

## Overview: A Story Line

### The Background

In a moment I will sketch a line of argument, or rather narrative, that weaves through the essays gathered here. But first let me recall some background notions broadly assumed in that story line.

Consciousness is a consciousness “of” something, and this of-ness – called *intentionality* – is the tie that binds consciousness and world together.

Intentionality is itself the structure in which we know about the world. This structure begins with mental and practical acts on the one hand and objects of various types on the other. Phenomenology works from intentionality into structures of experience, or conscious mental activity, whereas ontology works *inter alia* from intentionality into structures of the world in general (including mental activity). We do not normally think of ontology as beginning with intentionality. As Quine has stressed, however, our ontology consists of what we posit in our preferred theories – what we posit, I note, in our intentional activities of theorizing.

So we may think of working from intentionality into phenomenology on the one hand and into ontology on the other hand. In one direction lies “subjective” structure; in the other lies “objective” structure. Both directions are pursued in the essays gathered in this book, but the subjective and objective, I urge, are part of one world with a unified structure. (By contrast, Descartes posited two realms of mind and body, and Kant separated two spheres called phenomena and noumena, or things-as-they-appear and things-as-they-are-in-themselves.)

Since Husserl's work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, philosophers have come to define intentionality as the property of a mental state's being "of" or "about" something – in the sense that (following Husserl) consciousness is (almost always) a consciousness "of" something. The concept of intentionality has been developing since at least Aristotle, but it came into its own in Husserl. In the background of the essays in this volume lies a reconstruction of Husserl's basic theory of intentionality.<sup>1</sup> What I rely on is mostly an appreciation of the phenomenon of intentionality, including intentional content and the intentional relation of mental act to object. This much is broadly Husserlian but shared by other philosophers who take seriously "first-person" consciousness and content.<sup>2</sup>

Very briefly, the content theory of intentionality, in the form I prefer, holds that intentionality consists in a complex structure of context, subject, act, content, and object – that is, within a certain context a person or subject performs or experiences an act of consciousness (thinking, seeing, willing, etc.) with a certain content (thought, image, etc.) that represents or "intends" a certain object (individual, state of affairs, event, etc.). In that way consciousness is intentionally directed toward an object. Schematically:

context |—— subject — act — content ——> object.

The context includes the background conditions on which the intentionality depends. The subject is the person who is conscious. The act is the state or event or process of thinking, perceiving, imagining, desiring, willing, or whatever. The content is the ideal or abstract "meaning" entertained in the act. That content represents something, which is the object of the intentional act, that which the subject is conscious "of" – in a certain way defined by the content and conditioned by the context.

A special range of cases that have interested me are those in which the subject is directly acquainted with the object, as in visual perception. Here the content is naturally expressed by indexical words such as "this," "here," "I," "her," etc. The intentional or semantic force of the intrinsically "indexical" content of an act of acquaintance depends on the context of the act: my perception of "this" tree depends on which tree is in my visual environment as I see "this." The structure of acquaintance figures in some studies in this volume, so I point toward it here in preview. What may be less familiar is how the case of acquaintance is handled in a content theory of intentionality.<sup>3</sup> In this form of intentionality mind and world are most intimately connected.

### The Story Line

The essays to follow tell their stories individually. But these shorter stories fit into a larger story, a broad philosophical account of mind and world. I have arranged the essays in a pedagogical order: moving mostly from more phenomenological to more ontological issues. An alternative pedagogy would move in the reverse order, and one might well read the essays in reverse, depending on one's interests. Here, in an overview, I attempt to weave the larger story line around salient themes in the individual essays.

