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Epiphenomenal Semantics: Cognition, Context and Convention

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Chapter 3. Phenomenology of meaning

3.1. Introductory remarks

To be human means to be social. To be social means to be interactive. To be interactive means to be meaningful (together). Hence to be human means to be significant, and more specifically, co-significant. Nothing means anything on its own. Not even a human *person*, let alone a human world of objectivities. Because to be a human person, and not just a human being, requires, as we shall learn from Husserl, conscious immersion in an environing and contextualized (or inter-contextualized) co-existence, co-being. What is more, we shall show that it means, most of all, a community of cognizant and cognizing subjects entangled in a world of semiosis. The process of semiosis, as should be remembered, can be described as sign action, or, rather, sign interaction, given the fact that meaning emerges from contextual synthesis. Ultimately, the world we live in is indeed a world of semiosis, where everything is a matter of signs, or, put differently, where everything is what it is not in itself, but, instead, as relativized to human (mutual) understanding in a certain context. Even I, the I known to me, the I that I am prepared to accept as I, is not a being in itself, abstracted from its condition, from its situation, detached from its “root soil”, to adapt a Husserlian term (Husserl 2000: 292). The question ‘Who am I?’ cannot be answered otherwise than relatively and relationally. Nothing in the human world, in this world of perpetual semiosis, is ever meaningless; and whatever seems to be so is only suffering from a temporary lack, a gap in want of (ful)filling.

Meaning is the province of humanity. Whatever draws our attention, whatever falls within the field of our sensual experience, whatever is (re)cognized is necessarily endowed with meaning, significance, interrelation to other (re)cognitions. Nothing in the human world is devoid of its (inter)subjectively bestowed sense. To mean is human, both positively and negatively. This is to say that the subjects will always seek meaning, and that the meaning will always be only subjective (i.e., an intersubjectively conditioned subjective object of the mind). It will never touch the true essence of being, it will never go beyond the veil of objectivity. It will only show the transparent world, i.e., the visible world which then vanishes into the mist of its (noumenal) objectivity. It will thus open a world of intersubjective objectivity, coming from a dimension of similar subjective transcendence. And since meaning is, as has been shown, the goal and the source of any human action, including social (inter)action, since it arises from the cognitive interplay of various forms of experiential data, it is, in the final analysis, experiential all the way through. It is simultaneously cognitive, social, and interactive. But to begin with, it is always cognitive, if relatively so, before it is intercognitive. This is so, because, even though it arises from the ‘sounds’ of

experience, it is invariably involved, entangled in silence and it is in silence that it takes shape to the mind of the interpreter. Meaning does not travel between speakers, nor does it reside anywhere. It is a process, a process of semiosis, an interaction of the sign. It is therefore to be found in the intersection of cognition, convention and context. Just as the human subject is an embodied spirituality and hence a culturalized person, an embedded unity of body, mind and sociality, so is meaning – embedded in cognition, convention, context. Cognition is that which acquires convention, that which recognizes and neutralizes innovation, and that which makes sense of any recognition reached in the given situation, an inter-contextual situation. Just as optimal self-awareness comes with the empathetic recognition of an other and subsequent mutual-understanding, so does meaning – in itself it does not make sense. What is meaning in itself, what is man in himself? Endlessly senseless. It is only in the community of co-acting, co-existing, co-operating members that the comprehensive unified whole emerges. It is equally true of man and meaning. On their own, they mean just about anything, i.e., nothing. Both are relational or relative. Both are social.

3.2. Consciousness (un)limited¹

Human consciousness is fundamentally undefined with respect to its intentional objects. Consciousness – which, as we shall see, is understood here quite broadly – is the beginning and the end of everything; it is that which influences and is influenced, experiences and is (indirectly) experienced. Beyond it there is nothing (constituted) for the subject. But consciousness can transcend itself by going further and further beyond its realized self. It can go out to the unknown. It can become self-reflective. It is freedom unlimited. Or so it would seem, because it is indeed unlimited by anything but its self. It is unlimited by anything but the expression of its self, the corporeal expression, from which there is no escaping in the intersubjective (objective) world.

