

Synthesis

Its Role in Husserl, Precursors, and Legacy in Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty

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In phenomenology, “synthesis” refers to the intentional process through which the content of experience is combined by and thereby constituted for consciousness, a process that involves contributions from both the subject and the world. In examining the various syntheses through which the content of experience becomes present to us, we are uncovering the origins of the senses or meanings that make up the world of our lived experience—senses or meanings understood phenomenologically not as simply “found” in the world but as synthetic *accomplishments* that involve a contribution of subjectivity in some respect (e.g., consciousness or the ego in Husserl; Dasein in Heidegger; the lived body in Merleau-Ponty).

In claiming that the content of consciousness is “made” and not simply “found” in the world, the classical phenomenologists reject both naïve-realist conceptions according to which the world is already there as meaningful independent the imposition of schemas by the subject, and naturalistic views that may recognize the schematizing role of subjectivity in some respect but ultimately locate that subjectivity in a prior order of natural, causal-empirical reality. The notion of synthesis is central for the transcendental claim (fully endorsed by Husserl and recognized in a more or less modified way by most later phenomenologists) that meaning as an accomplishment of subjectivity is a condition of the possibility of all experience, even the experience of nature, and thus that the objectivity of the world and its status as an object of knowledge can only be gained by going through an analysis of the structures of subjectivity and meaning. Insofar as, outside naturalistic presuppositions, the synthetic, meaning-bestowing function of consciousness cannot be presupposed to be empirically “located” in the head or brain, the notion of synthesis also leads the phenomenologist to recognize the role of the lived body as a whole as a “site” of the synthesis through which the meaningful world is constituted.

I. Historical Precursors

Two different but related conceptions of synthesis in the history of Western philosophy are of major relevance for phenomenological usage of the term: those of Aristotle and Kant.¹ Aristotle uses the term “synthesis” to describe to logical process of combining while also preserving

¹ A case could also be made for the Hegelian dialectical conception of synthesis as another important precursor for phenomenology, in its way of conceiving of phenomenological thinking if not in its usage of the term. While there is some truth to this claim in the case of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and, perhaps more directly, for the phenomenological existentialism of de Beauvoir and Sartre, there is less of a case to be made for this influence with regard to Husserl, whose more directly epistemological conception is the primary focus of this entry (for a useful overview of Hegelian-dialectical conceptions of the notion of synthesis in Husserl, see Lampert 1995, 28-33).

discrete elements under a common notion “which cannot be thought of without the components.”² In this sense, “synthesis” is roughly the opposite of the process of analysis (diairesis). As the term appears in phenomenological thinkers, whereas analysis involves drilling down to the most basic structures through which we experience the world, synthesis describes the multi-layered building up of those structures; the individual steps involved in the process of *constituting* our world of experience. There are important relationships to Husserl’s conception of genetic phenomenology here, and (as noted below), this Aristotelian source for the notion is especially important for Heidegger.

Perhaps the most direct precursor to the phenomenological conception of synthesis, however, is Kant. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant saw synthesis, the action of “putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness in one cognition,”³ as central to the determination of the origin of cognition.⁴

In the transcendental deduction of the categories, Kant argues that the sensible intuition of objects necessarily requires both the transcendental unity of apperception (that the “I think must be capable of accompanying all of my representations”⁵) and the categories: pure concepts of the understanding which Kant derives from a classification of the forms of judgment (a classification which can itself be traced to Aristotle). In this sense, the Kantian conception of synthesis is linked to an account of judgment by means of the concept. This intellectual conception of synthesis and the associated notion of conceptual judgment will become central for Husserl’s account of active synthesis in the guises of categorial intuition and predicative judgment.

But equally important for phenomenology is Kant’s notion in the first *Critique* of the productive synthesis of the imagination or figurative synthesis, especially as it appears in the first (A) edition of the transcendental deduction.⁶ Whereas intellectual synthesis takes place by means of concepts, the figurative synthesis is attributed by Kant to the productive function of the imagination and results in a corresponding intuition.⁷ In the A deduction, the imagination is framed as a separate type of synthesis, distinct from both sensibility and intuition.⁸ In the phenomenological tradition, this A-deduction notion is of special importance because it is taken to suggest a domain of conscious experience consisting neither of mere passively given sense-data (sensibility), nor of full-blown conceptual syntheses and predicative judgments, but a domain that that is nonetheless still synthetic (insofar as it is still *constituted* in our experience and thus involves a contribution from the side of the subject). In this version of the deduction Kant places greater importance on the role of subjectivity in synthesis (though he would reject a psychological-empirical conception of that subject as much as a purely formal one) and emphasizes the contribution of sensible intuition to synthesis independently of the work of the

² Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* 16b25

³ Kant 1998, A 77

⁴ Kant 1998, A 78/B 103

⁵ Kant 1998, B 132

⁶ Kant 1998, A 84-130

⁷ Kant 1998, A 124

⁸ In the B edition, by contrast, while Kant acknowledges that the productive imagination shares characteristics with both the faculty of sensibility (insofar as it issues in intuitions) and that of the understanding (insofar as it still governed by the categories), he places the emphasis on the logical, categorial character of the experiential synthesis, and casts the transcendental unity of apperception in formal terms.

categories.⁹ For Heidegger, the role of synthesis in the A-deduction will also be interpreted as the key to the phenomenological account of temporality (temporal synthesis).

II. Husserl

Since Husserl's notion of synthesis is a highly developed part of his system and sets the stage for later uses of the term in phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, the majority of this entry will be devoted to his employments of the term. Husserl uses the vocabulary of "synthesis" and "synthetic acts" and distinguishes his own conception from that of Kant as early as the *Philosophy of Arithmetic*,¹⁰ and the notion is developed and expanded as a technical term in his phenomenology throughout his career. The phenomenological inquiry into conscious experience reveals two sides or poles of intentionality, which Husserl will call (as of the *Ideas*) the noetic and the noematic, and which belong inseparably together in a structure of correlation. Synthesis refers the process of consciousness itself bringing together the two sides of this correlation, the "unity of a *consciousness* combining consciousness with consciousness."¹¹

Synthesis, Intentional Fulfillment, and Knowledge

In the sixth *Logical Investigation*, the basic functioning of intentionality is characterized in terms of intention and fulfillment, and this is said to be synthetic insofar as it consists in bringing together an act of consciousness and an act of intuition. The intention-fulfillment structure results in either a synthesis of identification (in the case of intentional fulfillment—when the object intended emptily coincides with the object given with fullness in intuition¹²) or in a synthesis of distinction (in the case of intentional frustration—when the intention does not encounter such coincidence¹³).

On this basis, knowledge is described in terms of the synthesis of recognition (*Erkennen*), which Husserl defines as the unity of a thought (meaning-intention) and an intuition in a synthesis of identification—my finding the world as I think it to be. This is a static unity which overlays a consciousness of fulfillment as the original, dynamic experience of coincidence.¹⁴ In the synthesis of recognition I not only experience the fulfillment of an intuition but thereby experience it (and through it the object) as "fixed," with the "character of being valid henceforth."¹⁵ This account of the synthetic structure of intentionality allows Husserl to account for direct perceptual knowledge of "the things themselves"¹⁶ while also explaining the epistemic role played by more complex structures of meaning and predicative thought. In this sense it also sets the stage for his account of the more complex account of categorial knowledge.

Since the basic idea of an operation of synthesis is so central to Husserl's conception of consciousness, intentionality, and knowledge, and thus the phenomenological project generally, he used the term in sometimes overlapping ways to identify a wide variety of processes and

⁹ Cf. Crowell 2013, 13-14.

¹⁰ Hua XII, 38ff.

¹¹ Hua III, Husserl 2014, §118.

¹² Hua XIX/ Husserl 2001, VI, §8

¹³ Hua XIX/ Husserl 2001, VI, §11

¹⁴ Hua XIX/ Husserl 2001, VI, §§7-8

¹⁵ Husserl and Landgrebe 1964/1973, §71

¹⁶ Cf. Hopp 2009, 213f

phenomena, identified several different but closely related distinctions between different types of syntheses, and revisited the conception at multiple points in his career. Our further explication of Husserl's conception of synthesis will proceed by surveying some of these major distinctions and their implications, roughly following the chronological order of discussions of them in major texts.

Discrete vs. Continuous Synthesis.

Many commentators attribute a major shift in Husserl's conception of synthesis to the period surrounding the publication of *Ideas I*, generally for reasons having to do with the recognition of the importance of passive synthetic structures for what would come to be known as genetic phenomenology.¹⁷ In *Ideas I*, Husserl distinguishes between *Discrete* and *Continuous Syntheses*. Discrete syntheses are active and articulated, and discrete acts become unified in higher-order unities, which Husserl then refers to as "structured" or "polythetic" syntheses.¹⁸ Looking forward to something on behalf of another, for example, is a structured, polythetic act of a higher order encompassing the ordered, lower-level discrete acts directed to 1) the thing looked forward to, and 2) the other on whose behalf I am looking forward.