#### *Three Facets of Consciousness*

In the information age computer scientists have found it useful to distinguish a computing system's hardware, software, and users: the *physical* implementation of the *formal* computing algorithms manipulated by humans as the computation *appears* to them on their computer screens. But this *three-schema* approach to computation reflects a highly abstract ontological framework. Indeed, the nature of any entity divides into three fundamental *facets* that we may call *form*, *appearance*, and *substrate*. An entity's form consists in its kinds, properties, relations; its appearance consists in the way it is known or experienced by a knowing agent; its substrate consists in that on which it depends for its existence (such as deep physical process in quarks or strings or whatever). Now, the nature of an act of consciousness divides thus into form, appearance, and substrate. Its form is intentionality; its appearance is its qualitative phenomenological character as experienced; its substrate is its neural basis, its cultural background, and more. Keeping this division of essence in mind will change the way we practice philosophy of mind and indeed ontology in general, while sharply defining the place of phenomenology in both.

#### *The Cogito circa A.D. 2000*

Philosophers have studied *intentionality*, the basic form of consciousness, in various guises at least since Aristotle. But it was Husserl's work circa 1900 that finally produced a sharp model of intentionality. On this model, an act of consciousness is directed via a conceptual structure of *meaning* (intentional content) toward an object appropriately represented or "intended" through that meaning. But how do we come to know the form of consciousness? The phenomenological turn to consciousness and its intentional structure began with Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*. The best way to appreciate the "first-person" approach to mind – which has

returned to center stage in contemporary philosophical-scientific theory of mind – is to reexamine the cogito from today’s perspective. Consciousness includes, in its very structure, an *inner awareness* of the transpiring act. The logic of the cogito follows this form of inner awareness. This inner awareness grounds our knowledge of our own conscious experience from our own first-person perspective. That knowledge is not incorrigible (as Ryle averred of Descartes’s claim). Rather, it is the experientially certain starting point of our understanding of consciousness. And third-person studies of mind must accommodate this first-person structure.

#### *The Return to Consciousness*

What makes a mental act or state conscious, on the classical view (Descartes, Locke, Brentano, Husserl, et al.), is a certain *inner awareness* of the act as it transpires: I am not consciously thinking, perceiving, and the like unless I am aware of so thinking or perceiving. What is the *form* of that inner awareness? It cannot be that of a distinct mental act of observing or reflecting on the given mental act, because then we have two acts instead of one and tend toward an infinite regress (of observing observing . . .). Instead, inner awareness must be an integral component of a conscious experience. Roughly speaking, we may articulate the structure of inner awareness in the following form of phenomenological description: “Phenomenally in this very experience I see this frog.” The inner awareness is not, then, an additional and second-order awareness but rather an integral self-reflexive component of the given act. In this way we may avoid the problems of recently fashionable “higher-order” theories of consciousness. Nonetheless, we should recognize a gradation from elementary sentient consciousness to more complex forms of consciousness, recognizing that it is these “higher” forms that involve inner awareness.

#### *Consciousness in Action*

Since Descartes’s revolution, turning philosophy inward to the subjective sphere and then arguing for a metaphysical distinction between mind and body, it has been widely thought that the focus on consciousness in itself leads to the separation of mind and body. From Locke, Hume, and Kant to Husserl in his transcendental phenomenology, it has seemed that the connections of mind and body have been cleanly severed. Yet a careful phenomenology of the experience of acting – of conscious volitional bodily *action* – leads instead to a subtle ontological intertwining of consciousness and body, and so of mind and the world in which it occurs.

*Cogito ergo sum* leads to *ambulo ergo sum*: inner awareness in embodied action leads to discrete awareness of one's own body and one's natural surroundings and to the connections between them. The phenomenology of action thus leads into an ontology of consciousness embedded in nature, in one's body, and – with further empirical studies in neuroscience – in one's brain. We are beginning to turn our attention in this regard to the *substrate* of consciousness, to the natural, physical conditions on which our own consciousness depends.

