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PHILOSOPHICAL INSIGHTS: A CASE OF INTENTIONALITY

Abstract. Philosophical intuition may be used as a shortcut for establishing what ordinary people would say or do in certain circumstances. In such use it may be and should be replaced by proper empirical tests. This part of philosophy, in which such information is essential to arguments, should be experimental philosophy.

However philosophical intuition may be – and has been – understood differently. Namely it can be regarded as a principled, thorough, dispassionate, unbiased analysis of the fundamental traits of human cognition in the first person perspective. While science arises from a critical and systematic attitude towards the third person aspect of common sense, philosophical insights result from adopting such an attitude towards the first person aspect of common sense.

Such insights are quite rare; but if they are sufficiently deep, they can ‘reflect some fundamental features of our thought about the world’ (Strawson). Among instances of a philosophical inquiry aiming at formulating such insights we may count Strawson’s descriptive ontology and – for another instance – Husserl’s theory of intentionality. I have enumerated several observations made by Husserl on this and, by that example, have highlighted three important aspects of deep philosophical insights. One, despite their first person perspective, they are not idiosyncratic: other thinkers, even from very different traditions, arrive at very similar insights. Two, they are not dim and vague: they can be expressed precisely, even in the shape of formal calculus. Three, they are not *a priori*. They may be misguided, but their shortcomings are traceable and correctible. In particular, I show how one could think about correcting some flaws in Husserl’s account of intentionality and proceeding to a new, rather naturalistic theory of it.

One of the sources of the problem with philosophical insights and the rise of experimental philosophy is the serious devaluation of the role played by intuition in philosophical arguments. Increasingly, intuition has been treated as a short cut to common knowledge, a cheap replacement for tiresome and expensive tests. A vivid example of such treatment can be found in the debate around contextualism in epistemology. Most participants in the debate (notably [DeRose, 1992]) would argue that normally people would say this or that in such-and-such situation and therefore this theory is better than that theory because the former predicts the data and the latter

does not. The explanatory scheme is virtually identical with that typical in empirical sciences. Now, when we realize that intuition is a very *inaccurate* replacement of proper tests – and everyone is bound to realize that, once the idea of asking his or her students crosses his or her mind – the move to experimental philosophy is the only reasonable option, unless philosophers would rephrase their arguments in order to show that the appeal to common knowledge in the original version was inessential. Something like this happened to Kripke's arguments against descriptivism. They were formulated with reference to the beliefs about 'what people would say' and were challenged [Machery *et al.*, 2004] on the grounds that these beliefs were empirically inaccurate. Then Michael Devitt [2011] set out to show that these beliefs were inessential to the arguments. In other cases – where the appeal to common knowledge proved to be essential – intuition would be replaced by actual empirical tests. That is happening now in the contextualism debate (cf., for example, [Hansen and Chemla, forthcoming]).

But there is another use of intuition. It was employed, for instance, by Peter F. Strawson who, in his search for an explanation for the subject-predicate duality, assumed that the duality should

reflect some fundamental features of our thought about the world [Strawson, 1974, 11].

His renowned, 'descriptive' ontology from the first part of *Individuals* describes precisely the fundamental features not of this world but of *our thinking* about the world:

we are dealing here with something that conditions our whole way of talking and thinking, and it is for this reason that we feel it to be non-contingent [Strawson, 1959, 29].

We might try for the first approximation the following formulation: *Philosophical intuition in its proper understanding is a principled, thorough, dispassionate, unbiased analysis of the fundamental traits of human cognition in the first person perspective.* In this sense it is prior to any scientific enquiry and cannot be replaced by such. Priority does not mean independence. There is mutual dependence between philosophical insights and science. In one way, when we think about the world we are conscious of what science tells us about the world and about human ways of thinking (from the third person perspective); the more we know about it, the more such knowledge conditions our first person way of thinking. That is why philosophy can and should take all relevant scientific facts into consideration (so to speak: we shall naturalize as much as we can) and yet retain its

specificity. Conversely, it is the first person perspective that ultimately sets the agenda for science. Science can be explanatory only on condition that it answers some interesting questions. What questions are interesting, what kinds of answers are satisfactory, why this or that enables us to understand the issue and what the issue is – these problems require some input from the first person perspective.¹

The first person perspective alone does not yet yield philosophy. The first instance of such a perspective is just common sense or, perhaps better put, common sense is an uncontrolled mixture of a first person and a third person perspective. Indeed, common sense is sufficient to do much of the job of the first person perspective, notably to run science. We can live without philosophy, but some of us feel the need to control the first person perspective and gain deeper understanding of the foundations of our cognition in this perspective.