Ideas I also discusses "another and in a certain sense universal group of syntheses" that fall within the category of discrete syntheses, which Husserl relates to the "pure forms of synthetic objectivities": collective synthesis, disjunctive synthesis, explicative synthesis, and relational synthesis. These discrete syntheses align with Husserl's notion of categorial synthesis (see below), and through this are used to give an explanation of fundamental distinctions in logic and thus basic categories of objectivity.¹⁹

In continuous synthesis, by contrast, there are no acts of a higher order: "the unity belongs to the same level of order as what is united." Husserl's primary example of this type of synthesis is the everyday object, which is perceived as unitary despite its adumbrated appearance across space and time. Husserl also categorizes the constitution of phenomenological time, which is neither active nor discrete, as a form (indeed the most basic form) of continuous synthesis.

Aesthetic vs. Categorial Synthesis

In *Ideas II*, Husserl distinguishes between *Aesthetic* (or sensuous) and *Categorial Synthesis*. Through aesthetic synthesis, the object is presented (noematically) "as something which is such-and-such, even if no concepts, no judgments in the predicative sense, are mediating."²⁰ Through a series of continuous syntheses, the object is presented as, e.g., having profiles, sides, or other "partial meanings" which refer to previous partial meanings maintained via "secondary passivity."²¹ Such secondary passivities are ultimately "determinative of sense" for the sensuous object, in that they "motivate" (in Husserl's technical sense of the term²²) the further course of perception in the ongoing process of aesthetic synthesis and thereby help to determine the future intentional horizons of the object.

¹⁷ Cf. Lampert 1995, 27

¹⁸ Hua III/ Husserl 2014, §118; Cf. Mohanty 2011, 166

¹⁹ See Hua XVIII/ Husserl 2001, Prolegomena, §67; Cf. Ricouer 1996, 153; GA 20, 89/ Heidegger 1992, 66.

²⁰ Hua IV/ Husserl 1989, §9

²¹ For a detailed account, see Biceaga 2010, ch. 3. See also the discussion of primary vs. secondary passivity below.

²² See Rump 2017, 97ff; Cf. Walsh 2017.

Husserl also includes under the rubric of aesthetic synthesis synthetic background conditions or “correlative ‘perceptual circumstances’,”²³ including, on the noetic side, the embodied kinaesthetic functions of the subject which help to co-determine an object’s sense. Husserl insists that these latter aspects of the aesthetic synthesis are ignored in the natural attitude, which focuses only on the object of the perception and not the synthetic act as a correlative noetic-noematic structure through which the object is constituted in and by consciousness. These background syntheses involve a “plurality of theses” determinative of a variety of possible but not always compossible future meanings. Thus they are not united in a separate, categorial synthesis but rather by means of a continuous synthesis that guarantees the endurance of the object of perception over time (hence the name “aesthetic” or “sensuous” synthesis, where aesthetic is used in the sense of the transcendental aesthetic in Kant’s first *Critique*).

Categorial synthesis, by contrast, is discrete, active, and spontaneous. In the most technical sense, “categorial synthesis” refers to the third and final step in the process of categorial intuition.²⁴ A categorial synthesis is typically²⁵ accomplished in a higher-order act which takes as its object the “synthesis of coincidence” or “covering synthesis” in which the perceptual object first appears with a certain categorial property or “as-structure.” In a categorial synthesis I see, e.g., not simply a blue door, but *that* the door is blue.²⁶ This form of synthesis is especially important for the phenomenological account of the way in which, via certain acts of judgment, new meanings or senses may arise as “givens” in lived experience in a manner at once founded in but not reducible to prior senses resulting from prior syntheses at the perceptual level. This helps to explain the way in which meanings arise in perceptual experience but transcend or exceed their presentation in that experience. This is a central insight for classical phenomenology’s transcendental stance (as discussed in the introduction to this entry), and distinguishes it from an empirical or naturalistic position according to which all content of experience is derived directly via sensibility.²⁷ Categorial syntheses result in collectives, disjunctives, and states of affairs,²⁸ and fall under the rubric of discrete syntheses as discussed above.