Husserl, in his phenomenologically oriented quest for fundamentals, recognizes the key function of the human subject, involved in intricate intersubjective relations. It is before the subject that the world in its multifaceted nature spreads out, and it is a world which outside (the experiential field of) its subject may well have no existence whatsoever. In this way Husserl relativizes the entire world to the Ego, even the Ego itself is thus relativized. The world of nature, the world of objects, the world of culture and cultural products, the world of other subjects are all anchored in experiencing human consciousness, in the consciousness of the I. That this is really so can be seen from the following:

¹ In the present Chapter, we will use the personal pronoun ‘he’ and its correlates to refer to the subject in general. This will be done for the sake of standardization with the language employed by Husserl. The same policy will be adopted in Chapter 4.

the actual surrounding world of any person whatsoever is not physical reality pure and simple and without qualification, but instead it is the surrounding world only to the extent he 'knows' of it, insofar as he grasps it by apperception and positing or is conscious of it in the horizon of his existence as co-given and offered to his grasp ... precisely in accordance with the way it happens to be posited in consciousness (Husserl 2000: 195).

The actuality of the surrounding world, i.e., an experienceable and experienced world, unfolds in experience to the cognizing subject from the perspective adopted by him, and it does so in such a way that it is never really complete – correspondingly to the conceptual sphere where domains and categories also interfuse and where there are no clear boundaries. It is therefore – in its processual nature of experiential emergence – never a world 'an sich' but always and invariably 'für mich', as has already been stressed many times. Accordingly, Husserl (2000: 196) notes that

the surrounding world is not a world 'in itself' but is rather a world 'for me', precisely a surrounding world of its Ego-subject, a world experienced by the subject or grasped consciously in some other way and posited by the subject in his intentional lived experiences with the sense-content of the moment. As such, the surrounding world is in a certain way always in the process of becoming, constantly producing itself by means of transformations of sense and ever new formations of sense along with the concomitant positings and annullings.

That it is forever 'becoming' rather than ever simply being out there as a ready-made product is because what it is and how it is hinges on the human subject, his overall conceptualized situation – that is, the immediate spatiotemporal, intentional, interpersonal, conceptually associative circumstances, as (re)cognized by the subject in a foreground or background manner, consciously or unconsciously, onstage or offstage. Reference points may vary from context to context, but one of them will remain constant across all contexts and irrespective of any situational changes, including standpoint-alterations. This is the zero-reference-point – localized and temporalized in the embodied subject – which even if imaginatively moved for empathetic purposes remains factually, as we shall later see, where it has always been – with me. Let us consider this:

all that is thingly-real in the surrounding world of the Ego has its relation to the Body. Furthermore, obviously connected with this is the distinction the Body acquires as the bearer of the zero point of orientation, the bearer of the here and the now, out of which the pure Ego intuits space and the whole world of the senses. Thus each thing that appears [or is supposed to be able to appear] has *eo ipso* an orienting relation to the Body (Husserl 2000: 61).

The human subject, the experiencing consciousness, is necessarily located in a physical body. This body gives it not only a perceptible and materially present form – whereby it really is itself out there, in the objective, i.e., intersubjectively

entertained ‘there’, which for the Ego proper is invariably a ‘here’ – but it also enables the subject to relate and relativize the surrounding spatiotemporal environment to the one spatiotemporal place which is his own, and which is certain. This spatiotemporal point which defines the here-and-now of the intersubjectively present subjectivity is the point of departure for every construal, for every conceptualization, for every position-taking and constitution. Husserl speaks of this, for example, when he draws attention to the fact that “to have Objects in the proper sense ... the characteristic grasping or positing attitude of the theoretical [i.e., performing the cognitive act of objectifying] subject is required” (Husserl 2000: 19). The experiential character of his considerations also shows through when Husserl (2000: 26) points out that “all Objectivation of spatial things ultimately leads back to sensation”. Sensation is inextricably related to the embodied subject because it is in the human body that sensuous experience is “localized” (Husserl 2000: e.g., 152). That being so,

[e]verything is related to the here [and the now] which is my here [and my now]. I, the person, am in space at this place [and at this time]. Others are over there where their Bodies are (Husserl 2000: 213).