Philosophy answers that need. It is like implementing the spirit of the scientific method within the first person perspective. Analogously, just as science develops from a critical and systematic attitude towards a third person aspect of common sense knowledge of the world, so philosophy develops from such an attitude towards the *first* person aspect of common sense (effectively it might be as remote from common-sense as Quantum Mechanics from common sense physics). Philosophical insight is intersubjectively communicable to those who are able to develop a similarly critical and systematic attitude and may be discussed, challenged and changed – assuming that people share their cognitive foundations (not common sense ‘intuitions’!). This is just as it is in science, where the outcomes are communicable to those who share the relevant background and may be discussed, challenged and changed – assuming that the object of inquiry does not change when different researchers take a look at it.

A good example of what kind of enquiry I have in mind is Strawson’s descriptive metaphysics, already mentioned above. But an even better example is Edmund Husserl’s work in the theory of intentionality in *Logical Investigations* [2001].

Husserl has not been well remembered in the analytic tradition because of his late phenomenological project. The project highlighted the aim of making philosophy an assumptionless, apriorical royal road to absolute certainty, which should be rightly placed next to sheer fantasy. However, a struggle for certainty is only part of the story. Phenomenology, espe-

¹ I will skip the topic of metaphysical assumptions in science although it is not entirely irrelevant here.

cially early phenomenology, has another component: a method of detailed, methodical, principled observation and categorization of the subject's own inner states accompanied by a struggle for the detection and reduction of one's biases and personal idiosyncracies. This part of phenomenology is highly respectable and it has in fact contributed much to the rise of analytic philosophy.²

Let us take a closer look in order to see how it works in detail.

Intentionality is rightly believed to be one of the fundamental features of our thinking and talking. I claim that the method of 'pure description', as he would call it, enabled Husserl to discover many subtle facts about human linguistic competence that the sciences (such as psychology or linguistics) were not – and still are not – properly able to describe and explain. Firstly, he started with the observation that expressions have meanings because they are founded in intentional acts whereby they appear to be directed at something:

The concrete phenomenon of the sense-informed expression breaks up, on the one hand, into the physical phenomenon forming the physical side of the expression, and, on the other hand, into the acts which give it meaning [...] In virtue of such acts, the expression is more than merely sounded word. It means something, and in so far as it means something, it relates to what is objective [Husserl, 2001, vol. 1; 191–192].

Secondly, an intentional act, hence an expression, can be directed at nothing. Expressions must **appear** to be directed at something, but not necessarily **be** so directed. Husserl lays great emphasis on this (in opposition to his predecessors, notably Brentano and Twardowski):

Relation to an actually given objective correlate, which fulfills the meaning-intention, is not essential to an expression [Husserl, 2001, Vol. 1; 199].

If I have an idea of the god Jupiter, [...] this means that I have a certain presentative experience, the presentation-of-the-god-Jupiter is realized in my consciousness. This intentional experience may be dismembered as one chooses in descriptive analysis, but the god Jupiter naturally will not be found in it. The 'immanent', 'mental object' is not therefore part of the descriptive or real make-up of experience, it is in truth not really immanent or mental. But it also does not exist extramentally, it does not exist at all. This does not prevent

² The boiling pot of ideas from which analytic philosophy erupted was heated mainly by the exchange between Husserl, Twardowski and Frege, which is rightly noted in [Dummett, 1993]. All three of them, Frege notwithstanding, were in this sense phenomenologists. Frege's ideas of distinguishing sense and reference or saturated and unsaturated expressions are products of the same method.

our-idea-of-the-god-Jupiter from being actual, a particular sort of experience or particular mode of mindedness (*Zumutesein*), such that he who experiences it may rightly say that the mythical king of the gods is present to him, concerning whom there are such and such stories. If, however, the intended object exists, nothing becomes phenomenologically different. It makes no essential difference to an object presented and given to consciousness whether it exists, or is fictitious, or is perhaps completely absurd. I think of Jupiter as I think of Bismarck, of the tower of Babel as I think of Cologne Cathedral, of a regular thousand-sided polygon as of regular thousand-faced solid [Husserl, 2001, Vol. 2; 98–99].

Thirdly, intentionality assumes two forms. In other words, there are two kinds of intentional acts: nominal acts and propositional acts. In language, they correspond to names and sentences (which can therefore justly be called primary semantic categories). It is not enough to say that our thinking or its verbal expression is intentional or directed at something, for our thinking and its verbal expression can be directed at it *in two different ways*.