Husserl claims that “aesthetic synthesis... in the higher strata of the constitution of a thing” is “the only one Kant has in mind when he speaks of synthesis.”²⁹ On Husserl’s view, Kant cannot properly account for categorial synthesis, since for him the categorial function is attributed exclusively to the faculty of the understanding, whose forms are derived from the forms of judgment independent of synthetic activity. For Husserl, by contrast, categorial synthesis

²³ Hua IV/ Husserl 1989, §15c

²⁴ Hua XIX/ Husserl 2001, VI, ch. 6;

²⁵ This description would not apply in the case of collectives. In this case, while we still have a categorial synthesis, it is not one that takes the form of a synthesis of coincidence, because members involved in the collective need not have anything in common (Lohmar 2006, 122f).

²⁶ Lohmar 2006; Sokolowski 1981.

²⁷ “[T]he synthesis of coincidence is somehow imposed on us in a passive manner, even if it occurs in the framework of an actively performed activity. The content (the datum) is given to us—we must accept this seemingly paradoxical formulation—in a ‘sense’ which has nothing to do with sensibility, but which is an irreducible relation between the intentional moments of acts. [...] Syntheses of coincidence are non-sensible representing contents” (Lohmar 2006, 120).

²⁸ Hua IV/ Husserl 1989, §9

²⁹ Hua IV, 20, n. 1/ Husserl 1989, 22, n. 1

provides the first step in an account of the categories and fundamental forms of judgment through which experience becomes meaningful. In this sense Husserl's account of synthesis can be seen as an attempt at a deeper elaboration not only of the Kantian conception of a transcendental logic (a term which Husserl adopts for his own theory) but also of the Aristotelian notion of synthesis as the combinatory function of judgment.

In Husserl's view, Kant misses the "lower strata" of aesthetic synthesis because his account of the origination of meaningful experience in space and time as the a priori forms of intuition is explanatory only at the level of an empirical science concerned with physical objects:

[H]is question is only this: What kinds of syntheses must be carried out subjectively in order for the things of nature to be able to appear, and thus a nature in general. But lying deeper and essentially preceding this is the problem of the inner, the purely immanent objectlike formation and the constitution, as it were, of the inner-world, that is, precisely the constitution of the subject's stream of lived-experience as being for itself, as the field of all being proper to it as its very own. [...] [T]he constitutive problems of the world presuppose the doctrine of the necessary, most general structures and the synthetic shapes of immanence that are possible in general. Hence, we are to seek here in immanence what are in principle the most general syntheses, especially, as we said, the syntheses concerning *content* that extend beyond the transcendental synthesis of time, and which as such, according to their general character, are discernible as transcendently necessary.³⁰

In addition to reconceiving Kant's notion of a transcendental logic, then, Husserl also seeks to extend the Kantian account of the "transcendental aesthetic" to this "lower strata" of synthesis, which includes the purely formal temporal synthesis but also the synthetic constitution of passively pre-given *content*. This expansion of the transcendental aesthetic is accomplished via Husserl's account of passive synthesis.

Active vs. Passive Synthesis

The most important distinction within the Husserlian conception of synthesis is that between *active* and *passive* forms. Husserl's engagement with the notion of synthesis in his early work is primarily concerned with active synthesis (though there are traces of the notion of passive synthesis as early as the *Logical Investigations*.³¹ Husserl defines active syntheses as "active accomplishments of the ego, through which the formations of the genuine *logos* come about, [which] operate in the medium of an attentive turning toward and its derivatives. Turning our attention toward is, as it were, the bridge to activity, or the bridge is the beginning or *mis en scene* of activity, and is the constant way in which consciousness is carried out for activity to progress."³² The hallmark of active synthesis is thematic grasping. This is an activity of consciousness in which intentionality is self-consciously aware of its synthetic activity, and which results in an explicit, thematic object toward which intentionality is actively directed. It is the means by which the ego actively "forms its world."³³ Active syntheses include categorial syntheses and the explicit predicative judgments they allow for, as well as the thematic grasping

³⁰ Hua XI,125/ Husserl 2001b, 171

³¹ Mohanty 2011, 165.

³² Hua XXXI, 4/ Husserl 2001b, 276

³³ Hua XXXI, 15/ Husserl 2001b, 288

of a perceptual object, as when, e.g., I focus my attention on the bird outside my window (as distinguished from the merely passively pregiven, non-thematic background or horizon in which the bird appears, including the bird itself when it is merely a part of this horizon and not yet the object of an active, thematic intentional act).

