

# On the Use and Abuse of Teleology for Life: Intentionality, Naturalism, and Meaning Rationalism in Husserl and Millikan

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## ABSTRACT

Both Millikan's brand of naturalistic analytic philosophy and Husserlian phenomenology have held on to teleological notions, despite their being out of favor in mainstream Western philosophy for most of the twentieth century. Both traditions have recognized the need for teleology in order to adequately account for intentionality, the need to adequately account for intentionality in order to adequately account for meaning, and the need for an adequate theory of meaning in order to precisely and consistently describe the world and life. The stark differences between their accounts of these fundamental concepts stem from radically different conceptions of the world, the natural and life. I argue that Millikan's teleosemantic approach relies on a teleology of determination by means of the lawfulness of nature that leaves no room for the freedom of self-determination, for reason, or for experience—for the reality of lived human life. In contrast to Millikan's account, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology situates teleology as a function of reason and first-personal experience, part of an extended account of intentionality and meaning according to which the full range of our making sense of the world is conceived as a rational activity that is itself a part of that world, and not an unnatural activity to be separated from it. While Husserl's account of these issues is indeed symptomatic of what Millikan calls "meaning rationalism," I argue that it is immune to the sorts of problems she claims will plague any such account, since these problems arise only against the background of a set of presuppositions about intentionality (representationalism, the "mythiness" of all givens) that Husserl does not share. Husserl's position can itself be understood to be within the bounds of a suitably liberal conception of naturalism, and interpreting him in this way it has the added benefit—contra Millikan—of not divorcing teleology from reason, the latter construed as our first-personal striving to make sense of the world as we experience it—of life.

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This essay is concerned with some fundamental issues in epistemology and mind – issues that arise at the intersection of concerns with intentionality, teleology, meaning, and rationality that are of continued relevance in contemporary analytic philosophy. But the origin of my title is historical, borrowed from Nietzsche. As is well known, in *The Uses and Abuses of History for Life*,<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche contrasts three types of human being: the unhistorical, the (properly) historical, and the superhistorical. The unhistorical is the mere animal, living without a sense of its history. The superhistorical is overly influenced by a conception of its history; this category includes, among other figures, the overly scientific man.<sup>2</sup> Whereas the unhistorical man remains without the capacity to recognize meaning in his life, lost in a mode of constant forgetting, or confined by a failure of the capacity to remember in the first place, the superhistorical is so determined by his history that there is no room left for the creative self-determination that Nietzsche calls “becoming”: the self-determination of the living of life characteristic of the properly historical human being, possessing of culture, society, and reason.

Though a conception of the role of the historical plays a part, the main topic of this essay is not history but two contrasting ways of thinking about teleology and meaning and their contemporary relevance. My guiding thought is this: if we swap teleology for history in Nietzsche’s critique, the teleosemantic approach to meaning—represented here by the work of Ruth Millikan—rightly surmounts the difficulties that Nietzsche diagnosed in form of the unhistorical (in our case, the non-teleological): in contrast to earlier twentieth-century analytic accounts, it correctly recognizes the importance of teleology in accounting for meaning and life. But, like Nietzsche’s superhistorical man, it does so in a way that risks an overreach: it relies on a teleology of determination by means of a conception of the lawfulness of nature that leaves no room for the freedom of self-determination, for reason, for experience, *for life*. The account of meaning in the transcendental phenomenological tradition, by contrast—represented here in the work of Edmund Husserl and some of his more recent interpreters—similarly avoids a problematic twentieth-century conception of meaning devoid of teleology. But it does so, in analogy with Nietzsche’s properly historical man, in a way that does not allow teleology to efface self-determination,

<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche 1980. Nietzsche’s German title is *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*. While Preuss’ “advantages and disadvantages” may be more apt, the more traditional translation, “use and abuse” better fits my purposes here.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche 1980, p. 62.

but instead aligns them, and therefore allows for the proper recognition of *life*. It recognizes life by situating teleology as a function of reason and first-personal experience, part of an extended account of intentionality and meaning according to which the full range of our making sense of the world is conceived as a rational activity that is itself a part of that world, and not an unnatural activity to be separated from it.<sup>3</sup>

A related question that will be addressed, largely implicitly, in the course of arguing for the above claim, is why the turn to teleology was or still is needed at all, especially since analytic philosophy for much of the twentieth century seems to have gotten along without it. To the degree that the project of analytic philosophy in the first half of twentieth century was modeled on the methodology and presumptions of the natural sciences, especially, early on, simultaneous and groundbreaking work occurring in physics, there was little room in its orthodoxy for a teleological picture of the world. It was not until much later—largely through the groundbreaking work of Millikan herself—that teleology came to have a respectable place in at least some conceptions of analytic philosophy. Of course, simultaneously with the rise of analytic philosophy was the rise of phenomenology. In this tradition, especially in the work of Husserl, a teleological conception of reason was taken to play a major role *from the start* for reasons related to the primacy it ascribed to intentionality. But even a brief glimpse at the often antagonistic relationship between what came to be known as continental philosophy (including phenomenology) and what came to be known as the analytic tradition in the twentieth century suggests that it is unlikely that later analytic philosophers such as Millikan were made to see the need for teleological thinking by engaging directly with their phenomenological brethren.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the drastic differences between the

<sup>3</sup> There is another (very rough) echo of Nietzsche's essay in the background here, in that the transcendental-phenomenological approach to teleology and meaning I defend, especially the notion of a teleology of reason, will be seen by many as *untimely* (the above-discussed essay is the second part of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*). It does not fit with the largely scientific presuppositions of our times, and appeals to notions—experience, first-person consciousness, the relative self-transparency of mind—that are still felt by some to have been fictions twentieth century philosophers fought hard to overcome—mere “ghosts in the machine.” I will suggest, on the contrary, that this is a very timely untimeliness: for the very issues of subjectivity, intentionality, and experience that Husserl was engaging at the turn of the twentieth century are returning to the forefront of philosophical engagement—at least in the philosophy of mind and epistemology, where the fascination with enactivism, embodied know-how, and a variety of phenomenologically informed frameworks have begun to haunt the scientific convictions of an earlier age of analytic thought.

<sup>4</sup> The ongoing engagement with Brentano in the work of Roderick Chisholm is an exception to this trend.

notions of teleology at play in the two traditions as demonstrated in this paper casts further doubt on any such hypothesis.

My suggestion, instead, is that examination of the work of Millikan and Husserl(ians) shows that *both* traditions have been ultimately unable to discard teleological notions for similar reasons that came to be expressed in quite different ways: both have recognized the need for teleology in order to adequately account for intentionality, the need to adequately account for intentionality in order to adequately account for *meaning*, and the need for an adequate theory of meaning in order to precisely and consistently describe the world and life. The differences between the accounts stem from different conceptions of intentionality and meaning, and different notions of what counts as an adequate account and as an adequate description—*notions ultimately based upon radically different conceptions of the world, the natural and life.*

I begin in Section One by outlining relevant aspects of Millikan's approach to teleology, paying special attention to the problematic of meaning (representation) and reason as outlined in her critique of "meaning rationalism," a position she ascribes to Husserl. Section Two contrasts different conceptions of nature, world, and life, introduces some considerations characteristic of the tradition of transcendental philosophy broadly construed, and situates Millikan's account with regard to those considerations. Sections Three and Four turn more specifically to transcendental *phenomenology*, touching on several interrelated sub-topics in epistemology, the theory of meaning, and intentionality, with reference to Husserl and to some contemporary authors working in the Husserlian tradition. I argue that Husserl's account of these issues, while it is indeed symptomatic of what Millikan calls meaning rationalism, is immune to the sorts of problems she claims will plague any such account, since these problems arise only against the background of a set of dogmas about intentionality that Millikan presupposes but Husserl does not share. Husserl's position can itself be understood as within the bounds of a suitably liberal conception of naturalism, and interpreting him in this way it has the added benefit—*contra* Millikan—of not divorcing teleology from reason, the latter construed as our first-personal striving to make sense of the world as we experience it—of *life*.

## 1. Millikan on Teleology, Intentionality, and the Problem of Mis-representation

I begin with one of the most prominent accounts of teleology in recent analytic philosophy: Ruth Millikan's teleosemantics. What interests me for the purposes of this paper is not so much the fine-grained details of Millikan's notoriously technical and complex account as her starting presuppositions and general orientation to the issues—the approach taken here is one of external, as opposed to internal, critique. Of special import for the concerns of this essay is her critique of “meaning rationalism,” a position she attributes to the vast majority of figures in the history of philosophy before her, including Husserl.<sup>5</sup>

Millikan's account of teleology begins from a concern about intentionality in the form of what is often called Brentano's problem: the problem of explaining how the mind can be about or directed to the world. In the analytic tradition, answering the question has most often been approached by means of the analysis of mental states and their content. For Millikan, “mental content” means semantic content, and intentionality is conceived more-or-less interchangeably with semanticity. Intentional or semantic content is then explained in terms of a teleological theory of “Normal function.”