This is so even if the subject assumes for interpersonal purposes and via empathy a viewpoint foreign to his corporeal being. Whatever the subject does is always related to where he ‘stands’, to his *psychophysical* standpoint, which means that it concerns his spatial and attitudinal situation alike. Insofar as all conscious and unconscious cognitions are incorporated into the conceptual system of the speaker, which is where they can actually make sense and have a bearing on the person’s (inter)subjective activities, it is essential to realize that the viewpoint cannot be purely somatic. We can never approach anything from an absolutely bias-free position, a position which would be feeling-less, emotionless, experience-less. Since all our experience is, as we assume in the present work, integrated in our intersubjectively molded cognitive models, it will always bring along certain attitudes and feelings when it is summoned up by new experience and online interpretative processes. Moreover, what is somatic must necessarily be (re)cognized in order for any higher-level processes to take place:

The Body then has for its particular Ego the unique distinction of bearing in itself the zero point of all ... orientations. One of its spatial points, even if not an actually seen one, is always characterized in the mode of the ultimate central here: that is, a here which has no other here outside of itself, in relation to which it would be a ‘there’. It is thus that all things of the surrounding world possess an orientation to the Body, just as, accordingly, all expressions of orientation imply this relation. [For example,] [t]he ‘far’ is far from me, from my Body ... whereas the subject is always, at every now, in the center, in the here, whence it sees the things and penetrates into the world by vision, on the other hand the Objective place, the spatial position, of the Ego, or of its Body, is a changing one (Husserl 2000: 166).

The Body as that which gives (infra)structure and grounding to each subjective consciousness is at the same time an indicator of the latter's position in a world which it opens up to human cognition. This localization of the psyche in a spatiotemporal situation also shows up in language. And it is not only in expressions of orientation or motion that this is the case. Every time the subject says 'I', it entails manifold implications because it is always the I related to the conceptualizing subject's conceived here-and-now; but insofar as this I, as a conceptualized subject, is not only an index of the conceptualizing subject, but also a circumstanced object of conception (i.e. relative to inter-con-text, as we might put it), the standpoint of this conceptualized subject does not need to coincide with the actual standpoint of the conceptualizing subject, with what would count as here and now at the moment of speaking. Similarly, every time the encoder says 'you', it is both the conceptualized 'you' and the conceptualizing you, i.e., the decoder. These are situations in which Langacker (see e.g. 1990b: 11; 1991: 318ff.) speaks of minimal subjectivity, and maximal objectivity of the elements of the ground. Whether or not there is coincidence in such ground-objectifying conceptualized situations between the conceptualizing circumstanced ground (encoder, decoder and their cognized context) and the ground-gone-onstage, one thing is certain, namely, its actual meaning is relativized to the conceptualizing ground. Besides, as should be remembered, we wish to embrace within the perspectival purview of the subject also what surely owes its existence to *embodied* cognition, but what operates from within, i.e., conceptually stored background information and conceptually highlighted and organized immediate information. That which is new and derives from a given inter-con-textual situation comes to have an impact on what is old by activating relevant areas of experiential knowledge and projecting on it the structure of the present experience, which is what Langacker has in mind when he discusses the relation between 'construal' and 'content'.

Since no two persons are ever the same as regards their conceptual make-up, and since no two persons can ever experience exactly the same thing identically at exactly the same time, no two persons can ever reach exactly the same conceptualizations, or have exactly the same surrounding worlds. Naturally, this is not to say that different subjects belong to different worlds, but rather that

in a now which, as intersubjective presence, is identical for the different subjects who mutually understand one another, these subjects cannot have the same 'here' (the same intersubjective spatial presence) nor the same appearances [of things] ... Therefore different subjects have phenomenal Objectivities that in phenomenal intersubjective time are distinct of necessity ... The same things can, of course, actually appear to them, but the appearances, the things 'in their fleeting mode of appearance' ... are different (Husserl 2000: 216; cf. Husserl 1983: 89).

What we have here is the implication that although subjects live in one and the same spatiotemporal world, in which they are exposed to the same spatiotemporal

objects, they – being themselves not only perceivers but also perceivable as objects within this world (or, in cognitive terms, being at the same time, cognizing and cognizable, conceptualizing and conceptualizable beings) – cannot experience these appearing things otherwise than through the medium of their corporeality anchored in their reality, as conceived by their own Ego. This means that while the source of what appears to them, the source of their experience is cross-subjectively identical, the experiences themselves are not and, what is more, cannot be. What they have, each of them, are their ‘phenomenal’ or subjective objectivities which are their perspectival conceptions of intersubjective (non-phenomenal) objectivities (see below Husserl 2000: 118).