Over the course of his career, however, Husserl became increasingly interested in aspects of synthesis that he saw as extending below the active functions of consciousness to more basic non-thematic perceptual structures which he understood as pre-predicative,³⁴ and which he at times even considered to be forms of the “unconscious.”³⁵ While Husserl’s analyses often begin from the active modes of synthesis and then move to the passive, because the active ones are taken to be “exemplary,”³⁶ by the period of his later writings he was convinced that the ultimate origin of active syntheses must be sought in the prepredicative, passive sphere. Without this level of inquiry, the theory of judgment simply “hangs in the air,”³⁷ since it has not been adequately grounded in descriptions of experience at the level of our original simple perceptual interests in the course of ongoing experience:

If one goes back from theory that is dead, so to speak, and has thus become objective, to the living, streaming life in which it arises in an evident manner, and if one reflectively investigates the intentionality of this evident judging, deducing, etc., one will immediately be led to the fact that what stands before us as the accomplishment of thought and was able to show itself linguistically rests upon deeper accomplishments of consciousness.³⁸

Insofar as passive synthesis is conceived as a structure arising from the ongoing patterns of our pre-theoretical, everyday lives, there is clear overlap with the aesthetic and continuous forms of synthesis identified in the distinctions discussed above.

The distinction between active and passive synthesis also provides a useful way of understanding Husserl’s much-discussed shift from static to genetic phenomenology: if static phenomenology allows us to explain the workings of structures analogous to Kant’s “bringing of intuitions under concepts” (intuitive contents which we can always actively convert to a nominalization or predicative judgment, but which are not thereby themselves in essence linguistic or apophantic), then genetic phenomenology seeks to uncover both the origins of those concepts, and the content of intuitions that must already be in place pre-predicatively in order for active syntheses in the form of predicative judgments to occur. The Kantian account of judgment, rooted ultimately in a theory of the categories derived from basic forms of judgment, does not adequately ground the logical categories in the prepredicative sphere.³⁹ As Husserl puts it, “passivity is what is in itself first because all activity essentially presupposes a foundation of passivity as well as an objectlike formation that is already pre-constituted in it.”⁴⁰ This also called “pre-figuring,” and Husserl

³⁴ Husserl and Landgrebe 1964/1973, §14

³⁵ Hua XI, 154/ Husserl 2001b, 201; Cf. translator’s introduction to Husserl 2001b, 1-li.

³⁶ Husserl and Landgrebe 1964/1973, §14

³⁷ Husserl and Landgrebe 1964/1973, §21d

³⁸ Hua XVII, 373/ Husserl 2001b, 32

³⁹ Husserl and Landgrebe 1964/1973, §24a

⁴⁰ Hua XXXI, 3/ Husserl 2001b, 276. As the quote suggests, for Husserl the products of passive synthesis include not only objects (as for Kant) but also prepredicative “objectlike formations” [*Gegenständlichkeiten*]. In the inquiry

admits that, in a sense, a purely passively synthesized object with absolutely no active accomplishments is actually an abstraction or limit-concept, though “a necessary one.”⁴¹

Distinctions within Passive Synthesis

In line with his insistence on the “necessity” of this “deeper” level of inquiry, in his later work, Husserl identifies a number of different structures and levels within passive synthesis. Perhaps the most obvious function of passive synthesis in providing the preconditions for meaningful perceptual experience is the “synthesis of identification.” In the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl calls this the fundamental form of synthesis. It is responsible for our experience of an appearing object as unitary, identical and continuous in time, despite changes in its appearance or position. The first synthesis within identification—and *ipso facto*, “in the constitution of all objectivity given to consciousness”⁴²—is correspondingly the most basic presupposition of the continuity of time as such, the “continuous synthesis of internal time.”⁴³

While it is given new emphasis in the context of Husserl’s later focus on passive-synthetic structures, this function of synthesis is discussed by Husserl as early as 1905.⁴⁴ While it might be thought that the givenness of time itself must be somehow *prior* to consciousness, in line with his broadly Kantian transcendental idealism Husserl insists that it is still to be considered a (passive) synthetic accomplishment, taking place within the two-sided or correlative structure of intentionality,⁴⁵ “a unity of a *consciousness* combining consciousness with consciousness.”⁴⁶

But passive synthesis encompasses much more than temporal synthesis. As he further developed his account of genetic phenomenology, Husserl came to realize that a purely formal account of passivity in terms of time consciousness, while necessary, would not be sufficient to explain the constitution of specific, differentiated experiential *content*. While the further syntheses Husserl seeks to uncover are not limited to the Kantian syntheses responsible for the constitution of physical objects or the objects of explicit judgments, they are nonetheless a form of synthesis resulting in a content. Husserl is concerned not only with the content apprehended in *natural scientific* inquiry but with the wider project of grounding meaning and knowledge *as such*, with an eye to the structures of their genesis, and thus his radical rethinking of the character of the field of intuition or expansion of the transcendental aesthetic from the conditions for empirical objects to the broader domain of intentionality itself—ultimately, down to the level of the “sense-form of time and sense-shape of space”⁴⁷ which lie at the basis of the constitution of the whole of our *lifeworld*.⁴⁸ Within passive synthesis, then, are found not only temporal syntheses,

