

ON THE PLURALITY OF LIFE-WORLDS AND THE SHARED MEANINGS AMONG THEM

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Abstract

An early project in Husserl's philosophical career was to integrate a phenomenological theory of intentional content with a logical theory of objective meaning. In this essay, I examine how Husserl's formal account of meaning established in the *Logical Investigations* (1900/1901) relates to an intentional and cognitive account of meaning found in his *Ideas*, Book I (1913). My analysis hinges on discussing how Husserl integrated his analysis of meaning-intentional acts, found in the *Investigations*, with a full-fledged theory of sense and meaning involving noetic and noematic correlation, found in the *Ideas*. On my view, Husserl's theory of meaning does not succumb to psychologism as many linguistic analysts have supposed because his theory is able to account for how senses of meaning are objectively given within various overlapping and encompassing life-worlds.

Keywords: Edmund Husserl, theory of meaning, life-world, logic, intentionality.

Husserl's philosophy is characterized by three stages. The first, known as the Halle period, was devoted to the study of logic and the philosophy of mathematics, most evident in the *Philosophie der Arithmetik* (1891). This period spanned the years 1886–1900.¹ The Göttingen period followed during the years 1900 through 1916, where Husserl formulated his idea of pure logic on the refutation of psychologism, arrived at an axiomatic understanding of mathematics, embraced logicism, and developed the various aspects of the phenomenological method.² The Freiburg period extended between 1916–1939. In this period, Husserl used his burgeoning phenomenology to explore an ontology of the life-world, embracing a social, cultural, and historical philosophy of consciousness and its essences. This essay focuses on the Göttingen period using the *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas I*, considering the changes after 1905.³

Husserl's account of sense and meaning was initially cognitively based. Although an accusation stands that he had succumb to psychologism during his early philosophical development, he had redeveloped his earlier thought in order to clarify and strengthen his various positions concerning the laws of logic and

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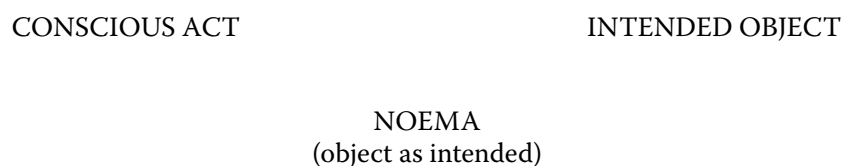
how they could be studied more thoroughly.⁴ Thus, Husserl eventually rejected any traces of psychologism found in the *Logical Investigations*.⁵ Husserl's phenomenology during the Göttingen period could be therefore considered a «realist» phenomenology specifically because his aim was to discover the pre-experiential and objectively applicable logical laws that have governance both over external material objects and the perception of objects; he chose *not* to focus on the psychology of mental thinking. Husserl would argue that one could discover a pure logic of thought based on looking at the universal ways mental events deal with the appearances of objects directly. In other words, he was concerned with the study of «phenomena» in the *sense* of the ways in which they appear in different forms of conscious experience. With this definition in mind, Husserl maintained that a science of logic would be able to secure the formal laws that apply to the experiences of sense and meaning within the consciousness of thinking beings.⁶

Husserl's phenomenological project was constructed in such a way that it was possible to maintain a balance between an examination of the structures of consciousness, language, logic, *and* the presentation of phenomena to individual consciousness.⁷ As he saw it, phenomenology needed a way to describe given senses of meaning in a pure fashion and thus go beyond mere personal and psychological descriptions. Hence, by 1905 Husserl developed his *reductive method* in order to provide a way to bracket metaphysical questions of existence relative to personal presuppositions about the objects of experience. The reductive method could then reveal the logically objective structures of thought essential and most pertinent to all thinking beings. He went on to employ this method within the *Ideas I*. Yet, within the *Ideas*, especially in book I, the reduction would yield a theory that identified objective structures capable of providing meaning in any human experience – that is, in one's life-world [*Lebenswelt*], in addition to describing phenomenal objects themselves within one's own immediately given experience/an immediate meaning-world that remains part of the overlapping life-world. These objective structures manifest as Husserl described the essential intentional relations that human beings use as they intend objects.⁸ Husserl's theory of meaning found in the *Ideas* thus seems to be fully compatible with the theory put forward in the *Investigations* if one takes into account the objectivity of meaning structures that permit an individual's conscious grasping of sense, as well as the essential features of intentional relations that must be in place for meanings to communicate sense [*Sinn*.]

