the phenomena**. He attempts to do just that through a second stage of what he calls the **eidetic reduction**. [39]

Eidetic Reduction

Briefly, when I perceive an object, say a pear sitting on the table, I am conscious of its qualities such as the yellow color of the skin, the long narrow stem emerging from the top, the round, smooth shape of the lower part of the fruit, etc. But if we consider for a minute just the yellow color, we are directly aware of something that goes beyond my particular act of perception. The yellow color, Husserl claims, is a **universal** — it can be instantiated indefinitely without being used up or exhausted.

So, while the color is **immanent** in the second sense of being **directly given**, it is **not mind-dependent**. If I’ve done my phenomenological reduction correctly, I know this **not** through assumption, argument, or inference, but through **observation** of many different instances of my perception of yellow. I “see” a universal that goes beyond any momentary act of seeing or thinking about it. [See IP, 40.]

Note: The claim above is not subject to the Humean objection that while I may have many experiences of seeing yellow, I **conclude** that the possible instances of yellow are **infinite** only through an act of **inductive reasoning**. This trap should be avoided by correct application of the phenomenological method.

Speaking phenomenologically I can say that **in my experience** comparing multiple instances, yellow recurs and is “seen” **indefinitely** without being used up or diminished in any way. This characterization does not go beyond a description of what is **directly given**.

But it may seem that Husserl, and Spade in his commentary, are **presupposing** something about universals, viz. that they cannot be reduced to any **finite** collection of momentary phenomena. Spade says, “[N]o matter how many times I think about or am aware of redness, I could **in principle** think about it again, so that it would then be the object of yet another mental act”. [40; emphasis added.] But we can’t be sure on **phenomenological** grounds that the next time we look for something yellow or try to imagine it, it will be there. Perhaps the universe is constructed in such a way so that universals **can** be used up. There seems to be no way to refute this on phenomenological grounds.

But does Husserl **need** to refute it to establish transcendent objects? Isn’t it enough to note that color is not dependent on the individual mental acts of seeing? The fact that the yellow is there in **multiple instances** of seeing or imagining — without being diminished or changed — should be sufficient for Husserl to distinguish the immanent from the transcendent. (Are we glimpsing here what Graham Harman calls a “real quality” of the perceived or intentional object?)

Particulars and Universals

Now we find ourselves confronting some very difficult questions about the nature of the essences and universals that Husserl claims are transcendent. What is the difference between **phenomena**, which are “genuinely” immanent, and **universals**, which are “genuinely” transcendent? [42f]

We’ve been referring to that which is “genuinely immanent” as mental, “in the mind”, mind-dependent. And a phenomenon that seems truly mind-dependent is a **particular** mental event. So, for example, it is **this instance** of my having a **seeing-a-yellow-pear experience** that must be mental for it to be occurring. If there was nothing of the sort present to my consciousness, I wouldn’t be having a seeing-a-yellow-pear experience. That much seems clear and unproblematic.⁴

If I have the experience of **seeing-a-yellow-pear**, I also have, as one **part** of that experience, a **seeing-yellow** experience. If we assume seeing-yellow is a mental event — it occurs in the mind — then it’s clearly **immanent**. But that very same yellow can appear in other mental events such as seeing-a-yellow-towel, seeing-a-yellow-car, seeing-a-yellow-painting, etc. Thus, seeing-yellow is also, in **some** sense, mind-dependent but not dependent on a **particular** mental event. It occurs in many distinct intuitions. It’s not “wholly contained in”, “confined to”, or **dependent** on a single isolated event in the mind. [43]

But then, Spade asks, “What is it, **if anything**, that is **genuinely** immanent in a mental act?” [43, emphasis added.] Is it simply “the **instantiations** of the universal”?

Keep in mind that the goal for Husserl and the phenomenological analysis is to uncover **essences** (“universals”) through close attention to, and description of, mental objects and events (“particulars”). This is what it means to do an **eidetic reduction**. Concern about the **existence** of things has already been bracketed in the first stage of reduction — Husserl’s version of the method of doubt — and is irrelevant to the search for essences.

⁴ Note that when Spade says that such an experience is “**exhausted** in one single mental act” [42, my emphasis], “exhaustion” means that the experience is finite — temporally isolated and determinate — and complete. It occurs and then it’s over. That particular experience will never occur again. Here he cites Husserl: “Every genuine (*reell*) constituent of the cognitive [mental] phenomenon, this phenomenological particular, *is also a particular*...”.