Nominal acts and complete judgements never can have the same intentional essence, and [...] every switch from one function to the other, though preserving communities, necessarily works changes in this essence [Husserl, 2001, Vol. 2; 152].

Naming and asserting do not merely differ grammatically, but ‘in essence’, which means that the acts which confer or fulfil meaning for each, differ in intentional essence, and therefore in act-species [Husserl, 2001, Vol. 2; 158].

Fourthly, the distinction between nominal and propositional intentional acts (a basis for distinguishing the syntactic roles of names and sentences) crosses with the distinction between positing and non-positing acts:

Among nominal acts we distinguish positing from non-positing acts. The former were after a fashion existence-meanings [...] refer to [an object] as existent. The other acts leave the existence of their object unsettled: the object may, objectively considered, exist, but it is not referred to as existent in them, it does not count as actual, but rather ‘merely presented’. [...] We find exactly the same modification in the case of judgments. Each judgment has its modified form, an act which merely presents what the judgment takes to be true [...] without a decision as to truth and falsity [...]. Judgments as positing propositional acts have therefore their merely presentative correlates in non-positing propositional acts [Husserl, 2001, Vol. 2; 159–160].

The difference between those two distinctions is clear, but the matter requires close scrutiny because, due to obscure terminology, the distinctions may be confused. In particular, the concept of proposition (judgment) in

the light of these distinctions is ambiguous. It could be understood broadly as a correlate of any propositional act, assertive or non-assertive, or understood narrowly, as a correlate of a positing propositional act (assertion). Some readers may also, wrongly, take it for a correlate of any positing act (propositional and nominal as well):

To call all positing acts ‘judgments’ tends to obscure the essential distinction [...] between nominal and propositional acts, and so to confuse an array of important relationships [Husserl, 2001, Vol. 2; 166].

Fifthly, Husserl further distinguished independent from non-independent expressions, as well as complete from incomplete. Complete expression is a kind of expression which is syntactically coherent, with a unitary meaning, for example, ‘a cat’, ‘The cat sits on the mat’, or ‘quite well’. Incomplete expression is an expression which lacks this internal syntactic coherence: ‘the on cat quite’. Independent expressions are, for example, ‘a horse’, ‘I’ve seen a ghost’, ‘a green cow’, while non-independent expressions are, for example, ‘good’ or ‘quite well’ – they are functors which have unitary but unsaturated meanings and therefore require objects:

Several non-independent meanings [...] can be [...] associated in relatively closed units, which yet manifest, as wholes, a character of non-independence. This fact of complex non-independent meanings is grammatically registered in the relatively closed unity of complex syncategorematic expressions. Each of these is a single expression, because expressive of a single meaning, and it is a complex expression, because expressive part by part of a complex meaning. It is in relation to this meaning that it is a complete expression. If nonetheless we call it incomplete, this depends on the fact that its meaning, despite its unity, is in need of completion. Since it can only exist in a wider semantic context, its linguistic expression likewise points to a wider linguistic context, to a completion in speech that shall be independent and closed [Husserl, 2001, Vol. 2; 57].

Let us stop the illustration here. Three points are particularly apt to be made.

One is that the observations made by Husserl are by no means idiosyncratic to him. On the contrary, we can spot very similar insights in the works of other philosophers, especially those who acknowledged the descriptive method we are talking about.

For instance, the crossed distinctions of nominal/propositional and positing/non-positing acts, mentioned above, were referred to independently by Strawson and Peter T. Geach. Strawson wrote [1950, 11]:

[R]eferring to or mentioning a particular thing cannot be dissolved into any kind of assertion. To refer is not to assert, though you refer in order to go on to assert.

How close the approach gets to Husserl's observations is not entirely clear, because Strawson's statement can be taken as an acknowledgment of the distinction between nominal and propositional acts, but maybe it is only a way of drawing our attention to the distinction between positing and non-positing acts. Less ambiguous is a passage found in Geach [1980, section 20, p. 52]:

A name may be used outside the context of a sentence simply to call something by name – to acknowledge the presence of the thing. This act of naming is of course no proposition [...]. It does, however [...], express a complete thought.

Geach here distinguishes naming acts as different from propositional acts although expressing complete thoughts as well as propositional acts do. In this passage he confines himself to positing acts only, but elsewhere in his book [1980, section 19] he further distinguishes propositions from assertions, which leads us to believe, with reason, that Geach, like Husserl, held both distinctions separate and considered them to be independent.