It was Husserl's overall goal in this period to show how expressions have meaning (objectively speaking) and that meaning's objectivity could be secured by examining the structures of meaning-intending and meaning-fulfilling acts where these acts are found within the conscious experience of the intending human subject. Although approached from a *transcendental* standpoint, in the *Investigations* Husserl sought to show how one may *empirically* verify the content of a given meaning through the analysis of the meaning intending acts and their relations.⁹

Studying meaning within immediately presented empirical phenomena, then, reveals the system of ideal laws grounding meanings in general, and ideal meaning structures consequently may be detected. Thus, Husserl attempted to find the objective *foundations* that govern relations about meaning in general, and as explained by the concepts of logic through human intending.¹⁰ What are these objective foundations that govern meaning?

Meaning can be divided into two parts. On the subjective side of an intending human consciousness is the act of expression, meaning-intention, and meaning-fulfillment.¹¹ On the objective side there are their respective contents of expressions, the meaning referred to, and the object referred to. Overall, the model would look something like below:



Conscious acts are meaning intention and fulfillment, noetic and noematic correlate are placed in the middle, and intentional relation is found between act and object. Meaning is distinguished from object as different meanings can refer to the same object. For example, to use Husserl's notion, «The victor at Jena» and «The vanquished at Waterloo» both refer to the same object, but in different ways, as do «the equilateral triangle» and the «equiangular triangle».¹² A meaning refers to its object, or *referent*, through *the sense* [*Sinn*] of that meaning intended in a proposition, expression, or thought. Perhaps more clearly put, expressions have meaning but also refer to objects in the world through a given sense.¹³ Having established what the model looks like generally, it is now possible to turn to *Investigation I* and *Investigation V*. The first part of *Investigation I* deals with meaning and expression as uncovered by the «Prolegomena to Pure Logic».¹⁴ The second part deals with the ideality of meanings and intentional experience. Taken together, one can see how Husserl used a conception of logic to support his theory that there is a universal and logical meaning structure available through an analysis of intentional relations.

Like meaning, *noema* is an ideal entity. The connection between meaning and intentional act is given through mental acts of «internal» instances of meaning instantiation. Husserl called the acts meaning or sense [*Sinn*] «noema» and noema is the object «as intended».¹⁵ Every act has a noema, is intentional, and is mediated by the noema. Thus, in the correlative sense, noema stands *between* the act and intended object. «Noesis» on the other hand is the configuring component of consciousness, or the complement of noema. More clearly put, *noesis* is the «how» or consciousness and *noema* is the «what» of consciousness.¹⁶

The development of an objective meaning theory begins with the noetic – noematic correlation and by establishing how the components

of intensive mental processes possess intentional correlates. These correlates stand together as features of human consciousness just as much as they are truly inherent to human thinking at its core, especially in terms of *apprehending* objects and *expressing* things about them.¹⁷ Any thinking about objects and the meaning associated with them must be guided by these principles. When speaking about meaning and having the sense of expressions fulfilled, Husserl focuses on how noemata have «sense» in terms of applying to actual objects in comprehensible ways.¹⁸ He states that every intensive mental process has its intentional object or its «objective sense»¹⁹. This intensive sense is fundamental to all consciousness and is essential to mental life. However, noemata cannot stand alone in the respect that sense must be bestowed by noesis; so they stand together in whatever specific sense moment where object is apprehended and meaning is conferred. Each moment must have both, as Husserl would later state «Thus, the eidetic law confirmed in every case, states that there can be *no noetic moment without a noematic moment, specifically belonging to it*»²⁰.

To identify «pure» noema, Husserl turns to judgmental processes. When a «meaning user» makes a judgment, there is the judgment and what the judgment is made about. There is a whole which is formed out of judgment or «the total What which is judged» in a certain mode of «givenness».²¹ In other words, Husserl identifies noema as being the «sense in the How of its mode of givenness» which is what allows meaning to be meant unto an object.²² Noemata therefore objectively belong to consciousness and each noema has its own sense. This sense has a core of characteristics that Husserl identifies as the noema's «content»²³. The intensive mental process has its relation to something objective in its consciousness *of something*; in this respect, through the sense of noema. Noema, taken in itself, has a sense by which it means and relates to the object and thus «sets up» meaning intention. Therefore, noemata exist as pre-experiential structures so that human beings *can* intend and mean unto things in a specific manner.