One reason the notion of Normal function is needed in Millikan's account is to guarantee to a suitable degree a public standard of meaning, and thereby preserve objectivity. If mental (semantic) content is supposed to be the bridge through which minds can be about the world, and different minds can be about the world in a way that is generally reliable in the sense of being truth-preserving across individuals and circumstances, we need an account of what mental content *means* that is similarly shared or “public” instead of “private.”<sup>6</sup> While she does not deny that I have privileged access to my own mental states,<sup>7</sup> the content of those states cannot be something that I merely decide, “internally,” on pain of the possibility that the world in which I live is radically different from (and thus possibly with radically different truth conditions than) the world in which you live. Unless intentionality and semantic content are in some way “standardized throughout the species,”<sup>8</sup> intentionality would not be

<sup>5</sup> See the citation of Husserl in the Epilogue to Millikan 1984, p. 325.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of Millikan's unique version of this position, and a defense of it against Chomskyian objections which are said to only apply to more standard (e.g., statistically) normative models, see Millikan 2003.

<sup>7</sup> See the clarification of this point and positive references to Davidson's “Knowing One's own Mind” and Burge's “Individualism and Self-knowledge” in Millikan 1993, p. 288, n. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Millikan 1984, p. 3.

scientifically respectable, in that it would not, as natural science strives to do, present a singular, unified picture of the world independent of any subjective viewpoints on it. While there can be differences in perspective, idiolect, etc., the underlying *explanans* of mental content (and thus intentionality) must be universal.

But, for Millikan, this universality of content cannot be adequately explained by appeal to majority agreement, statistical norms, or any “obscure kind of regularity within some nebulous group.”<sup>9</sup> For it must deal with the problem of *mis*-representation: a theory of mental content must also explain how it is that our thoughts are genuinely about the external world, and not merely dreamed up internal fictions we may have arbitrarily agreed upon. In order for an account of mental content to do this adequately, on Millikan’s view, it must rule out two different sorts of misfires of intentionality: intentional representations that are genuinely about the world but turn out to be false, and purported mental contents that, despite how they appear to the subject who entertains them, fail to genuinely be about the world at all and thus fail to be genuine representations:

The failure to hold of a single step true-representation-to-world relation could account for only one of these kinds of failure. To understand false as well as true representation, apparently we must understand what *bare* representation is, and then what being true or false is, over and above bare representation. The problem for a naturalist is to do this without introducing *ad hoc* abstract objects, say, unanalyzed meanings, senses, propositions, or possible states of affairs as somehow ingredient in nature.<sup>10</sup>

Millikan’s basic strategy is to explain bare representation in teleological or normative terms—terms of success or failure that are *not those of truth and falsity as such* but “over and above” or theoretically prior to them in some sense. To account for such success conditions in a way that still tracks nature and is not determined solely by agreement, Millikan rejects the language of merely statistical norms in favor of the technical term “Normal,” which is intended to capture a specific sense related to something’s *purpose* conceived naturalistically—typically that of a bodily organ or living organism.<sup>11</sup> For this notion,

<sup>9</sup> Millikan 2003, p. 218.

<sup>10</sup> Millikan 1990, pp. 151-52.

<sup>11</sup> Millikan 1984, 2-4.

it would not do, for example, simply to average over conditions-in-the-universe-any-place-any-time. Nor is it given how to carve out relevant description categories on occasions. [...] Depending on how one sets these parameters, radically different conditions are ‘statistically normal.’ But the notion of semantic content clearly is not relative, in this manner, to arbitrary parameters. The content-fixing circumstances must be *nonarbitrarily* determined.<sup>12</sup>

Teleology is Millikan’s central notion for such a “nonarbitrary” determination of semantic (mental) content, in terms of the proper (Normal) function *of* that content: “The key notion that is needed in order to discuss intentionality (‘of-ness,’ ‘about-ness’) will be, in a way, only a by-product of the notion of ‘proper function.’”<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, then, teleology is invoked to explain how meaning (in line with a simultaneously naturalistic and representational theory as discussed below) can be public and properly about the world, even in cases where truth-as-correspondence fails, and even in cases where misfires outnumber cases of success (e.g., most beaver tail slapping does *not* refer to genuine proximate danger, but we can still say this is the *purpose* of such activity and that it therefore functions as a form of representation; most sperm do not succeed in uniting with an ovum, but this is still what they are *for*).

Millikan’s account has the great advantage of recognizing the importance of the normative side of representation and intentionality. She rightly recognizes that, in order to adequately explain intentionality, we will need to explain not only conditions of truth (in line with a correspondence account or otherwise) but also, and separately, the conditions that characterize the intentional relation in the context of which questions of truth can first arise. Such conditions will not be on the order of causes, but of *purposes*. It is difficult to see how a purely causal account can make room for this. Take the case of a mechanism that fails more often than it succeeds, e.g., the rather drastic case of the sperm. How is it possible for us to even invoke the notion of a purpose (and thus success conditions), when the vast majority of sperm fail to achieve it? Where does the relevant notion of purpose then *come from*? Even an exhaustive account of that which is mechanically (or physically) possible, in accord with casual laws, does not seem capable of generating any such notion of purpose, for the latter seems different in kind, like the answer to a different sort of question. Millikan

<sup>12</sup> Millikan 1989, 281.

<sup>13</sup> Millikan 1984, 5.

recognizes that the aboutness of mental representations presupposes not only a causal *how* but also a teleological *why*. It is only with questions of the latter sort in view that normative criteria—some kind of conditions of success or failure<sup>14</sup>—make any sense at all.

While it speaks against a certain orthodoxy in earlier *analytic* philosophy, in the *broader* history of philosophy, this is far from a new insight. In a lecture on teleology from his 1919/1920 Introduction to Philosophy course, Husserl claims that these same sorts of *why*-questions are used already by Plato to justify his own “passage to a teleological explanation of the world” [*Übergang in die teleologische Welterklärung*]:

Why do just these individual things arise and why do they yield just this individually determined unity-nexus [*Einheitszusammenhang*] of given nature? Ought this *why*-question not be posed as a rational question? Is there not given, besides the question about natural causes, i.e., about explanatory [*erklärenden*] causal laws, an additional question, a *plus ultra*? Is there not an asking about mental [*geistigen*] grounds ... aimed in an essentially different direction? Are they not the only ones—to reiterate the point—that allow for an insightful, and that means precisely a truly enlightening [*aufklärende*] answer?<sup>15</sup>

Oversimplifying greatly, we can say that much of empirically or naturalistically inclined analytic philosophy up through the mid twentieth century responded to this *why*-question by ignoring it or downplaying the normative. On the other hand, less naturalistically inclined analytic philosophers tended to assimilate the normative to the (statistically) normal. Millikan’s great insight has been to envision a different way of accounting for such normativity. She refuses to simply abolish such concerns in favor of a purely mechanistic, casual account because such normativity is self-evidently present. On this general point Millikan and Husserl are in agreement: the *why*-question implies that there must be a *plus ultra*. But they disagree on the character of the latter: whereas—as I will show in sections three and four below—Husserl’s position begins from a descriptive account of first-personal lived experience as teleological and rational through and through, Millikan’s holds to the contours

<sup>14</sup> Throughout this essay, I follow Steve Crowell in defining norms and normativity in this minimal way. In this sense, norms need not be either linguistically expressed or formulated explicitly as rules (see Crowell 2013, p.2).

<sup>15</sup> Husserl 2012, p. 201, my translation.



of some standard concerns of the analytic tradition, interpreting the mental in a naturalistic manner that divorces it from the rational and appealing to teleology in a way that, while it may be *explanatory*, is far from *enlightening* with regard to human life.

At least three sets of presuppositions contribute to this use (abuse) of teleology in her work.

First, in the background of Millikan's account of teleology is a set of presuppositions shared with much of the tradition of twentieth-century analytic philosophy: that an account of intentionality is ultimately an account of linguistic or propositional *representational* content, and that the main purpose of attempting to solve Brentano's problem about intentionality is deal with certain problems concerning linguistic representation.<sup>16</sup> Take Millikan's own characterization of her position as "biosemantics,"<sup>17</sup> or her discussion of "language devices" as primarily oriented toward offering an account of what linguistic content *does*" based upon the Normal conditions model.<sup>18</sup> This view may be a natural inheritance from the twentieth-century's linguistic turn, but that alone should not be taken to legitimize its application to any and all discussions of mental content.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> My criticism of representationalism in this essay should be taken to apply only to theories that rely upon the notion of a representation as a sort of mediating mental entity. If we can interpret representationalism in a sense that avoids appeal to such mediation, it is possible to interpret Husserl's position as "representationalist" in a way that does not conflict with the "presentationalist" interpretation I offer in section III. See Crowell 2013, pp. 105ff, and Drummond 2012 for differing positions on this point.