into the absolutely most basic contentful level of passive synthesis, we cannot presuppose already constituted objects, since passive synthesis is precisely that which is supposed to first explain the constitution of objects: “concrete objects are not what is elementary here, but rather object phases, sensible points, so to speak” (Hua XI, 165/ Husserl 2001b, 213). See also Husserl and Landgrebe 1964/1973, §§13, 17, n. 1.

⁴¹ Hua XXXI, 15/ Husserl 2001b, 288

⁴² Hua XI, 125/ Husserl 2001b, 170

⁴³ Hua I/ Husserl 1960, §18

⁴⁴ See Hua X, 3-134; Husserl 1964

⁴⁵ Hua I/ Husserl 1960, §17

⁴⁶ Hua III/ Husserl 2014, §118

⁴⁷ Steinbock, Translator’s introduction to Husserl 2001b, xxiii

⁴⁸ Rump 2014; 2017

but also, at the level of passive-synthetic *content*, associative syntheses, and affective syntheses (including kinaestheses).

Associative synthesis is the manner in which, prior to thematic conscious awareness, the most basic data of the perceptual field are combined into intentional unities on the basis of essential associative laws.⁴⁹ In this sense, there is a precursor to the Husserlian account of associative synthesis in the associationist psychology of early modern empiricists such as Hume.⁵⁰ Unlike early modern accounts of association, however, Husserl's is conceived as explicitly transcendental rather than empirical, since empirical psychological approaches to association ultimately explain it as "a course of events similar to natural ones, [only] occurring in the quasi-space of consciousness,"⁵¹ amounting to, on Husserl's view, "naturalistic distortions of the corresponding genuine, intentional concepts."⁵² Husserl's account of associative synthesis instead looks to the conditions of possibility immanent to the field of conscious experience in order to describe relations of meaning bound by essential laws. It describes associations as given to consciousness in the form of synthetic unities of meaning or sense. For example, in the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl discusses the phenomenon of "pairing" or forming a plurality as a "primal form of that passive synthesis we designate as 'association'" in which "two data are given intuitionally, and with prominence, in the unity of a consciousness and that, on this basis—essentially, already in pure passivity (regardless therefore of whether they are noticed or unnoticed) —, as data appearing with mutual distinctness, they *found phenomenologically a unity of similarity*."⁵³

The account of the associative synthesis of pairing is important not only for the genetic description of the constitution of everyday objects for individuals, but also for the role it plays in Husserl's account of our experience of and co-constitution with others ("monadal intersubjectivity") in the fifth Cartesian Meditation.⁵⁴ To mark this difference, Husserl distinguishes between passive synthesis occurring on the basis of my individual lived experiences alone (primary passivity) and passive synthesis occurring on the basis of intersubjective, linguistic, and historical structures (secondary passivity).⁵⁵ This notion becomes especially important in Husserl's later work for further explorations of synthesis as not only an intersubjective but also an historical phenomenon involving the "sedimentation" of meaning. Husserl insists that it is the operation of synthesis at both primary and secondary levels, and not merely for me as an isolated subject, that ultimately allows for the constitution of shared horizons that make up the lifeworld.⁵⁶

Associative synthesis is closely tied to another form of passive synthesis: affective synthesis. Husserl insists that the inquiry into passive synthetic structures must ask not only how intentional objects come to prominence via acts of associative syntheses understood in isolation, but also how they are first able to do so within the context of a multiplicity of polythetic acts—for in

⁴⁹ Husserl and Landgrebe 1964/1973, §16

⁵⁰ See Lampert 1995, 3-4

⁵¹ Hua V, 156/ Husserl 1989, 423

⁵² Hua I/ Husserl 1960, §39

⁵³ Hua I/ Husserl 1960, §51

⁵⁴ Hua I/ Husserl 1960, §§42-62

⁵⁵ Husserl and Landgrebe 1964/1973, §67b; Hua XV, 203. Also see the above discussion of aesthetic synthesis.