For another instance let us take the crossed distinctions of complete/incomplete and independent/non-independent sentences. *Pace* terminology, one can easily see that Husserl's non-independent expressions correspond quite well to Frege's incomplete or unsaturated ones: they exhibit a certain unitary quality of meaning, but they need to be completed in order to acquire independent meaning.³ Husserl's incomplete expressions, or those 'containing gaps' are not Frege's incomplete, or unsaturated expressions; they are simply incoherent fragments, with no 'unitary meaning' whatsoever; they have more to do with ellipsis or with plain syntactical incoherence.

The second point is that insights like these are not loose ideas without any relevance to more rigorous accounts of language. On the contrary, they are expressible in a precise way and can be considered as postulates ready to use even in formal systems. These particular insights we have just discussed constitute the foundations of Categorical Grammar.⁴ It shows that deep, careful reflection upon one's own way of thinking and talking may lead

³ *For not all the parts of a thought can be complete; at least one must be 'unsaturated', or predicative; otherwise they would not hold together* [Frege, 1892, 54].

Statements in general [...] can be imagined to be split up into two parts; one complete in itself, and the other in need of supplementation, or 'unsaturated' [Frege, 1891, 31].

⁴ Categorical Grammar is a highly sophisticated formal account of syntax, initiated by Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz [1935], and developed by, among others, Y. Bar Hillel, J. Lambek,

to a discovery of ideas that are shared by other distinguished thinkers in the field and the possibility of forming a framework for a universal, highly formalized syntactic theory.

The third point is that first person insights are not only shared by other thinkers, and not only expressible in a calculus, but also open to further development. Being the results of a scientific-like attitude they are not *a priori*: internal experience is experience, thought experiments are experiments. Philosophical insights resulting from them are *a posteriori*: they may be misguided in this or that, but their shortcomings are traceable and correctible.⁵

Also in Husserl's account we may find thoughts that are not thought thoroughly enough. Some problems can be spotted within Categorical Grammar, when internal difficulties with the calculus seem to reach the philosophical ground. I believe that this is the case with the syntax of quantified phrases: so far no treatment of quantification has proved entirely satisfactory in CG. But some other problems can be shown directly, from the common-sense level.

Two such charges against Husserl's account are presented by Dummett [1993].

One is that Husserl's account of the intentionality of language puts him at risk of slipping into a Humpty-Dumpty-like attitude towards meaning. Humpty-Dumpty, talking to Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*, maintains that she cannot know the meaning of a word he has used ('glory') until he communicates his intentions in the matter. Acceptance of such attitudes is rightly believed to be absurd – if it were the case, any intersubjective communication would be impossible. Yet it seems that Husserl's insight, according to which meaning is founded in an intentional act of a subject, leads precisely to such an attitude. Another charge, akin to the former, is that in Husserl's account it is hard to imagine how language acquisition could be a social practice (which it certainly is). Husserl sounds very individualistic in that respect.

However, we can remedy that. We can try to establish and analyse further what has been left without proper treatment. I have done this in

P. T. Geach, M. Cresswell, D. Lewis, J. van Benthem, and W. Buszkowski. It is now one of the most powerful tools for analysing natural language. For a presentation of a full-blown version see, for example, [Carpenter, 1997] or [Steedman, 2000]. For a discussion of the relation between the calculus and its philosophical background see [Tałasiewicz, 2009; 2010; 2012a].

⁵ This point shows in the clearest way that the insights I am talking about here are of a different sort than the 'conceptual analysis' advocated by Kirk Ludwig [2007], which is declared to be *a priori*.

greater detail elsewhere [Talasiewicz, 2012b], but some recapitulation seems appropriate here.

The problem with Husserl's insight that is responsible for the troubles raised by Dummett is that Husserl has not properly distinguished the perspective of the subject as a speaker (encoder) and as a hearer (recipient). He was talking generally about a 'subject' and 'subject acts' in 'solitary life' [Husserl, 2001, Vol. 1; 190], and this distinction was not clear: the subject in a sense is both the speaker and the hearer. Now, when this distinction is uncontrolled, we are apt to assume automatically that intentionality is founded in the acts of the speaker. And that is the mistake, in consequence of which we slip into the Humpty-Dumpty attitude.

Upon reflection we might choose to go the other way and deliberately adopt the hearer's perspective.⁶

That solves the problem: now meaning is formed in the acts of the recipient, when he or she perceives the expression as directed at something. The quality of this perception may be induced by those from whom the recipient is learning the language in the social practice of using language. Humpty-Dumpty imparts meaning to the word 'glory' not when he wants to subject Alice to 'a nice knock-down argument' but when he himself learns the word for the first time, and this meaning is (roughly) the same as Alice's.