Husserl claimed that meaning indicates *something* to thinking beings (one might claim «only» to thinking beings given the meaning structure just discussed). He claims that signs for example, when taken in themselves, do not express anything.²⁴ Signs must fulfill an indicative function, i.e. to express or mean something to someone, so as to be considered an expression. The functions of expressions usually are descriptive of a «live function», which indicates relations of states of affairs, and a «motivational function», which expresses relations of indication present in judgment.²⁵ Such functions are certain facts of thinking which operate by certain laws in a «law determined ground»²⁶.

The language of a meaning-user, here read *conscious being* capable of apprehending (symbolic) expression, designates the meaning through *the use* of expressions, and this is possible because of the *intentional unity* found between the expression and the language or meaning user within a life-world. There is an immediate «world» created where the object or state of affairs is grasped or designated through the intended

use of an expression. There the language-user *means* to say this or that about the meaning object and confers an intention by *expressing* the meaning in some way. A «meaning world» is thus created within the life-world at large. One world *encompasses* the other. Expressions have a certain phenomenological and worldly character in that they are used to express a way of experience within one's own conscious experience of the self. Beyond the self and its monologue of intended meanings there exist encompassing ways of communicating, whether through concepts or symbols or spoken and written language – as well as other forms of communication may be taken into account in the expression of these intended meanings: gestures, non-verbal communication, aesthetic communications are found in the arts such as drama, dance, painting, poetry, and music, and a myriad of languages, symbolic expressions, and cultural semiotic codes come into play at this level of the life-world. Therefore, individuals are able to intend meaning through «meaning-intention» and have meaning fulfilled by «meaning-fulfillment» in personal meaning-worlds, and those worlds are communicated through an encompassing life-world.²⁷

The objectivity of various meaning-worlds is established through the inter-subjective and overlapping nature of meaning-intending and meaning-fulfilling acts, as well as the mutual apprehension of what those acts intend. Meaning presents itself to be grasped *for* some mind.²⁸ Meaning-intention is the relation of the intended expression to its objective correlate (*Gegenstand*) whereas meaning-fulfillment appears as the act expressed. Every act is an «object directed» act and possesses the power to *direct* or *refer* the meaning within a particular meaning-world to its respective content apprehended in the life-world, thus distinguishing *what* someone is saying from what they are actually saying it *about*. As Husserl put it, «An expression only refers to an objective correlate *because* it means something, it can be rightly said to signify or name the object *through* its meaning»²⁹. Every personal expression means or names *something* by indicating/referring/denoting *via* an objective sense. In simpler terminology, sense determines reference and every act intends an object.

It can now be seen how the relation of an object is constituted via expressions with reference from one meaning-world to another. However, this may pose an intentional problem if the object referred to is fictitious, imaginary, or a hallucination. Individuals can refer expressively within the life-world and it is not required that the referred-to-object actually exists as a materially present physical object. This means that meaning-users may use an intention referring to objects beyond the ken of any inter-subjectively validating life-world. Illusions, hallucinations, and acts of the imagination are examples of such a phenomenon. Yet this does *not* mean that if every expressive act intends an object then expressions referring to *non-existing objects* (non-standard epistemic objects, those produced by the imagination) *really do* refer to objects that exist «outside» of actual being or reality. Such was Kasimir Twardowski's and Alexius Meinong's interpretation of Husserl's theory of meaning-

intention and meaning-fulfillment. These two philosophers, curiously in the mutual lineage of Brentano, interpreted Husserl's theory to mean that it is possible to refer to objects beyond the real: actual *possibilia* existing outside of the realm of being, and these are what expressions refer to when inter-subjective validation of an intended meaning object fails. Jaako Hintikka's possible world semantics and David Lewis' possible worlds theory both revive this tradition, and in this case if they are correct, one might speak of Husserl's meaning theory erecting a *plurality of possible life-worlds* where these objects could exist. However, Husserl disagreed with Meinong's 1904 relational theory of objects for he claimed it is contradictory to maintain that non-existing objects *exist* extramentally.³⁰ Again, Husserl's reductive method collapses the distinction between what exists, and what «really» exists. Those suppositions are bracketed in the reduction.