<sup>17</sup> Millikan 1989.

<sup>18</sup> The passage continues: "I will argue that looking for stabilizing proper functions of various language devices—roughly, for functions that explain the survival or proliferation of these devices together with their characteristic cooperative hearer responses—can lend a sharp focus to questions about what language devices *do*. But looking to the conditions under which these devices work when they work in accordance with historically Normal explanations is what reveals the representing or intentional side of language" (Millikan 1984, p. 5).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Tim Crane's recent critique of "propositionalism": "Why do some people think that all content is propositional? ...A dominant tradition in analytic philosophy since Frege has treated meaning as explained in terms of the idea of truth-conditions. Propositions are thought of either as 'having' truth conditions, or as themselves *being* truth-conditions. The obvious links between the concept of meaning and the concept of intentionality might then lead you to think that intentionality or intentional content must be understood in propositional terms: that is, in terms of truth-conditions too. ...[W]hatever its merits as an account of meaning, the truth-conditional model is not an adequate general account of intentionality" (2015, p. 112). While Millikan's "two-level" account of intentional representation admittedly adds a layer of consideration of Normal functions to the consideration of truth-conditions, her consideration of those functions is itself clearly adduced in support of an account that ultimately treats representations in truth-conditional terms.

Second, Millikan's is also a biological account, unabashedly naturalistic in its orientation. This, too, is part and parcel of Millikan's turn to teleology: for her, "an appeal to teleology, to function, is what is needed to fly a naturalist theory of content."<sup>20</sup> Why does an appeal to semantic content need to be ultimately natural or biological? Because—presumably—only in this way can it be scientifically respectable. While Millikan is not an eliminativist about such matters (she does not take consciousness to be a fiction or epiphenomenal or profess to seek a naturalistic account that "analyzes away" intentionality), she nonetheless seeks the ultimate explanation of intentionality *exclusively* in biological terms. The naturalistic purity of Millikan's account is not a result of investigation but a requirement.<sup>21</sup>

Third, her work also falls in line with an orthodoxy of analytic philosophy of more recent vintage: as Jesse Prinz has shown, her work reflects an orientation popular in the 1970s and 1980s which he dubs "outerism": it defends a position at the intersections not only of representationalism and naturalism, but also semantic externalism, anti-Fregeanism, and the ongoing concern to banish from respectable philosophical inquiry all traces of the Myth of the Given. These concerns come together in her work in the form of a critique of "Meaning Rationalism."<sup>22</sup> Since it is in this context that Millikan's work explicitly invokes Husserl and through this notion that the differences in their accounts of teleology are clearest, I will develop and remain in close conversation with this critique throughout the rest of the essay.

Millikan defines meaning rationalism as "not a doctrine but a syndrome,"<sup>23</sup> "the traditional but unargued assumption that there *must* be a level on which psychological differences and samenesses automatically track semantic/cognitive differences and samenesses."<sup>24</sup> Essentially, her target is the notion that the meaning of thoughts is transparent to their thinkers, and that any thought that seems to have sense does indeed have sense—a question that can be answered, for subject or thinker, entirely a priori, without consultation with the facts of the world. For an account that interprets intentionality outside the

<sup>20</sup> Millikan 1989, p. 283.

<sup>21</sup> It is remarkable how little direct defense of this starting point one finds in the literature. It is simply taken as obvious. As Thomas Nagel has argued, the default mode of explanation in much of analytic philosophy in the latter half of the twentieth century is Darwinian or evolutionary, "an example of the tendency to take a theory that has been successful in one domain and apply it to anything else you can't understand... an example of the pervasive and reductive naturalism of our culture. (Nagel 1986, 78).

<sup>22</sup> Prinz 2013, p. 198.

<sup>23</sup> Millikan 1984, p. 326.

<sup>24</sup> Millikan 1993, p. 283.

purview of subjectivity and consciousness, in terms of biological functions, no notion could be further from the truth.

I will suggest in sections three and four of this essay that Millikan's critique of meaning rationalism relies on (rather than supports) the presuppositions identified above. If the Husserlian transcendental phenomenological position I advocate does not share these presuppositions, meaning rationalism may still be ascribed to it, but the notion loses its critical bite. Indeed, what counts as an adequate answer to the normative or *why*-question—introduced above as the point at which Millikan and Husserl part ways—will be shown to hinge on the question of the effectiveness of the critique of meaning rationalism: if we accept the critique, the *why*-question can only be answered in a way *external* to the thoughts and experiences of the human person, and indeed, as we shall see, external to human rationality. If we reject it, the *why*-question can be answered instead by an appeal to human life, including our rationality. We can begin to home in on the difference by turning more directly to the question of naturalism.

## 2. Two Conceptions of Naturalism, and Some Transcendental Considerations

In the contemporary philosophical landscape, the term “naturalism” has been used to refer to a wide variety of positions. In this section I distinguish two different ways of construing naturalism, following John McDowell, and briefly outline some considerations for Millikan's approach in light of this distinction from the perspective of transcendental philosophy broadly construed.<sup>25</sup>

In “Naturalism and the Philosophy of Mind,” McDowell outlines a distinction between “restrictive” and “liberal” conceptions of naturalism. Restrictive naturalism conceives of nature as the realm of law, and, in turn, takes this realm of law as the only ultimate framework of intelligibility. It may explicitly “reduce” all phenomena to such lawfulness, or, while not reducing them, nonetheless account for them in such a way that lawfulness is responsible for their ultimate intelligibility.

But McDowell insists that nature conceived exclusively as the realm of law is a realm inhospitable to subjects with thought and knowledge. In doing so, he seeks to recognize the notion—often attributed to Sellars but clearly already an organizing principle of Kant's systematic transcendental philosophy—that

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed account of the transcendental tradition in philosophy along the lines gestured at here, see Carr 1999.

human life operates in accordance with a framework of intelligibility that is not lawful in the sense of “laws of nature,” but rather allows for freedom. Freedom and reason go together; the spontaneity of thought allows for the exercise of our rational capacities. Furthermore, this notion of freedom depends upon a framework that is ultimately normative or teleological—a framework that is often called, with reference to Sellars, the “space of reasons.”<sup>26</sup> Such an orientation to these issues is characteristic of transcendental philosophy, a tradition that, taken broadly, can be ascribed not only to Kant and Husserl but also to analytic figures such as Sellars and McDowell.

The second sort of naturalism, which McDowell calls “liberal naturalism,” is more in line with the transcendental tradition in that makes room for this normative or teleological dimension by construing nature more broadly, refusing to equate it exclusively with the realm of law by including as well a sense of *life*. On this view, the distinction between law and freedom (the space of causes and the space of reasons) does not map on to a distinction between the natural and the non-natural, since the space of reasons can itself be understood as something natural, insofar as rationality is a part of human life:

The concept of a life is the concept of the career of a living thing, and hence obviously the concept of something natural. But there are aspects of our lives whose description requires concepts that function in the space of reasons. We are rational animals. Our lives are patterned in ways that are recognizable only in an inquiry framed within the space of reasons. On these lines, we can see thinking and knowing as belonging to our mode of living, even though we conceive them as phenomena that can come into view only within a *sui generis* space of reasons.<sup>27</sup>

In liberal naturalism, then, the independence of our rational capacities as knowers and thinkers in a world characterized by normativity (or teleology<sup>28</sup>) and freedom is maintained, without—importantly for McDowell—the ascription

<sup>26</sup> McDowell 2004, p. 94.

<sup>27</sup> McDowell 2004, pp. 94–95.

<sup>28</sup> I use these terms interchangeably here for reasons that will become clear after the discussion of the intention–fulfillment/frustration structure as accounting for conditions of success and failure in section IV below.

of these capacities or this space to anything *super*-natural.<sup>29</sup>

Now, at first blush, it might seem as if Millikan's approach fits nicely into the liberal naturalist camp: after all, her use of the explanatory framework of nature is not premised on the usual paradigm of natural lawfulness—the mechanistic causality of, e.g., physics and chemistry—but instead upon biology, a science of *life*.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, since her version of naturalism is rooted instead in the paradigm of “proper function,” her account preserves the notions of teleology or normativity, which a purely causal or physicalist portrait of nature misses. Indeed, as a student and self-avowed intellectual “daughter” of Sellars,<sup>31</sup> Millikan has no truck with placing central importance on the notion of normativity. As noted above, this is the great advantage of her *teleo*-semantic account over more traditional accounts in the analytic tradition.