### *Background Ideas*

Our conscious experience is not only embedded in our bodily comportment in our natural environment; our experience is also embedded in our social environment. A close study of intentional content or meaning shows that our most familiar ideas – everyday concepts and rules of practice – presuppose very basic conceptual and practical structures that are extant in our surrounding culture. There is thus a deep dependence of our intentional contents on *background ideas* that virtually define the everyday world as we know it. Only by a sort of phenomenological-semantic archaeology, however, do we begin to appreciate this type of dependence. We may launch our study of this deep background of our intentional experience by starting with Husserl's conception of a "horizon" of background meaning and practice, Wittgenstein's notion of "ground propositions," and Searle's account of "background" capacities. However, we need to place these notions of background within a proper ontology of dependence. Here lies a crucial part of the *substrate* of consciousness – in the culture surrounding us, rather than in the neural processing within us. Indeed, background ideas have a life and status of their own, not in a Platonic or Fregean heaven of ideal meanings but in a realm of ideal meanings extant in our culture in the life world.

### *Intentionality Naturalized?*

Contemporary philosophy-of-mind and cognitive science are largely wedded to a *naturalism* that assumes a functionalist physicalist ontology of mind. But functional-physical analyses of mind – of the physical inputs and outputs of different types of mental states – do not account for the crucial phenomenological features of consciousness: intentionality (and meaning), inner awareness, sensory qualia. What we need instead is a wider and more fundamental *ontology* that gives consciousness and nature their proper places in the structure of the world. A worthy start is Husserl's distinction between *formal* and *material* ontological categories.

In Husserl's ontology, for instance, the formal structure of states of affairs applies to entities in the material domains of nature (the physical), consciousness (the intentional), and culture (the social). We may thus begin to rethink the basic categorial structure of the world by considering fundamental categories of mind and world. We must distinguish different material types of properties of mental activity: those of consciousness (intentionality, etc.), those of nature (the physical causal conditions of consciousness), and those of culture (the social conditions of consciousness). But we must also distinguish different formal types of properties of mind: for instance, *intentional* relations of consciousness to its objects and *causal* relations of an event of consciousness to its causes and its effects. Without a fundamental ontology that draws such distinctions we cannot develop a *unified* account of mind and the world of nature, an appropriate phenomenological ontology.

#### *Consciousness and Actuality*

To understand the structure of the world in general, and the structure of consciousness in particular, we need to rethink our most familiar ontological concepts, which began with Plato and Aristotle on universals and particulars. A radically different type of ontology was envisioned by Whitehead, an ontology that would replace Aristotelian *substance* (centered on predication) with a fundamental type of *process* more attuned to twentieth-century physics. Today we might look to something like dynamic states in a relativistic quantum field (if we could understand such entities). Whitehead held that the most basic "actual entities" of the world are something like point events in a field of constant flux – out of which everyday objects emerge in great complexity. However, Whitehead distinguished what we may call *temporal* and *ontological* becoming. Whereas an "occasion" is formed by the process of temporal transition, any "entity" is formed by the process of becoming an entity, wherein an entity is ontologically dependent on a variety of other entities. This highly abstract form of *becoming* suggests a more fundamental kind of ontology, which may apply in instructive ways ultimately to the special case of consciousness.

#### *Basic Categories*

The doctrine of ontological *categories* began with Aristotle's list of ten. Husserl's distinction between formal and material categories ramified the very notion of ontological category, and of the categorial structure of the world, with instructive details applied to consciousness, nature, and culture. Whitehead's ontology of process, especially ontological becoming,

suggests a deeper ontology of levels – or, as I prefer, “modes of being.” We may begin to specify a more up-to-date *category scheme* by reflecting on these types of ontology. Three-facet ontology (distinguishing the form, appearance, and substrate of any entity) organizes three basic categorical structures, but there is more to the story. Marking various formal ontological distinctions, and organizing them in a structured system of categories, we may begin to frame a more systematic account of the order of things in general and of consciousness in particular.

Such is the story line that I mean to weave through and around the essays to follow.