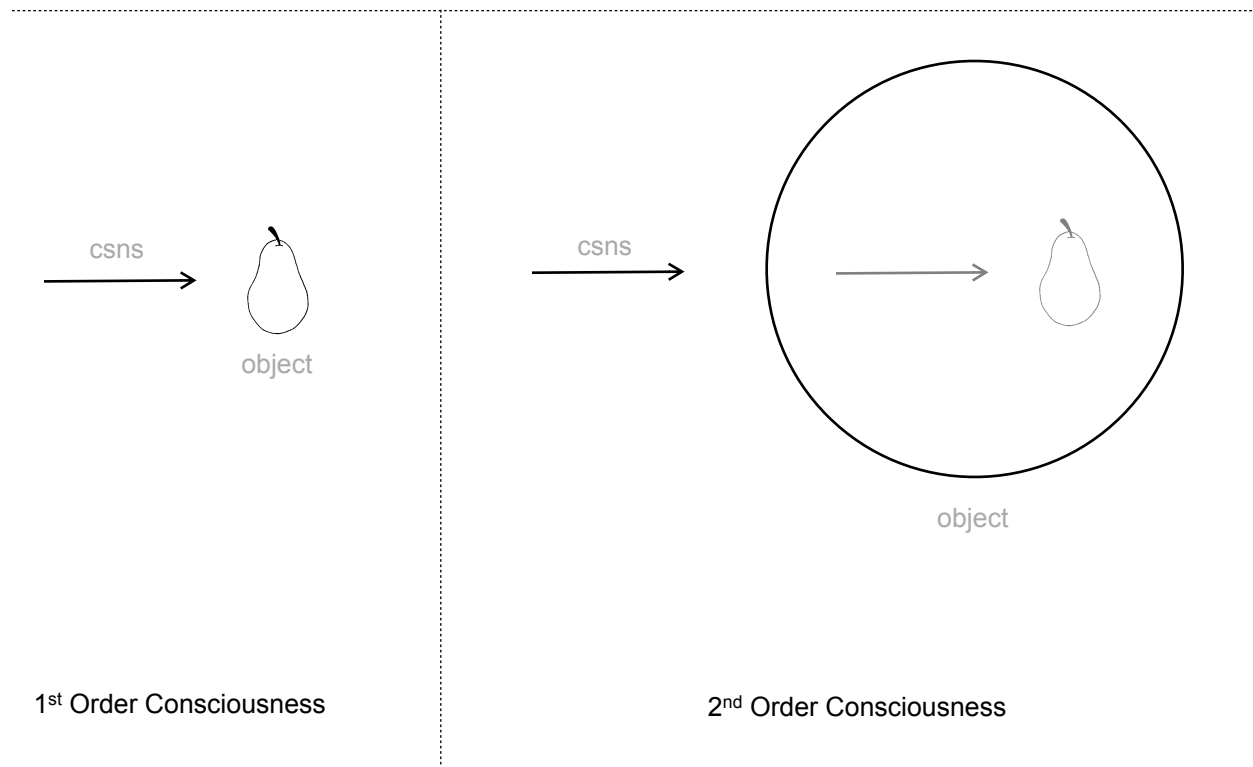
But now a question arises. Spade goes on to qualify this temporality adding that the **particular** is a single mental act **or a finite series of mental acts**. That muddies the waters. An example of such a finite series would help us understand what he has in mind. Perhaps he’s thinking of multiple (but finite) instances of seeing-a-yellow-pear. But aren’t those multiple instances of **particular** experiences. Might it be more helpful to stay with the clearest and simplest case of a particular mental act and see if that is sufficient for distinguishing the genuinely immanent from the genuinely transcendent?

Intentionality

Intentionality is one of the most important concepts in phenomenology, one that Husserl took from his studies with Franz Brentano. Intentionality, Brentano claimed, is “the mark” or defining feature of the mental. Intentionality is often characterized as “aboutness” — thinking about an object. This “aboutness” is a **necessary** condition for mental activity of any kind. All consciousness is consciousness of an object. There is no consciousness without an object of some kind.

The **object** of consciousness is referred to as an “intentional object”. The relation that exists between any consciousness and its intentional object is **irreflexive** — it never “reflects” back on the act itself as an object. If I see the pear in front of me, there is just a **consciousness of** the intentional object — the **pear**.