Now, we might compare the outcome of our reflection in the first per-

⁶ Husserl himself, contrary to what Dummett says, was far from being obviously encoder-oriented. In many places the description of an intentional act essentially takes the receiver's perspective:

What is involved in the descriptive difference between the physical sign-phenomenon and the meaning-intention which makes it into an expression, becomes most clear when we turn our attention to the sign qua sign, e.g. **to the printed word as such**. If we do this, we have an external percept [...] just like any other, whose object loses its verbal character. If this object again functions as a word, its presentation is wholly altered in character [...]. Our interest, our intention, our thought [...] point exclusively to the thing meant in the sense-giving act [...]. [I]ntuitive presentation, in which the physical appearance of the word* is constituted, undergoes an essential phenomenal modification when its object begins to count as an expression. While what constitutes the object's appearing remains unchanged, the intentional character of the experience alters. There is constituted [...] an act of meaning which finds support in the verbal presentation's intuitive content, but which differs in essence from the intuitive intention directed upon the word itself [Husserl, 2001, Vol. 1; 193–194].

All objects and relations among objects only are what they are for us, through acts of thought essentially different from them, in which they become present to us, in which they stand before us as unitary items that we mean [Husserl, 2001, Vol. 1; 194].

The meaning of the assertion [...] [–] we continue to recognize its identity of intention in evident acts of reflection: we do not arbitrarily attribute it to our assertions, but discover it in them [Husserl, 2001, Vol. 1; 321 – note 5 to page 213].

The soliloquizing thinker 'understands' his words, and this understanding is simply his act of meaning them [Husserl, 2001, Vol. 1; 321 – note 5 to page 213].

son perspective⁷ to some third person scientific research, devoted to the problems of language acquisition; luckily we now have some interesting and relevant findings at hand. For instance, psycholinguists point out that fundamental for the learning of the first language is the child's ability to interpret another person's physical features as directional:

Joint Attention Comes First [...] In a successful conversation, the two participants must agree on what is being talked about. One way to ensure this is to start with the same locus of attention. But how does one make a one- or two-year-old systematically attend to what one is saying? [...] [B]y age one, infants have become quite good themselves at checking on the adult's **gaze, stance, and physical orientation** [Clark, 2003, 32].

This in turn may lead us – by the mechanism mentioned before, that our (scientific) knowledge about the world conditions our first person perspective – to again make a first person observation that perhaps intentionality of thinking and talking is not a primary form of intentionality; that intentionality in the first place, prior to language and articulated thoughts, is a property of some physical objects, whose shape and orientation induce upon us the impression of directedness. And that concerns not only early stages of natural language, or just natural language, because, as Grzegorzczuk convincingly argued over a half of a century ago, not only in natural language, but also in the language of science, ‘the meaning of the name is ultimately fixed in situations involving pointing’ [Grzegorzczuk, 1950–1951, 307] and ‘the expression “I am now pointing to ...” [...] is the primitive formula of the descriptive language [of physics]’ (ibidem: 311).

Thus we arrive at a quite unexpected insight:

Intentionality is a relative quality of certain perceived objects, in particular arrows and sticks, but also other people's gestures and glances, which exhibits itself in a relationship with a certain ability of the subject perceiving those objects. The result is that the subject perceives those objects as being directed towards something [Tałasiewicz, 2012b, 515].

According to this insight, intentionality is expressed in a simple, naturalistic way, and is similar to such relative qualities as colours.⁸ Intentionality

⁷ The talk of Humpty-Dumpty and Alice, grammatically in the third person, should not cover from us the fact that epistemologically we are all the time in the first person perspective: we know what H-D or Alice would say or do because we ourselves play their role in the analysis.

⁸ Compare J. J. C. Smart's definition of the latter: ‘Colors [are] dispositions of physical objects to evoke characteristic patterns of discriminatory color behavior by normal human percipients in normal circumstances’ [Smart, 1997, 1].

is no longer a relation between the mind and what the mind is directed at – contrary to the standard post-Brentanian account. It is rather a relation between a physical object of a certain kind and the subject who perceives this object as being directed. Human ability to perceive such things as intentional becomes a natural, congenital trait, and it is quite easy to imagine evolutionary advantages that hominids possessing such a trait would have over those lacking this ability.⁹

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⁹ For further details of this insight into intentionality see [Tałasiewicz, 2012b].

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