#### Notes

1. That theory of intentionality is detailed in Smith and McIntyre 1982. A shorter version of the theory is presented by the same authors in 1989.
2. See Searle 1983.
3. Details on “indexical” content are found in Smith 1989. My account there extends and modifies traditional Husserlian phenomenology. Kindred spirits are at work in two books not directly linked with the phenomenological tradition: Searle 1983 (see the chapters on perception and action) and Perry 2001 (see Perry’s account of “reflexive” content).

#### References

- Perry, John. 2001. *Knowledge, Possibility and Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Searle, John. 1983. *Intentionality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, David Woodruff. 1989. *The Circle of Acquaintance*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Smith, David Woodruff, and Ronald McIntyre. 1982. *Husserl and Intentionality*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
1989. “Theory of Intentionality.” In J. N. Mohanty and William McKenna, eds., *Husserl’s Phenomenology: A Textbook*, pp. 147–79. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America.

## The Picture

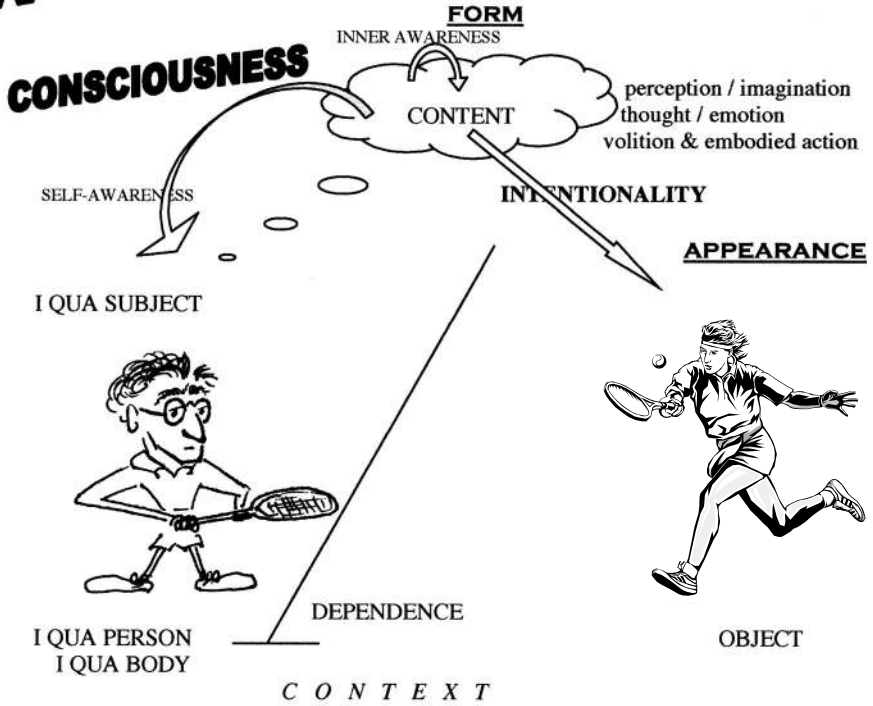
Many of us think visually, even when we conceptualize highly abstract phenomena. This is a phenomenological observation about the practice of phenomenology and ontology (for those like “us”). Indeed, I often draw pictures on the board while lecturing on the topics pursued in this book: structures of consciousness (intentionality, background, inner awareness, self-awareness) and structures of the world (ontological categories, the form of intentionality itself).

What follows, accordingly, is a pictorial organization of the structures of world and consciousness that are pursued in the essays to follow.

My students will recognize many of the elements of The Picture.



# WORLD



**BACKGROUND**  
 Ideas ... Languages ... Practices

**SUBSTRATE**  
 NEURAL DYNAMICS ... BIOLOGICAL EVOLUTION ... QUANTUM FIELDS

## CATEGORIES

**FORMAL CATEGORIES**  
 INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY  
 STATE-OF-AFFAIRS

**MATERIAL CATEGORIES**  
 NATURE CULTURE CONSCIOUSNESS

**BASIC CATEGORIES**  
 Prehension Intentionality Modality Dependence Unity Plurality .....

### **ONTOLOGICAL BECOMING**