Despite these caveats, Millikan's account must be categorized in terms of a restrictive naturalism for several reasons:

First, her appeal to the teleological concept of “proper function” is still ultimately in the service of an account of evolutionary *laws*—those of adaptation, survival, etc. While not appealing to the laws of physics or brute causality, when Millikan claims that “all of the basic norms applying to cognition are biological norms,”<sup>32</sup> or that “rationality is... a biological norm effected in an integrated head-world system under biologically ideal conditions,”<sup>33</sup> and speaks of biological norms in terms of “mechanisms”<sup>34</sup> and rationality in terms of heads “in good mechanical order,” it is clear that the appeal to biology is still an appeal to a conception of natural-scientific (if not purely causal) lawfulness. In Millikan's account, placing the emphasis on how rationality is “effected” is a way of transferring explanatory priority to evolutionary theory, which, despite its name, functions not only as a theory but as an instantiation of *the lawfulness of nature*.

Second, her radically externalist account of meaning does not allow for the free exercise of thought characteristic of rational human experience. As soon as

<sup>29</sup> While I will argue below that Husserl's position can be seen as a form of liberal naturalism, his position vis-à-vis the question of the supernatural is more complicated. For some relevant passages see Husserl 1986, p. 119; 2012, p. 191; 2014, Part III.

<sup>30</sup> See Millikan 1993, p. 362 for a contrast between Millikan's biological approach and the more typical “lawful and statistical” approach of the physical sciences.

<sup>31</sup> Millikan 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Millikan 1993, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Millikan 1993, p. 280.

<sup>34</sup> Millikan 1993, p. 286

we countenance this rather obvious aspect of our experience, we see that the real issue is not—as Millikan seems to frame it in her critique of “meaning rationalism”—between a brute, Cartesian internalism and a properly enlightened, naturalistic externalism, but—to frame things in transcendental terms—between an account that does justice to the spontaneity of the knower and one that does not.<sup>35</sup> When we recognize the tight connection between freedom and reason from the standpoint of transcendental philosophy, we can say that Millikan’s concern with answering the *why*-question by providing a biological account of how reason is effected loses sight of the fact that what is effected is *rational*. Recognizing the force of Sellars’ (Kant’s) distinction between the space of causes and the space of reasons, Millikan notes explicitly that her representational account of intentionality (in the service of which the notion of teleology is invoked) separates intentionality from reason:

The senses of the inner sentences are not determined by the inference rules or dispositions that connect them to other inner sentences, or by their causes or the stimulations that induce them, but by the ‘rules’ (mapping functions) in accordance with which they map when true. Intentionality is thus divorced from rationality, as sense is divorced from intension. So I will describe the intentionality of thoughts in naturalist terms.<sup>36</sup>

Millikan’s pairing of an intentional (and thus, for her, representational) account with naturalistic and externalist presuppositions in the effort to guarantee the public character of meaning effectively denies any explanatory role in meaning formation to consciousness or inner thought. This is part of the point of her critique of “meaning rationalism”—the meaning of thoughts is not a phenomenon transparent to the thinker. But if meaning is not transparent to the thinker, then nor are the *uses* of meaning for human life a matter of (even imperfect) exercise of everyday rational choices: they are governed by an account of nature as a domain *exterior* to our activity as thinkers and knowers,

<sup>35</sup> As McDowell notes in a criticism of Millikan, “‘externalism’ is grotesque if it implies that exercising semantic rationality is an activity of a ‘head-world system’—as if the environment of what we ordinarily conceive as thinkers is partly responsible for doing the thinking that gets done. The environment is partly responsible for there being a possibility of doing that thinking. But the thinking is done by something that *lives* in the environment, which includes thinking about it. This piece of mere sanity is obscured by Millikan’s concern with the mechanics of thinking (with how rationality is ‘effected’)” (McDowell 2004, pp. 103-104, my emphasis).

<sup>36</sup> Millikan 1984, p. 12.

as Millikan explicitly notes when she advocates “abandoning the traditional epistemic view of consciousness... giving up the rationalist view of meaning and intentionality.”<sup>37</sup> Rationality, construed along these lines, is either not natural, or if it is natural, then the notion of the natural in play is restrictive, divorced from human life insofar as it is divorced from the everyday sense in which reasons figure in the decision-making procedures of the subject *from the standpoint of that subject*.

A transcendental construal, by contrast, will *align* reason with the freedom of the subject: as Steve Crowell has argued in recent work,<sup>38</sup> a transcendental account of normativity or teleology must be able to account for my being capable of acting not only in *accord* with norms, but in *light* of them. Norms must be capable of functioning as *reasons*, and the reasons underlying my actions must be, at least in principle, available to me without at the same time being forced on me in the sense of an incontrovertible law (otherwise they would not be free).

The point about freedom and rationality is intertwined with a third reason for assigning Millikan’s position to the restrictive naturalist camp: its failure to acknowledge not only freedom but the subjectivity to which that freedom belongs. It is of course the case that that subjectivity will involve engagement with the world—that is what the notion of intentionality is all about. But we cannot lose sight of the fact that it is the *subject’s* engagement—that it is first-personal.<sup>39</sup>

One way this issue can be seen in Millikan’s answer to the *why*-question is in her use of the notion of history: “to have a teleofunction is to have emerged from a certain sort of history, one involving some form of selection. Because of this history, the teleofunctional item counts as being ‘designed to,’ or, even less formally, ‘supposed to’ have a certain structure, as being ‘supposed to’ perform a certain function.”<sup>40</sup> This appeal to history (more properly: etiology) might be taken as another way in which Millikan’s account diverges from the problematic presuppositions of a restrictive naturalism, in the above-noted sense that it

<sup>37</sup> Millikan 1984, p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> Crowell 2013.

<sup>39</sup> I use the term “first-personal” very loosely in this essay to refer to the standpoint of subjectivity, typically construed individually. Though I do not pursue this line of thought here, it should be noted that the term can also be used to refer to the first person plural. The phenomenological analysis of “we-intentionality” is an area of much contemporary interest. For a recent treatment with regard to some themes relevant for this essay, see Carr 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Millikan 1990, p. 152.

diverges from a more typical casual-mechanical accounts that would seem to have no room for history. However, as Mark Okrent has noted, since the power of Millikan's explanatory model is derived from the law-governed survival and evolutionary history (etiology) of a given trait within a species, the analysis of the function of that trait for a given individual will not take the form of an explanation of informational content transparently available to the individual, but only of the representations the individual publicly manifests.<sup>41</sup> This means the model tells us nothing about why an *individual* has the representations it does except in the very general sense that those representations can be said to provide some survival benefit. But since this is ultimately a survival benefit *for the species*, it tells us nothing at all about the benefit (and thus ultimately, on Millikan's account, the meaning content) *for or from the perspective of* a given individual. In this sense—to evoke again Nietzsche's threefold distinction, this time in its proper context as a claim about the use of history—while certainly not unhistorical, her account is problematically super-historical: history enters the picture as a fully external determiner, and not as a component internal to the spontaneity of human becoming. The notion of history as etiology is ultimately only a vehicle for explanation in terms of evolutionary laws—a far cry from the use of history (or teleology) *for life*.

### 3. Husserl on (Re-)Presentation, Externalism, and Direct Apprehension

Thus far I have outlined some of the basics of Millikan's account of teleology, focusing on her representationalism, naturalism, and critique of meaning rationalism, and further situated that view vis-à-vis a distinction between two conceptions of naturalism. In contrast to Millikan's restrictive naturalism, I have emphasized some important elements of the liberal naturalist conception widely accepted among philosophers sympathetic to the transcendental tradition that began with Kant. In this section I begin to home in on some specifically *phenomenological* elements of a transcendental account of intentionality, teleology, meaning and reason, focusing on Husserl and some contemporary interpretations of his work. Whereas the role of teleology in Husserl's work has most often been addressed with regard to his ethical and social thought,<sup>42</sup> in line with the themes introduced above I will focus on issues at the intersection of

<sup>41</sup> Okrent 2007, ch. 4.

<sup>42</sup> See Husserl 1988, 2004. For recent treatments of teleology in the secondary literature along the lines of ethics and socio-historical theory, see Miettinen 2014, Aldea 2017.



epistemology, mind, and the theory of meaning.<sup>43</sup> Going into the details of some of the most important contrasts between Husserl and Millikan on these issues in this and the following section will allow me to show how Husserl's account, while it is in many ways symptomatic of Millikan's portrayal of meaning rationalism, is immune to the sorts of problems she claims plague any such account.