⁵⁶ Hua XV, 207-209.

lived experience what is first for us is typically not solitary objects but multiplicities: structured “fields of sense.”⁵⁷ Even the sensuous data taken up in perception is “already the product of constitutive syntheses” in this sense.⁵⁸ Husserl introduces the notion of affective synthesis as that function of consciousness which allows for gradations of interest or “allure” by means of which certain aspects of sense fields come to prominence while others remain in the background. Affection is thus a structure of passive synthesis that operates via what we might call an “indirect” or “orientational” relationship to passive synthetic content. The notion of affective synthesis allows Husserl to capture the fact that, in the context of passivity, not only *is there* content (the existence of which is explained by associative syntheses); a subset of that content *comes to matter* for me as an embodied consciousness confronted with an otherwise unmanageably vast horizon of possible intentional data. Indeed, Husserl argues, affective synthesis is necessary in order for a world of objects to be constituted in subjectivity *at all*. Without its function of “allure” vis-à-vis consciousness, there would be no objects for consciousness and *ipso facto*, no content.⁵⁹

Perhaps the clearest examples of affective syntheses are those arising from the movements of my own body (a form of synthesis already introduced above under the rubric of aesthetic synthesis). Insofar as my lived body is the medium through which the world is constituted for me, the movements (real and possible) and capacities of that lived body determine the way in which the world shows up for me, and thus what comes to prominence for consciousness. This embodied conception of synthesis has become especially important in recent work engaging debates in enactivist conceptions of the philosophy of mind.⁶⁰ It is also central for the development of the notion of a “synthesis of my own body” in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty), itself a frequent reference for such contemporary work.

While the very notion of passive synthesis might be seen as paradoxical from a Kantian perspective, Husserl argues that a precursor to his notion of passive synthesis can be found in Kant’s notion of productive synthesis in the A edition of the first *Critique* as discussed above, but that Kant was “not in the position to recognize the essence of passive production as intentional constitution.”⁶¹ In more contemporary terms, passive syntheses might be understood as the domain of the “precognitive” functions of consciousness, including embodied kinaesthetic or “sensorimotor” aspects of consciousness and knowledge.⁶²

The Synthesis of the Lifeworld

The Husserlian account of synthesis is wide-ranging and complex, and was a subject of constant rethinking and development throughout his career. It maintains throughout, however, the same central idea concerning the combinatory power of embodied consciousness as the mode through which the world as an objective, meaningful whole is constituted for the subject. The overall importance of synthesis for Husserlian phenomenology is perhaps best expressed in Husserl’s claim, in his last great work, the *Crisis*, that

⁵⁷ Hua XI, 120/ Husserl 2001b, 165; Hua XI, 145ff/ Husserl 2001b, 193ff; Cf. Welton 1977.

⁵⁸ Husserl and Landgrebe 1964/1973, §16

⁵⁹ Hua XI, 162/ Husserl 2001b, p. 210

⁶⁰ See Rump forthcoming

⁶¹ Hua XI, 276/ Husserl 2001b, 410

⁶² See, e.g., Noë 2004; 2012

All the levels and strata through which the syntheses, intentionally overlapping as they are from subject to subject, are interwoven form a universal unity of synthesis; through it the objective universe comes to be... through this constitution, if we systematically uncover it, the world as it is for us becomes understandable as a structure of meaning formed out of elementary intentionalities.⁶³

In this sense, the ultimate and greatest form of synthesis for Husserl is the constant, intersubjective, embodied synthesis resulting in the continuous constitution of the lifeworld.

III. Synthesis in Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty

While the usage of the notion of synthesis among the classical phenomenologists is most prominent in Husserl, it also appears as an important term in several later phenomenologists. We thus conclude this entry with a very brief look at synthesis in the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, each of whom took up the Husserlian account of synthesis in its basic contours but modified and radicalized it in important ways

Heidegger

Although he largely adopts Husserl's account of synthesis as presented in the *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas I*, for Heidegger, the notion of synthesis draws directly upon Aristotle as well as Kant. Using the distinction between synthesis and diairesis, Heidegger distinguishes between Aristotle's approach—which, he insists, is already phenomenological—and a “superficial theory of judgment” limited to concepts and propositions.⁶⁴ Heidegger is interested in what he calls the “existential-hermeneutical ‘as’,” the sort of understanding that arises from our everyday lived experience in which we always already find ourselves, in the first instance independently of the explicit propositional and conceptual structures introduced via assertion and judgment (the *apophantical* ‘as’).⁶⁵ Heidegger's conception of the hermeneutic as is, in essence, an appropriation and careful re-working of the Husserlian account of categorial synthesis (and the process of categorial intuition generally) within an existential-hermeneutic framework.⁶⁶

According to Heidegger's hermeneutic approach to synthesis, despite a conception of the priority of experiential over conceptual understanding similar to Husserl's, the character of the “pre-given” cannot be straightforwardly ascribed to intuition or perception. Heidegger re-casts Husserl's epistemological conception of synthesis in terms of ontology, and treats it as an act of interpretation, via the Aristotelian conception of synthesis as part of the hermeneutic understanding of “letting something be seen in its *togetherness* [*Beisammen*] with something—letting it be seen *as* something.”⁶⁷ Thus, unlike for Husserl, for Heidegger even the most basic forms of synthesis will be understood as acts of interpretation, for which—even if propositional or conceptual—the structures of language and discourse are in a certain sense preconditions.