To make this **act** of consciousness an **object** of reflective consciousness you need a **second** act of consciousness. In that **reflective** consciousness, the intentional **object** is the first **act** of consciousness — **my seeing the pear**. These relations are summarized schematically as follows:



Note also that, according to Husserl, the **intentional object** need not exist. If it's an illusion or an hallucination, it's an intentional object of consciousness that does not exist **anywhere**, either in the mind or “outside the mind” in the material world. The same applies to impossible objects, such as a round square. Husserl claims you can **think about** a round square and have an intentional object in mind, even though the very notion of a round square is contradictory. [49]

Another feature of intentionality **not** mentioned by Husserl or Spade, but which comes up frequently in more recent discussions, has to do with truth conditions. We can illustrate this by means of Sophocles' classic Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. At one point in the story, Oedipus solves a riddle posed by the Sphinx, frees the Thebans from a curse imposed on them, and accepts his reward — the hand of Queen Jocasta and his role as King of Thebes. Given his **willingness**, we can say that, being offered his reward, Oedipus accepts — he wants to marry Jocasta.

Now, of course as we all know, it turns out that, unbeknownst to the young Oedipus, Jocasta is his biological mother. So, given that the propositions “Oedipus wants to marry Jocasta” and “Jocasta is Oedipus' mother” are both **true**, we have an elementary deductive argument:

Oedipus wants to marry Jocasta.
Jocasta is Oedipus' mother.

∴ Oedipus wants to marry his mother.

This appears to be a valid deductive argument in which both premises are true. If that's the case, the conclusion **must** be true. But it's not! Oedipus has absolutely no desire to marry his mother. The proposition, "Oedipus wants to marry his mother" is false.

So what's gone wrong here?

The problem has to do with an important feature associated with the intentionality of mental states. To understand **what** it is and **how** it works, we'll step outside a strictly phenomenological analysis and consider the logical difference between the characters referred to in Sophocles' drama and the internal states of mind of the primary character Oedipus. We also need some additional concepts and distinctions.

According to contemporary philosophical terminology, we have two different **contexts** at work here — the **intensional** (with an "s"), which includes **mental** attitudes, and the **extensional**, which includes **objects independent of** or "outside" the mind. So now we can say it's true **intensionally** that Oedipus wants to marry Jocasta. That's true due to the nature of his thinking about Jocasta. But it's also true **extensionally**, i.e. true of the real individuals in the world, that Oedipus is Jocasta's son and that she is his biological mother. But, as we've already noted, it is **not** true that Oedipus wants to marry his biological mother, even though it's true that the term "Jocasta" refers to precisely the same thing as the term "Oedipus' mother". That's because, from **his** perspective, Oedipus' **intensional object** cannot be described as "my mother" but **can** be described as "Jocasta" or "the queen of Thebes".

In other words, the truth of propositions that include **co-referring terms** is not necessarily preserved in **intensional** contexts. That's another corollary claim about the mental. We may not encounter these distinctions again in this semester's readings, but it's helpful to keep them in mind.

Constitution and the Transcendental Ego

In 1907, when Husserl wrote the IP, he assumed the phenomenological reduction would take care of the problem of the psychological ego. It would be bracketed along with other objects, except in cases where it was the object of analysis. The bracketing of the personal or psychological ego left only the bare perspective of a propertyless consciousness or observer of the phenomena. In the IP he alludes vaguely to a notion of constitution, but does not yet have a fully worked out description. [52f. Cf. IP 9f and "Lecture V".]

Later, through his ongoing study of Kant's epistemology, he came to believe he was mistaken and adopted a version of Kant's theory of constitution, albeit **without** the noumenal realm of "things as they are in themselves". This proved to be problematic, controversial, and a highly divisive issue for his followers. In *Ideas* (1913) and later in *Cartesian Meditations* (1929), Husserl claimed, somewhat provocatively, that without consciousness, there would **be** no world.

Thus, consciousness for Husserl was understood as having a kind of absolute existence not at all comparable to the existence of nature. While this sounds much like the subjective idealism he was trying to avoid, his characterization was that the world is "opened up" through consciousness.⁵

This led to his positing a **Transcendental Ego** responsible for constituting phenomena. Whereas in his earlier versions leading up to IP, all real content comes from the **outside**, in the later versions all the content comes from the **inside**, i.e. the **TE**. It's the need for this move that Sartre sets out to refute in *The Transcendence of the Ego*.

Timothy Quigley, revised 10 Feb 14

⁵ Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, 136.