I noted above that Millikan's answer to the normative or teleological *why*-question, as exemplified by her critique of meaning rationalism, attempts to answer that question in a way external to the thoughts, experiences, and inner life of the individual. When Millikan writes that the "human mainframe" responds to nerve stimulations "by developing concepts, by acquiring beliefs and desires in accordance with these concepts, by engaging in practical inference leading ultimately to action,"<sup>44</sup> it seems only natural to ask what such resulting action is *for*. But on Millikan's account, the ultimate purpose, the ultimate answer to the *why*-question, will always be some variation on the same: species survival. From the transcendental phenomenological perspective, however, this cannot be taken as the ultimate purpose since it is not, in any robust sense, *my* purpose. While an evolutionary account might be able to explain, e.g., my desire for water after a long sojourn in the desert, it is more difficult to see how this same sort of explanation can account for, e.g., my belief that British ales are best served at cellar temperatures and not colder, or my desire to cultivate the virtue of ready-wit.<sup>45</sup> For the relevant purposes in such examples have to do not simply with me as an exemplar of a biological species whose functions are determined species-historically or etiologically, but with me *as me*—first personally, and in a way that takes *my own* history, habits, and narrative trajectory as at issue,<sup>46</sup> and treats my reasons as reasons *for me*. From the transcendental phenomenological standpoint, the idea that we should begin to answer the *why*-question from the subjective standpoint is not a presupposition; it is rather a *descriptive* necessity borne of the situation in which we find ourselves—one in which the world is always-already the world *for me*.

<sup>43</sup> Of course, one of the implications of saying that these criteria are not separated from considerations of life is that for Husserl ethical and epistemological considerations are also not neatly separable. On this point see Peucker 2008, Rinofner-Kriedl 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Millikan 1989, p. 292

<sup>45</sup> An oft-overlooked virtue (*Nicomachean Ethics* [Aristotle 2009], 1108a). Note that, in line with my argument here, the cultivation of virtues is for Aristotle not natural *per se*, but a part of our *second* nature and in line with our capacity as rational animals—a point much emphasized by McDowell in related contexts (see, e.g., McDowell 1996, pp. 78-86.)

<sup>46</sup> Carr 2014.

Thus, concerning, e.g., the meaning of expressions of beliefs and desires, the phenomenologist will ask, Even if it is possible to explain my use of words in a way that makes no reference to my thoughts or the information that I wish to convey, why would I want to do so? From the standpoint of transcendental phenomenology, this denies the import of the first-person perspective, which after all is *our* perspective. Millikan's approach simply ignores or dismisses as a "folk" illusion a large part of the picture of life that the transcendental phenomenologist thinks we should be seeking to account for: the way that meaning works, not on the level of the species as a whole, but *for me*.

The decisive point to see, one that is too often obscured by a pervasive misconception of the phenomenological approach one finds in the literature, is that this turn to subjectivity is neither motivated by nor results in a mere "introspectionism."<sup>47</sup> Despite the formulations above, the subjectivity under consideration in phenomenological analysis is not *simply my* subjectivity, but subjectivity as such—what Husserl calls *transcendental subjectivity*. While my own personal case will involve its own intricacies and peculiar meanings, it is because the fundamental structures of subjectivity—which include, centrally, intentionality—are common to all consciousnesses that an analysis of the meaning structures in my own case can help me to arrive at objectively valid descriptions of human life by way of an understanding of the conditions of the possibility of that life. Objectivity, the "public" nature of meaning, and—as we shall see below—even reason, are approached *by means of the conditions or structures of our subjectivity*—both at the individual and at the social or intersubjective level. Like Millikan, Husserl recognizes the need for a distinction between the level of intentional meaning as such, and the level of the question of truth and falsity. My beliefs about things like beer temperature and which virtuous habits I should cultivate are subject to rational evaluation by myself and others, in light of their correspondence with the way the world is, including, in the case of *some* but not all domains of belief and thought, evaluation by in line with the criteria of natural science.<sup>48</sup>

In this sense, transcendental phenomenologists such as Husserl are in complete agreement with Millikan's contention that "intentionality is not

<sup>47</sup> See Gallagher and Zahavi 2012, pp. 15-23 for a detailed examination and critique of contemporary usage of the term "introspection" with regard to phenomenology.

<sup>48</sup> The beliefs that are subject to natural scientific evaluation in this way are those belonging to the ontological region of physical nature (Husserl 2014, p. 21).

harbored within consciousness.”<sup>49</sup> While it begins from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, Husserl’s account does not end there. This would be an inadequate description of experience. There is a world out there, and it is only with reference to that world that we move from the presentation of meaning in experience to the question of truth and falsity. But that world includes not only phenomena bound by the lawfulness of natural science, but also the much broader realm of structures of our lived experience that Husserl calls, in his later work, the lifeworld.

At the same time, the Husserlian position cannot accept the additional characterization Millikan adds to the above claim: “intentionality is not harbored within consciousness, *nor can consciousness, in the guise of a priori reflection, provide an affidavit for the genuine intentionality of seeming thoughts.*”<sup>50</sup> On the Husserlian view, consciousness *necessarily* provides an affidavit for the intentionality of thoughts, insofar as consciousness is fundamentally intentional:

We must realize that a transcendent object is not present to consciousness merely because a content rather similar to it simply somehow *is* in consciousness—a supposition which, fully thought out, reduces to utter nonsense—but that all relation to an object is part and parcel of the phenomenological essence of consciousness, and can in principle be found in nothing else, even when such a relation points to some ‘transcendent’ matter. This pointing is ‘direct’ in the case of a straightforward [perceptual] presentation.<sup>51</sup>

Even thoughts or beliefs that turn out to be false are still *meaningful* for Husserl, and in this sense they are no mere seemings: they are genuine attempts at direct apprehension of the world, cases of “genuine intentionality” even when they misfire. On Husserl’s account it makes no more sense to claim that intentionality floats entirely free from consciousness, such that the latter has no purchase on the genuineness of the former (that “thoughts do not obey laws that rest on meanings of any kind”<sup>52</sup>) than it does to claim it is not harbored in the world. From the perspective of a transcendental phenomenological approach that recognizes the priority of the subjective, intentionality cannot be merely

<sup>49</sup> Millikan 1984, p. 12

<sup>50</sup> Millikan 1984, p. 12, my emphasis.

<sup>51</sup> Husserl 2001, Investigation V, Appendix to §11 and §20.

<sup>52</sup> Millikan 1993, p. 323.

(though it may be said to be in part or in a certain, limited sense) a bi-product of the natural world in the law-bound sense of restrictive naturalism.

Instead, Husserl characterizes intentionality as a *correlational* structure, a parallel correspondence between the subjective intentional act and its intentional object, in which both sides of the structure must be investigated. More technically stated, as of his explicit turn to transcendental phenomenology, Husserl describes this correlational structure in terms of the relation between *noeses* (roughly, subjective intentional acts) and *noemata*.<sup>53</sup> When Husserl claims that meaning is contained in the noesis-noema correlation, the noema is not to be taken as a new, really existing object, the “object of meaning,” which is separate from and mediates the really existing object in the world.<sup>54</sup> The term “noema” instead refers to the presence of the object (the *very same* object that is really existing) just insofar as it is necessarily first and foremost the object of intentional experience, whatever the specific character of that experience might be. The difference is thus a difference of viewpoint, not of an ontologically distinct object—in this sense, contra some analytic interpretations,<sup>55</sup> Husserl does not violate Millikan’s stricture against “introducing *ad hoc* abstract objects... as somehow ingredient in nature.”<sup>56</sup>

While at first it may seem puzzling, Husserl’s account of the intentional object as a meaning object not ontologically distinct from the real object can be made sense of if we are willing to abandon some of the presuppositions of representationalism. This will mark our first major step in rejecting the negative implications of Millikan’s critique of meaning rationalism. In contrast to Millikan, for whom the theory of meaning and the theory of mind are conceived in terms of *representational content*, Husserl’s account describes a more direct engagement with the “things” of experiential life by casting intentionality as not representational, but *presentational*. For Husserl intentionality is a dyadic—triadic—relation: there is no new object, entity, or third term, no separate

<sup>53</sup> Husserl 2014, p. 174.

<sup>54</sup> Husserl explicitly warns against such “doubling” of the object in the very heart of his exposition of the concept of noema in Husserl 2014, pp. 178-79.

<sup>55</sup> For an extended criticism along these lines and a full defense of the interpretation of the ontological status of the noema appealed to here, see Drummond 1990.

<sup>56</sup> Millikan 1990, pp. 151-52 (full passage cited above). Interpreted broadly, the other items on Millikan’s naturalist no-no list (“unanalyzed meanings, senses, propositions, or possible states of affairs”) are very much embraced by Husserl.