Moreover, Husserl believed that it is actually irrelevant to consider the metaphysical baggage of an intended epistemic object if an intentional analysis is to be possible using the phenomenological reduction. Husserl is here concerned with how meaning objects are presented and grasped. He is not concerned in what special way they exist.

«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. The 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 [*deskriptiven reellen Bestand*] of the 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 our idea of the god Jupiter from being actual, a particular sort of experience. If the intended object *exists* [my emphasis] *nothing becomes phenomenologically different*».³¹

The phenomenological reduction would provide a uniform model for the analysis of experience by focusing on the immanent intention *as* the object is intended within «lived experience», or *Erlebnis*. Any question of intentional relation to *possible* objects in terms of their existence is bracketed. If meaning is identified with the objective correlate in an ontologically unrelated sense, then there is a contradiction of experiential terms. Such is the case of one epistemic object and its meaning directly contradicting another. For example, consider the proposition «A round square exists». Husserl's theory would posit an intention, but no correlate for the intention not even a non-existent correlate. His theory thus relates *the content* of the expression as a meaning-sense so that it exists in opposition to a meaningless-sense (or sense-less) expression. Simply stated: meaningless expressions do not make sense because they have no correlate. Yet, one must ask at this point: what exactly did Husserl mean when he used the term «sense» and how does that term relate to meaning within his general theory?

Husserl claimed that, «'Meaning' is further used by us as synonymous with 'sense'» [*gilt als gleichbedeutend mit Sinn*].³² He preferred to use the term «meaning» over «sense» only because objects *and* expressions are in question. A meaning contributes to knowledge through its actual use in relation to the meaning intended. Sense, on the other hand, appears to cover the entire «noematic» realm.³³ Husserl wanted to provide a degree of clarity between the act of meaning (referring/denoting) and meaning itself (sense), as well as the object referred to (referent). Having marked such a distinction, the second part of the *Investigations* deals with the ideality of the unities of meaning and the onto-logical guarantor of their sense.

Meaning, as we have seen, is an ideal unity to be grasped and given in expression against the multiplicity of acts found throughout various meaning-worlds. Expressions refer to their objective ideality by the presentation of meaning itself through intention and, although a meaning-user's saying of the meaning may vary, it in no way alters the objectivity of the fact that one is saying so of what is so. Thus, meaning is always a two-sided affair in that there is a correlation between meaning and its use with regard to what is found in the world.³⁴ Here another question arises: What then is the *intentional relation* with regard to the ideality of meaning just established, and how does Husserl introduce the noetic and noematic from the *Ideas I* to complete the model and deliver the sense of meaning? To answer such a question, I shall now introduce Husserl's phenomenology concerning *the experiences of meaning* so as to explore intentional content of its objective reference.

Husserl offered an account of experienced meaning where objects are «given» to experiencing conscious subjects; that is, his phenomenology described *how* we are aware of objects and *that* we can refer to them in some particular way.³⁵ Objects referred to are immediately presented in consciousness in terms of their intentional unity and can be connected by fulfilling intuitions. In this way, human beings deal with immediate and graspable objects. To deal with these relations, and also to deal with objects of reference and the unity of ideal meaning structures found in cognition, one must turn toward whatever has precedence over the variably mental so as to attain a pure description of what exactly constitutes those acts/relations character in *a priori* fashion. This is where, rather infamously, Husserl examined intentionality as a character of experience existing beyond the personally given life-world and posited a *transcendental* character for any meaning's significance. He did so to further explain his theory of objective meaning with respect to a sense giving logical structure.