The intersubjectively experienced and experienceable world simply “appears to each [subject] in a different way” and it is absolutely out of the question that “different subjects [could ever] ... have the same appearances at the same temporal point of intersubjective (‘Objective’) time” (Husserl 2000: 211). But, again, it is not only because “for each point of time intersubjectively grasped as identical, my here and the other’s here are separate” (Husserl 2000: 213), but also because the experienced surrounding world extends beyond what is seen into what is inferred, assumed, and felt regarding what is given or, as Husserl puts it, co-given, i.e., potentially or indirectly experienced as existing in the field of indeterminateness enfolding my actuality. This demonstrates that it is indeed “my surrounding world ..., ... not the physicalistic world, but the thematic world of my, and our, intentional life” (Husserl 2000: 230). Why is it my intentional life? Because it is I who tend toward the world where my body is situated, because it is I who attend to what arrests me, and it is I who, intending, constitute it. Why is it our intentional life? Because none of us is ‘an island entire in itself’. Although Husserl strives for such an absolute of pure consciousness in which transcendent things are constituted and turned into immanence – a question we will return to shortly – man, in our present reading at least, is of no such nature. Man is ‘involved in mankind’, is one of a kind and forever tends toward this kind because only there, in the experience of the other of his kind, can he recognize himself, can he become fully aware of what it means to be human, to be an I and to have an other, what it means to have a body and a reality inside and outside it (cf. Husserl 2000: e.g., 95). It is in this tending toward one another, in this recognition of an other appearing in my field of experience, and in my recognition of my own appearance within his field that “mutual understanding” takes place. Hence, Husserl (2000: 205) draws a distinction between “a subject and its surrounding world” and “an association of persons and its surrounding world”, noting that “the subject, as Objectivable and Objectivated for itself, is included at the same time in the surrounding world”. This is also true of “a social subjectivity ... [i.e.,] an association of subjects, constituted through communication” (Husserl 2000: 206). This is how Husserl demonstrates that the former distinction will not suffice: only narrowly understood does the notion of a ‘surrounding world’ refer to

what confronts a personal Ego (i.e., an Ego within a communicative association), [as] a world that encompasses all objectivities and that is constituted for the Ego through its ‘experiences’, through its experiences of things and its axiological and practical experiences (Husserl 2000: 204).

This Ego-centered world will be oriented around a relatively constant kernel, without which it could hardly count as functional, but, given its experiential character, it will necessarily change “in the course of active experience” (Husserl 2000: 204). A neutralizing role with respect to the alterations taking place in the various appearances of the Ego confronted with its own experiences and co-experiences of others is performed by what is constant across communicatively negotiated experiential frameworks. But this may itself be but an overriding appearance (see below).

Husserl (2000: 213) points out that apart from a subjectively construed surrounding world reflecting what appears to the individual consciousness from his idiosyncratic psychophysical viewpoint, each individual who is the conceptualizing subject of his reality enters himself – as conceptualizing and conceptualiz-ed/-able – into the intersubjectively constituted world. This happens by way of an indissoluble relation of each subject “to a nexus of persons” and it is in light of the intersubjective objectivity emerging from such interpersonal commerce that the subject becomes aware of the subjective character of his conceptualized surrounding world. The subject suddenly recognizes that “the subjective surrounding world is mere appearance”. Or, put differently, it may not be the whole truth. This realization does not change the fact that it is this subjective world that is still the core, if exposed, of whatever else there can be posited to be. Husserl (2000: 203) thus indicates that within the intersubjective or “communicative surrounding world”, which is “constituted in experiencing others, in mutual understanding and mutual agreement”, there is for each and every one of us this nuclear “egoistic” world inasmuch as we can “abstract from all relations of mutual understanding and the apperception founded therein”. It is only natural that it is the most inherently Ego-oriented positings – deriving from its bodily infrastructure, and defining its temporal and spatial I and the world spreading around – that constitute the pivot of the unfolding reality. After all, while it is true that our community is certainly a most significant conditioning environment for our subjective experience, and our socio-cultural superego does in fact supersede the subjective Ego, or, better, it blends with it in such a way that a non-arbitrary separation is impossible, that which is social is, nonetheless, our *second* first nature. It is not intrinsically natural to us, but acquired via interpersonal communication and experience. In other words, we are not bound to it the same way we are bound to our corporeal spatiotemporal position. Changing cultures is at least conceivable, if not doable; changing bodies is not. Culture can suppress and sublimate human brute instincts, but it cannot suppress people’s awareness of their selves. Because whatever is there for the subject, be it nature or culture, is there for him and through him. Hence,