“representation” between the intentional act and the world.<sup>57</sup> Rather, to borrow John Drummond’s formulation, “presentation refers to the object’s presenting itself to the subject in a particular manner—a manner that depends upon the interests, attitudes, concerns, cares, and commitments of the subject, as well as subjective performances and synthetic achievements.”<sup>58</sup> In characterizing intentionality in terms of the correlational structure of consciousness and subjectivity, Husserl is thus able to build into the terms of phenomenological analysis the sense in which for any given intentional object, while it is not something *separate than* the purported corresponding real object of, e.g., the natural world,<sup>59</sup> is also not *just* that, but rather also, and indeed more primarily, the object of an intentional, meaningful experience—a synthetic or constitutional achievement of human *life* in direct correction with the world.<sup>60</sup>

Is Husserl then, despite the pronouncements of some of his most vocal critics,<sup>61</sup> really an externalist *avant la lettre* rather than an internalist? And does this save him from being mired in the outdated presuppositions of meaning rationalism? With regard to the first question, the interpretation of Husserl’s account of intentionality as presentationalist rather than representationalist and the correlational account of meaning clearly speak against the ascription of a simple internalist position. But they also speak against externalism. Indeed, as several of Husserl’s commentators have pointed out, if the contents of thoughts are not already taken to be separated from the world outside by a third, representational term, then the debate between internalism and externalism seems lose its grip: thoughts are not problematically conceived as being “in the head,” but nor, as noted above, can they be fully external to the consciousness in congress with which they have their meaning.<sup>62</sup> (Here, indeed, Husserl

<sup>57</sup> This interpretation is somewhat contentious. I am following what has come to be known as the ‘East coast’ interpretation of the noema. See Zahavi 2004 for a useful overview of the debate, and Drummond 1990 for a detailed statement of this interpretation.

<sup>58</sup> Drummond 2012, p. 124.

<sup>59</sup> The object of the natural world is only one sort of example, since, as noted below, intentional analysis extends to all ontological regions, and not just the region of physical nature.

<sup>60</sup> Anxious critics might wish to raise Millikan’s problem of *mis*-representation already at this point. For reasons that will become clear, however, this issue cannot be properly addressed until further below, after some other central aspects of Husserl’s account have been sketched. In short, for Husserl, there are no misrepresentations (in the representationalist’s sense), but there are misfires of intentionality—intentions that are frustrated or that remain unfulfilled.

<sup>61</sup> Including philosophers in the analytic tradition sympathetic to later incarnations of phenomenology—especially Dreyfus and his followers. See Thompson 2007, Appendix A; Zahavi 2004.

<sup>62</sup> See, e.g., Zahavi 2004; Crowell 2013, Ch. 5.

anticipates the position of recent work that rejects the representationalist and cognitivist presuppositions of earlier analytic philosophy of mind in favor of an account of the mind as embedded, embodied, extended, and enacted.<sup>63</sup>)

As to the second question, while Husserl's correlational, presentational account is not thereby absolved of the accusation of meaning rationalism, meaning rationalism begins to look like much less of a mire. For Millikan's critique of that position—in line with the analytic orthodoxy of its day—not only tends to construe it as (wrongly) internalist as opposed to (rightly) externalist; it also *relies on* the representationalist framework:

The central argument [against kontent rationalism] is that the primitives for constructing thought kontent, the simples of the theory of kontent for thought, cannot have kontents that are epistemically given in the way required by the kontent rationalist. More precisely, these kontents cannot be epistemically given *unless we resort to direct-apprehension theories for thought kontent*, and that, I take it, should settle the matter.<sup>64</sup>

But why should that settle the matter? The general anti-Fregean flavor of Millikan's critique is easily grasped, but what precisely is the argument against a “direct apprehension” account and in favor of representationalism? The matter is taken to be settled because, in Millikan's eyes, a direct apprehension account<sup>65</sup> is a form of the myth of the given (the abandonment of which, Sellars has taught us, should cause us to abandon internalism as well). Meaning rationalism is a mire, then, insofar as the direct apprehension theorist's given is a myth. I believe Husserl's position speaks against this. Before turning to that point, however, another element of Millikan's critique of meaning rationalism vis-à-vis the internalism/externalism debate should be addressed.

In “White Queen Psychology,” after the argument against internalist meaning rationalism noted above, Millikan also critiques an externalist construal:

<sup>63</sup> For a useful overview of different positions within this camp see Ward *et al.* 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Millikan 1993, p. 303, my emphasis (ignore the use of “kontent,” with a K—this is a reference to a complication adduced to take account of another bit of analytic orthodoxy (“Kaplan-contents”) that is prevalent in the essay but need not concern us here).

<sup>65</sup> While it is tempting to re-cast “direct apprehension accounts” as direct realist accounts, I have resisted doing so since it would involve interpretive work beyond the scope of this essay. The two positions are at least very close, and it is not at all uncommon to interpret Husserl as a direct (though not “naïve”) realist.

If the historical or causal mechanisms, the appropriate causal or historical facts, that determine these mental names to have the referents they do are facts external to the mind, on any such theory, no a priori guarantee can be given... that any such historical mechanisms are in fact in place. The bare possession of an apparent thought vehicle cannot by itself guarantee that there is an appropriate history in place to make it the vehicle of genuine thought.<sup>66</sup>

Millikan's claim, of course, is that we should therefore *deny* that there is any such "a priori guarantee." And if an internalist account has been rejected, and an externalist account cannot give us any such a priori guarantees, it follows that, in effect, thoughts that don't refer are not "genuine thoughts": "thought without content [=external content -JR] is only would-be thought, not, as the rationalist tradition teaches, the essence of thought distilled."<sup>67</sup> Faced with this dilemma, Millikan holds on to externalism while rejecting meaning rationalism, spelling out the conditions for content in line with her representationalist, restrictive naturalist theory. But the dilemma can equally well be addressed in a way that holds on to meaning rationalism if one can at the same time (1) give up on at least a certain version of externalism, (2) abandon certain representationalist presuppositions (e.g., about the "bare possession of an apparent thought vehicle"), and (3) accept "direct apprehension theories" in a way that does not make the given out to be a mire of myth. This section has sought to show that Husserl's account accomplishes the first two conditions. I turn now to the third.

#### 4. Husserl on Act-first Epistemology, Fulfillment, and the Non-mythical Given

The spectre of the myth of the given points to what is for many a deeper set of worries for Husserl's phenomenological approach: If meaning is found in "correlation" with the lifeworld—the world as experienced by transcendental subjectivity—how could intentionality ever misfire? In pushing against Millikan's claim (cited above) that "consciousness, in the guise of a priori reflection" cannot "provide an affidavit for the genuine intentionality of seeming thoughts," are we not left in the position of a solipsism or subjective idealism in which simply to think a thought is to have it be so? If we accept the first-personal, presentationalist, direct-apprehension account of intentionality

<sup>66</sup> Millikan 1993, pp. 311-312.

<sup>67</sup> Millikan 1993, p. 357, and see the corresponding note 37, linking the meaning involved in genuine thoughts directly to a biological account of functions.

laid out above, are we not then taking the world as simply and unproblematically given? Have we not abandoned criteria of success and failure for our thoughts *about* the world—the very sort of criteria that Millikan’s worries about representationalism insists must be preserved—in favor of a presupposition that all thought, as meaningful, refers successfully?

Millikan has herself raised this worry explicitly in a criticism of phenomenology. As she puts the point in a recent essay (ignore for the moment the notion of “unicepts”):

‘Phenomenal experience’ is something many philosophers have beliefs about. These beliefs purport to be representations in thought of real properties of another real thing called ‘experience’. We need to understand then, in a way that is consistent with our more general views on epistemology, how a person can develop the necessary ideas/unicepts with which to think about and have knowledge of these properties and of this experience. I am posing the epistemological question for phenomenology as a question how the unicepts applied during the description of phenomenological experience acquire their credentials. What is the origin of these ideas? What evidence is there that they are unicepts, rather than vacucepts (caloric, pholgiston) or equivocepts (“heaviness,” before mass and weight were distinguished)?<sup>68</sup>

While Millikan’s introduction of the language of “unicepts and unitrackers” in more recent work might be seen as a certain sort of phenomenological concession (the notions are supposed to help spell out her semantic picture on the individual level, as opposed to the more general and public level of concepts<sup>69</sup>), the question of how unicepts “acquire their credentials” is similar to Millikan’s more familiar line of questioning, noted above, about how rationality is “effected.” This is in large part a question about concept acquisition: unless one is a conceptual nativist, one must have some sort of account of how concepts (unicepts) get off the ground. Both Millikan’s theory and transcendental phenomenology offer such an account. On Millikan’s version, as we have seen, the ultimate explanatory level of such an account is Normal function. Since Normal function is naturalistic and public, objectivity is preserved, and we have taken the worry of misfires of intentionality (vacucepts,

<sup>68</sup> Millikan 2014, p. 19. It should be noted that Millikan’s primary target in this essay is not so much classical transcendental phenomenology as discussed here but the use of “phenomenology” in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind (discussions of qualia, etc.).