⁶³ Hua VI/ Husserl 1970, §49

⁶⁴ GA 2, 211/ Heidegger 2008, 202

⁶⁵ GA 2, 210/ Heidegger 2008, 201

⁶⁶ GA 20/ Heidegger 2008, §6c

⁶⁷ GA 2, 44/ Heidegger 1962, 56

Heidegger's account of synthesis owes much to his interpretation of imagination as the "third root" in Kant, and like Husserl he preferred the A-edition formulation of the transcendental deduction. For Heidegger the imagination is seen as *adding* time to the synthesis of intuitions and concepts, and thus, ultimately, the temporal synthesis via the transcendental imagination is the root of subjectivity, not vice-versa.⁶⁸ Heidegger's account of synthesis thus emphasizes, contra Husserl's transcendental-idealist-inspired privileging of consciousness, our radical thrownness in an always-already temporalized world.

Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty's account of synthesis can be seen as a taking up of the Husserlian account within a broadly existential framework that deepens the interpretation of perceptual synthesis by further clarifying the primordial constitutional role played by the lived body and kinaesthetic syntheses. For Merleau-Ponty, "The synthesis of the object is accomplished through the synthesis of one's own body."⁶⁹ On his view, the Kantian account of synthesis is ultimately still a form of "intellectualism" which, in its focus on logical categories and concepts, fails to fully recognize the role of the lived body as the site of originary synthesis.⁷⁰ In this sense, Merleau-Ponty's project can be framed as a re-emphasizing or even radicalizing of the Husserlian prioritization of passive synthesis: "we are not asking the logician to take into consideration experiences that reason takes to be merely non-sense or contradictory, we simply wish to push back the limits of what has sense for us and to put the narrow zone of thematic sense back into the zone of non-thematic sense that embraces it."⁷¹ For Merleau-Ponty (as, arguably, for the later Husserl⁷²) meaning and even logic originate first and foremost not in the predicative, conceptual, or semantic structures of language, but in the broader field of our habitual and often unnoticed embodied ways of making sense of the world

Insofar as Husserl shares this insight, Merleau-Ponty considers him to have overcome the intellectualist nature of Kant's account of synthesis. But in another sense Husserl remains guilty of similar problems in his insistence on the active nature of consciousness or the I in constituting the context of its world:

[W]hat we criticize in the Kantian idea of synthesis and in certain of Husserl's Kantian texts is precisely that it presupposes, at least ideally, a real multiplicity that it must overcome. What is for us originary consciousness is not a transcendental I, freely positing in front of itself a multiplicity in itself and constituting it from top to bottom; rather, it is an I that only dominates diversity *thanks to* time and for whom even freedom is a destiny... against the notion of synthesis, we prefer the notion of synopsis that does not yet indicate an explicit positing of diversity.⁷³

Merleau-Ponty is concerned that the Husserlian epistemological account of the active structures of synthesis results in a picture in which the world is overdetermined by an *active* conception of

⁶⁸ GA 3/ Heidegger 1962, §§32-35

⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty 2005, 247/ 2013, 212

⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty 2005, 160, n. 2/ 2013, 522, n. 67

⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty 2005, 325/ 2013, 287-288

⁷² See Rump forthcoming

⁷³ Merleau-Ponty 2005, 326, n. 1/ 2013, 544, n. 60

consciousness and subjectivity, thereby failing to reflect the ways in which we find ourselves already intertwined in an embodied milieu of space and time that precedes any active or thematic meaning-making.



For Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, the notion of synthesis is central in the project of elucidating the structures of subjectivity by means of which we encounter the world as objective and meaningful. The continued relevance of their accounts, especially in the context of contemporary work in mind, epistemology, cognitive science and consciousness studies, is a testament both to the historical importance of the notion in Western philosophy and to the innovative developments of it in the phenomenological tradition.

IV. Works Cited

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GA = Heidegger *Gesamtausgabe*

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