The objective act – the character of meaning relations, Husserl claimed, is one that is precedent to the manner of personal presentations and judgments, although the objective character of meaning is only found within immediate intentional content. The relation of thinking to external and objective meaning object yields a relation of intentional reference, and it is through this relationship that thought refers to objective epistemic content and is able to re-present meaning and sense before

itself. Husserl would focus on the pure «essence» of these acts in what is known as the process of «Ideation», or the reduction of consciousness to its purely intuitive structures. In this way the individual subject passes from personal life-world to shared life-world, the experience of objective meaning included. Husserl clarified by saying:

«Differently put in terms of pure phenomenology: Ideation performed in exemplary cases of such experiences and so performed as to leave the empirical-psychological conception and existential affirmation of being out of account, and to deal only with the real phenomenological content of these experiences yields us the pure, phenomenological generic idea of *intentional experience* or *act*, and of its pure species». ³⁶

The attention given to the presentation of phenomena, then, is not one that has a merely psychological aim in mind. Rather, the attention paid to phenomena, in Husserl's method, is radically different from that of Brentano's focus on subjective intention. Husserl's reduction acknowledges that thought is directed toward objects through personal experience and the intuition of that experience, but this «directedness» is used to find out what is intentionally present, and still further, it is used to examine the ideal pure species of the intention instantiated in the fulfillment of the intention within the acts of an intuiting consciousness. Again, it must be reiterated that this ideal sense or objective meaning content is anchored within a «supra» personal meaning-world: it belongs to the life-world. This is what Husserl meant by «intentional» sense, as contrasted to Brentano. Here it may be better to distinguish Husserl's intentionality from Brentano's by titling the former's «intensionality», where the former presupposes the latter's that is, the intentional is intensional. ³⁷ Husserl's theory of meaning therefore acknowledges that intending objects and stripping away the variably mental yields a pure non-mental foundation for any possible meaning-world. It is thus possible to progress by Ideation through to the objective foundations for any and all possible meaning-worlds found within the life-world at large.

The «over reaching unity» of these acts is what Husserl, post-*Investigations* and most prominently in the *Ideas*, chose to investigate with his phenomenological method. As a conclusion, we should now note *why* he made the important transition from initiating research into the noetic and noematic correlate, as formulated in the *Investigations*, to outlining a phenomenological method for exploring the correlate, found in the *Ideas*.

It has often been criticized that Husserl's move from isolating the structures of intentionality to exploring their respective objective ideality (intensionality) was nothing more than a simple step in the «transcendentally ideal» subjectivization of consciousness. In a worst case scenario this move could lead to a manic case of solipsism that is not at all «logical», transcendentally established or otherwise. However, Husserl's project concerning intentionality was not completed until the introduction of the complementary noema found in the *Ideas* (for example, see the *Preliminary Remarks*, Chapter 3) and that both the *In-*

vestigations and *Ideas* must be taken into account if one is to develop an adequate theory of meaning in the Husserlian context. At least in the two texts that I have been using here, it appears that Husserl wished for his reader to focus on the relation of objectivity to the constituting subject and, in part, to examine what role meaning has in this relation specifically through the transitional steps that he outlined in one text, and then in the other. Thus he concluded: because every meaningful object is intended via sense, meaning is an ideal object whose immediately given experiences point the way toward the objectively ideal. So far as analytic theories of language have been concerned – G. Frege, S. Kripke, and D. Lewis included – the *ontological status* (read, the noematic sphere) of the objective sense-giving world has been nothing short of problematic, especially regarding possible world semantics and various theories of modal-logic. Within the scope of Husserl's model by contrast, intentionality (as intensionality) is non-problematic, especially with respect to its logical structure. In many ways, modern symbolic logic allows the anticipation of the intentional analysis that Husserl provided years before, especially before Russell's ventures into symbolic logic during the early twentieth century. Logic cannot stand alone on Husserl's model and it requires some sense behind it. A formal system of logic must have its use explained in terms of *what* is intended and *the manner in which* it is intended. The same applies for any language system under scrutiny.

To conclude: Husserl's introduction of the noesis and noemata in the *Ideas* and his model from the *Logical Investigations* establishes an objective foundation for thinking about meaning as such, and his integration of these two text's theories does not account for a drastic idealistic change in his thinking. It is, rather, a continuation of a project that sought to achieve knowledge of the objective foundations of meaning and sense in general. In Husserl's view, essential intentional relations found in cognitive life point toward the ideal unities of meaning-giving structures. His theory therefore does not fall prey to the accusation of «psychologism».