<sup>69</sup> Millikan 2017.



equivocally) out of human hands (and minds). The *why*-question, with regard to concept acquisition, as with regard to everything else, will ultimately be answered by a natural-scientific explanation indexed to species survival. I have been emphasizing the extraordinary cost of this explanatory reassurance: the story she tells (as Millikan recognizes and alludes to in the above passage) is *explanatory* but not *enlightening*. It leaves no room for genuine accounting for first-person *experience* in correlation with the world—for the significance of things from the perspective of human life.

In deference to the latter, the transcendental phenomenologist will respond to Millikan's challenge about the origin of certain concepts (unicepts) roughly along the following alternative lines: it may be that—from the perspective of contemporary understandings of natural scientific laws—"heaviness" is an "equivocal." But it is a concept that continues to pervade our collective and individual daily lives nonetheless. To suggest that, in *all* contexts, we are simply wrong about the meaning of this concept, is to revert to a brand of scientism and to align oneself with restrictive naturalism. On the transcendental-phenomenological version, the ultimate explanatory level is the object's experiential *significance* for me (or us), and the account of concept acquisition will involve contributions from both the subject and the world.<sup>70</sup> It is, thereby, admittedly, tinged with subjectivity, and the worry about objectivity, about misfires of intentionality, remains. But so it is in our actual daily lives, which, despite Millikan's claims to the contrary, are *experienced* by us in specific ways, in which things often don't work out, in which our utterances and gestures are not always understood with perfect clarity but nonetheless seem to us to have a meaning and to be involved in our daily activities of making sense and giving reasons. For the phenomenologist we need to register this fact *first*, only then can we legitimately raise the worry about objectivity (truth and falsity).

This strategy should not seem foreign from the Millikinian perspective: it can be seen as another version of her own claim, cited above, that in order to account for intentional representation we need to account for two different types of misfires: (1) representations that fail to be true, but are rightly intentional insofar as they are correctly teleologically oriented to the world, and (2) purported thoughts that are not really representations at all (e.g., in the quote

<sup>70</sup> More technically speaking, concept acquisition is approached in phenomenology as a problem of meaning constitution. See Rump 2014 for discussion of this issue in a related context with reference to McDowell's account of "second nature" and an Husserlian critique his model of concept acquisition in terms of language acquisition.

above, vacucepts). *Qua* meaning rationalist and direct-apprehension theorist, Husserl is indeed suggesting that at Millikan's second level, there can be no *misrepresentation* (in Millikan's sense). All meanings are legitimately intentional, even in cases where they do not correspond to some real object. But how can he claim this? Are we not, despite the above protestations, unavoidably thrown back on the old Meinongian problem of "intentional inexistence?" Only if we accept the common view, shared by Millikan, that if intentions are real intentions then not only those intentions but also their objects must be real, must themselves exist or subsist in some sense.

Underlying this issue is another important contrast between analytic and phenomenological approaches to teleology and intentionality: whereas analytic philosophy (including the naturalistic strain to which Millikan belongs) has traditionally approached the analysis of meaning and knowledge by beginning from, and thus always on the basis of, an a priori account of mental *content*, on the Husserlian, transcendental-phenomenological view, any account of content rests upon the subjective character of experiencing in terms of the correlational structure of the intentional act.<sup>71</sup> On this "act-first" approach to epistemology, analysis of content will always cede explanatory priority to the fundamental structure of intentionality. As the paradigmatic characteristic of consciousness, the intentional act comes first: As Zahavi notes,

For Husserl intentionality is not an ordinary relation to an extraordinary object, but an extraordinary relation to an ordinary object, an extraordinary 'relation' that can persist, even if the object doesn't exist. When it comes to intentions that are directed towards 'unreal' objects, they are just as much characterized by their directedness towards a transcendent object as are ordinary perceptions. In contrast to normal perceptions, however, the referent does not exist, neither intra-mentally nor extra-mentally. [...] This account dispenses with the need for ascribing a special kind of existence (or intentional inexistence) to the hallucinated object in order to preserve the intentionality of the act.

We cannot begin our analysis from content—conceived as *intensions* or *referents* or otherwise—we must instead begin from the fundamental structure of

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Gallagher: "This idea that we can experience or intuit such meanings is a beginning point for phenomenology, and in some regard it is a breaking point away from purely logical analysis, which becomes standard in analytic philosophy. To oversimplify things, analytic philosophy stays with the sentences; phenomenology turns its attention to the conscious acts in which we intuit meaning." (2012, p. 21). Cf. Mohanty 1982, p. 62.

intentionality—including the subjective side of the noetic-noematic correlation—since this is the precondition for any content *at all*. On such an “act-first” account, the absence of a given object in the world does not speak against the reality of the intentional relation or the legitimacy of the content *as an intentional meaning*.

It should also be clear from these considerations that intentionality in Husserl’s sense cannot be construed as either a biological or a psychological phenomenon.<sup>72</sup> On this point, the historical lineage of the position is instructive. Like Frege (in. e.g., “The Thought”) Husserl recognized that the objectivity of shareable idealities must be guaranteed by locating it *outside of the psychological*, in order to defend logic and the theory of knowledge from the threat of psychologism. But there is a crucial difference: unlike Frege’s, Husserl’s critique of psychologism was not explicitly tied to a rejection of the *subjective as such*. Husserl’s rejection of psychologism guarantees the objectivity of logic by linking it to the structure of meaning intention. This does not entail but rather *precludes* a rejection of the subjective, since the meaning intention—arising from the side of the subject (the *noetic*)—is a necessary moment of the correlational structure of the intentional act. And here we make contact with points of contrast outlined in the previous section: the admission of the subjective into the account of intentionality is not a reversion to psychologism, but a turn to *transcendental* subjectivity, and because of the dyadic or presentational account of the intentional object, the correlational structure of intentionality is ultimately only descriptive of the character of our lived experience; it does not imply an ontologically distinct third realm.<sup>73</sup>

Husserl instead accounts for Millikan’s problem about mis-representation though the notion of the meaning intention. And he is indeed saying, in line with Millikan’s meaning rationalism, that intentional meanings are in some sense transparent to the subject or thinker. But the implications she takes to follow from this position do not seem to follow in Husserl’s case. Take the following characterization:

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Crowell: “The phenomenological act-analysis is not psychological; rather, it thematizes the *norm-governed* (Husserl calls them the “teleological”) relations that hold among acts...” Crowell 2013, p. 24.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Rinofner-Kreidl: “a transcendental-phenomenological investigation marks off both from an unmotivated and seemingly arbitrary ontological abundance (in terms of, for instance, value Platonism) and the opposite extreme of a reductionist naturalism. [...] Husserl’s sophisticated phenomenological description gives credit to neither of these positions. A phenomenological analysis uncompromisingly withholds any attempt to interpret the results of its intentional analysis in terms of straightforward metaphysical findings, either Platonist or nominalist” (2015, p. 300).

If one cannot misunderstand *what* a term in one's idiolect means, or be wrong in thinking *that* it represents, then whatever criteria one uses in applying it cannot of course be mistaken criteria. Rather they must *define* its meaning in the sense of stipulating it. The meaning rationalist thus is forced to take the meaning of a term to be determined by its intension.<sup>74</sup>

While Husserl's view may be said to align with two conditional criteria in Millikan's argument, what she asserts to follow from the conditional is from Husserl's perspective nonsensical: on the dyadic, presentational, act-first view it makes no sense to appeal to additional criteria of "application." We do not begin from a content (term, intension) and determine its intentional application therefrom, in the way in which for Frege it is sometimes said that we start from sense to determine reference. The meaning of a term is ultimately determined not representationally or even by its *intension* but by *intention*, and intentionality is always already in application, even when it misfires. So, on the Husserlian view, intentionality indeed cannot account for mis-*representation*.

But recall that the requirement that it do so—that the mis-fire be accounted for in terms of mis-*representation* and that it be pre-empted *at this level*—was only adduced in the face of a worry about otherwise resorting to non-(restrictive) naturalist "bare representations... without introducing *ad hoc* abstract objects, say, unanalyzed meanings, senses, propositions, or possible states of affairs as somehow ingredient in nature."<sup>75</sup> On a non-representational, direct apprehension, act-first account, there are no ontologically distinct representations to be problematically non-naturalistically bare, and no *ad hoc* abstract objects as ontologically distinct elements in nature. The requirement of a second-level "bare-representation" account is a result of Millikan's own restrictive naturalist and representationalist presuppositions, not a necessity born from an accurate description of the phenomena of intentionality or of the objective/public nature of meaning as ingredient in human life.