A final note. Many today still question the stability of Husserl's meaning theory, and even Husserl himself had forewarned the problems of phenomenology with respect to fashioning a theory about meaning and its objectivity among various and shared meaning-worlds, but he also offered his own potential solution:

«At first, to be sure, the possibility of a pure phenomenology of consciousness seems highly questionable, since the realm of phenomenology of consciousness is so truly a realm of a Heraclitean flux... In spite of that, however, the idea of an intentional analysis is legitimate, since, in the flux of intentional synthesis (which creates unity in all consciousness and which, noetically and noematically, constitutes unity of objective sense), *an essentially necessary conformity to type* prevails...»

So, it seems possible, at the very least, to explore such an ideally objective terrain with a rigorous and presuppositionless scientific method that uses the concepts which phenomenology puts forward as inquirers

seek to unveil the essential structures to which all meaning-users must ultimately conform in their communicative practices. Husserl purported phenomenology to be the theory of a pure logical science, or the «science of science» so that one may secure, and then explore, these structures and the issues surrounding these structures, especially the issue of consciousness and its dealing with meaning. Husserl's method most prominently seeks to deal with ideal meaning objects that the mind intends and fulfills in acts, as I have discussed in this essay. In order to demonstrate the significance and success of his project, it may be helpful to note that there indeed exists an affinity between Husserl's first, fifth, and sixth investigations especially and the esteemed linguistic analyst Götlob Frege's *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* (1892). I mention this affinity only because these two thinkers possessed nearly identical theories about meaning, expression, and reference and both also had nearly identical thoughts about the nature, function, and appropriate uses of logic. However, one theory, in its completion, is riddled with paradox and problems, and the other appears relatively unscathed. If there is a rapprochement to be made between the linguistic analysts and phenomenologists, such a rapprochement would begin with these two figures, granted of course that any fruitful dialogue between the two schools of thought could be marred by two completely different sets of acceptable terminology. Such a conflict would inhibit meaningful communication between them. However, taking into account Husserl's theory that there *are* objective foundations for the shared meaning of meaning-worlds, an inhibited communication between phenomenologists and linguistic analysts is not an *impossible* form of communication. Husserl's theory, I think, demonstrates that point.

References

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- ³ See [LI I]: *Logische Untersuchungen. Vol. I* (Logical Investigations. Vol. I) originally published Hall: Niemeyer, 1900–1901; [LI II]: *Logische Untersuchungen. Vol. II* (Logical Investigations. Vol. II) originally published Hall: Niemeyer, 1900–1901; [ID I]: *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und Philosophie (Ideas: general introduction to pure phenomenology)* originally published Hall: Niemeyer, 1913.
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- ⁵ LI I: PR, § 41–51.
- ⁶ Cf.: LI I: PR, § 11, 16.
- ⁷ Ibid., PR, § 4.
- ⁸ Tito, op. cit., p. 217.
- ⁹ ID I: § 27–32.

- ¹⁰ Mohanty, J.N. *Edmund Husserl's Theory of Meaning...* P. 54.
¹¹ LI II: INV I, § 12.
¹² Ibid., § 12, p. 52.
¹³ Haddock, G.E.R., op. cit, p. 33.
¹⁴ LI I: PR, § 62–72.
¹⁵ Ibid., § 1–12.
¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ See also: ID I: § 9.
¹⁹ LI II: INV VI, § 1–12.
²⁰ ID I: 226.
²¹ Ibid., p. 226–229.
²² Ibid.
²³ Ibid., p. 228.
²⁴ Ibid., p. 226–228.
²⁵ Ibid., p. 88.
²⁶ Ibid., p. 323.
²⁷ LI II: INV VI, § 1–12 and ID I: 140 & 164. My allusion to Jaspers is here intentional. See the section on communication in *Philosophy*, transl. by E.B. Ashton, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969–1971.
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²⁹ LI II: INV VI, § 1–12, also p. 322.
³⁰ ID I: p. 263.
³¹ LI II: V, § 11, p. 558–559.
³² ID I: p. 346.
³³ C.f.: Derrida J. *Speech and Phenomena, and other essays on Husserl's theory of Signs*, transl. D. Allison. IN: Northwestern UP, 1973. P. 19.
³⁴ Derrida, op. cit., p. 19–20.
³⁵ Dummett's characterization, found in: Dummett M. *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. P. 110.
³⁶ LI II: V, § 10; ID I: § 10, 43, 67.
³⁷ Ibid., § 10.