And without these presuppositions, "a single step true-representation-to-world relation"<sup>76</sup> will work just fine. The worry about objectivity is accounted for, on the Husserlian view I am sketching here, on the first level Millikan identifies, by means of the structure of intention—fulfillment/frustration, which takes the place of the traditional correspondence theory of truth and provides

<sup>74</sup> Millikan 1984, p. 327.

<sup>75</sup> Millikan 1990, pp. 151-52 (cited above).

<sup>76</sup> Millikan 1990, pp. 151-52 (cited above).

normative conditions of success and failure for intentional meaning. I always experience the world as not fully determined (e.g., in the case of perception, I can only at any one moment see a given object from a certain perspective), and yet as *determinable*, and determinable in a manner that is itself predetermined on the basis of my history of prior perceptions and meanings, which provide a quasi-determinate “horizon” of future possibilities.<sup>77</sup> In this sense, while perceptions reveal aspects of objectivity in the guise of fulfilled meaning intentions, they also always simultaneously include horizontal apperceptions constitutive of additional intentional meanings (even if those additional meanings are never themselves fulfilled). These relations are a priori insofar as they are not intuitively present (immanent) as fulfilled intentions in a given perceptual experience, but they are at the same time not divorced from experience as would be, e.g., Platonic ideas. Thus, from the phenomenological perspective, intentional meaning is neither determined purely inductively from what we happen to have experienced in the contingency of our everyday lives, nor given in the pure a priori of a Platonic heaven or Fregean third realm. Husserl instead posits a sort of “third way” in which our experience of the world is characterized by a transcendence in immanence.

But, of course, intentions are not always fulfilled. Sometimes they remain unfulfilled or are even *frustrated*: I see the front of a healthy, delicious-looking red apple and expect that the back will look roughly similar. But as I turn it around this intention misfires—when the backside instead appears as caved in and rotted, my original intention is not fulfilled but frustrated. This is another way of saying that we can and often do intend what is not the case. It is undeniably part of the meaningfulness of our experience to have thoughts, desires, beliefs and expectations that are *not* fulfilled, and phenomenology as a descriptive enterprise must account for these un-fulfilled intentions as well as for the fulfilled ones.<sup>78</sup>

In sum, the account of the structure of intention—fulfillment/frustration is critical for defending the phenomenological theory of the intentional act from the negative implications of Millikan’s critique of meaning rationalism, in that it preserves the needed gap between intentional contents and truth: if *every* intention were simultaneously a fulfillment, there would be no sense in

<sup>77</sup> Husserl 2014, pp. 77ff.

<sup>78</sup> See Husserl 2001, Investigation I, end of §21, where Husserl claims that the clarification of the “a priori relations between meaning and knowing, or between meaning and clarifying intuition” will require not only further investigation of fulfillment, but also “distinguishing meaning from fulfilling sense.”

distinguishing between intention and intuition, and we would be left with a mere phenomenalism or with a Berkleyian subjective idealism. The intention–fulfillment/frustration structure shows that Husserl’s account of intentionality *doestake* account of the external world. The very structure of fulfillment implies that, in addition to the meaning-intention, we also need the “moment” of intuition in order to explain the way in which the intention *comes to be fulfilled* or *frustrated*.<sup>79</sup> In light of this, we can say that for Husserl the intention–fulfillment/frustration structure functions in place of the traditional correspondence theory of truth, resulting in a recasting of epistemology and the theory of meaning not in terms of a pure internalism, *nor* in terms of an externalism that ignores all contributions of subjectivity, but in terms of the priority of the intentional *act*.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, from the transcendental-phenomenological perspective, while the worry about truth, objectivity, and the public nature of meaning that motivates Millikan is real and must be addressed, it is still secondary: the question of meaning (not necessarily in representationalist guise) is prior to the question of truth, and we cannot simply choose to ignore or skip over the subjective way in which the world is given to us because of worries about whether our thoughts are legitimate representations of a real external world. If we do so we will have already mischaracterized the object of our inquiry, attempting to replace our natural “folk” conception of life with a purportedly more “real” and restrictively natural one. Husserl’s unfulfilled intentions, like Millikan’s “bare representations,” are not merely purported or illusory thoughts. They are genuine, meaningful components of a reality that, while it may obey causal laws,

<sup>79</sup> This is an insight that Husserl shared with at least the early Wittgenstein—another explicit target of Millikan’s critique of “meaning rationalism.” As Jocelyn Benoist puts it, “If it is possible for the things to be given *as they are meant*, it is, according to both authors, that, to mean them, in some sense, is to mean *how they would be given if they should be given*, or, at least, it entails that. In other words, in Husserl’s as in Wittgenstein’s view, *intentionality itself must allow fulfillment*, and is not to be conceived independently of it, to the effect that the structure of intentionality must entail at least the *logical possibility of such a ‘fulfilment’*” (2008, p. 84).

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Crowell: On Husserl’s account, “to speak of correspondence is not to adopt an impossible standpoint from which to judge that some mental content maps the thing-in-itself. Rather, it is to recognize the relations of fulfillment between certain categorial acts (judgments) and their founding perceptual contents. Consciousness of truth (the correctness of the judgment) is consciousness of the synthesis of identification between the judgment’s meaning and the intuitive fulfillment provided by an act of perception with the same meaning. This yields a phenomenological reformulation of epistemology: not a theory constructed to answer the skeptic but an elucidation of the meaningful relations of foundation and fulfillment that obtain among cognitive acts. (2013, p. 39.)

is also teleologically ordered. But what makes them more than mere illusions—the *plus ultra*—is not their place in species-level evolutionary lawfulness, but in the everyday, first-personal rationality of human life. What is “given,” then, is not the result of a misplaced presupposition about true correspondence to the world, but the meaningfulness and intentionality of a life in which we are always striving to make better sense of the world, in ways sometimes fulfilled and sometimes frustrated. This is certainly no myth.

## 5. Conclusion

For Husserl this striving occurs a variety of domains of experience, not just the natural-scientific, and, as for Kant, these considerations are a part of—not divorced from—the activity of reason from the standpoint of human freedom. Thus here, finally, we have arrived at the place of teleology<sup>81</sup> in Husserl’s account: where Millikan introduces the teleological account of Normal function in order to account for bare representations in line with a restrictive naturalism, Husserl appeals to a teleological conception of *reason* as part of a broader conception of intentional, experiential life, a conception of reason that includes not only the theoretical, but also our consideration of values and of our practical activity in the world.<sup>82</sup> As Husserl claims at the conclusion of the teleology lecture through the *why*-question was introduced above, a philosophy true to life must unify “all individual units of knowledge [*Einzelkenntnisse*]” and these will include not only “mere nature,” not only the striving for knowledge in specialized contexts like biology and evolutionary theory, but in the general context of “the completeness of the world [*Gesamtheit der Welt*].”<sup>83</sup>

On the transcendental-phenomenological account, then, in its very striving to make sense of the world—both its essential possibilities and its current actualities—human rationality is *always already* teleological or norm-governed—

<sup>81</sup> I have chosen to come to Husserl’s account of teleology of reason only at the end of this essay in order to more fully emphasize its *necessity* in his account. As Rinofner-Kreidl notes, if it is simply presented as a self-standing doctrine, Husserl’s account of the teleology of reason seems both out of place and old fashioned. In Bernet’s words, Husserl’s “extensive use of teleological concepts is encountered with bewilderment or an ironical reaction of a Nietzschean variety on the part of most contemporary thinkers. They consider Husserl to be a belated representative of an outdated rationalism, and his teleologically determined theories appear, at best, as the expression of a naive faith. (Qtd. in Rinofner-Kreidl 2015). Like Rinofner-Kreidl and Bernet, one of my purposes here is to show the continued relevance of this aspect of Husserl’s thought, in my case in contrast to other sorts of teleological theories.

<sup>82</sup> Rinofner-Kreidl 2015.

<sup>83</sup> Husserl 2012, pp. 214–15, my translation.

it is operating freely, in a way not determined by natural lawfulness, in the “space of reasons.”<sup>84</sup> If such a space can be construed within the bounds of liberal naturalism, and if the conditions of success or failure within nature so conceived can be accounted for not via representation and correspondence but instead via a presentational, correlational, act-first account of intentionality, then Husserl’s position is no less naturalist, and no less teleological than Millikan’s. And it has the added benefit of not divorcing teleology from reason or from an account of meaning that is descriptively adequate to the origins of objectivity in our subjective experience. In transcendental phenomenology, teleology is put to use for *life*.

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<sup>84</sup> See Rump 2017 for a detailed situating of Sellars’ space of reasons/ space of causes dichotomy in Husserl’s epistemology, and a criticism of that dichotomy in favor of a third phenomenological “space of motivations.”



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