# Inflecting 'Presence' and 'Absence': On Sharing the Phenomenological Conversation

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**Abstract:** This chapter introduces the difficulty of acquiring phenomenological terms by examining Carnap's and Derrida's criticisms of phenomenological speech; their criticisms show that any account of how phenomenological speech is acquired must clarify its distinction from ordinary speech about things while not falling prey to an esoteric separation. The chapter then reviews the way Husserl, Scheler, and Heidegger offer "indication" as the way to distinguish but not separate the one and the other, and it argues that indication, even with the support of analogy, metaphor, and metonym, suffers from Quinean indeterminacy and therefore requires some other resources for its successful enactment. Finally, the chapter outlines a novel solution to the problem of phenomenological speech by approaching the question as one of genesis and acquisition: ordinary language embeds certain experiential terms, such as "presence" and "absence," that, when inflected, introduce the learner into the transcendental dimension of experience. The chapter demonstrates that the question of language learning or acquisition is necessary for unraveling the nature of phenomenological language and clarifying its relation to ordinary speech.

**Keywords:** Phenomenological Reduction, Husserl, Heidegger, Formal Indication, Metaphor; Derrida; Carnap

> "Not comprehending, they hear like the deaf. The saying is their witness: absent while present."
> —Heraclitus[1]

We learn our mother tongue by attending to our caregivers in the context of everyday routines. We eavesdrop on their conversations and make sense of their foreign word-sounds thanks to the familiar meanings inscribed in the movements of their animate bodies as they tend toward things of interest and away from things of disinterest or of evident aversion. In the milieu of everyday

speech ordinarily acquired, we encounter philosophical terminology only as something strange or foreign. At first, we pick up these terms as jargon, as words we might employ but only clumsily and with great confusion. But in time we can go beyond mere use to actual understanding. Here these foreign words become familiar; instead of sounds said according to certain social routines or ways of speaking, they become words weighted with the truth of meaning. Now what is the relation between our mother tongue and our philosophical one? Quite obviously philosophizing requires everyday language as its background. How can the philosophical logos appear within everyday speech as other than it, so that it may be acquired as what it is?

The problem of philosophical speech is an old one. Plato, for example, maintained that though language cannot express philosophical insight, it nonetheless helps occasion it; philosophy "is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself" (341c). When it comes to phenomenology the question of philosophical logos becomes more vexed, for phenomenology trades on a shift in interest from things to the presence of those things, and the shift in experience requires a corresponding shift in language. Hence the question concerning the genesis of phenomenological language seems to be: how can a language fitted to things be repurposed to talk about the presence of those things? I think it necessary to challenge the framing of this question, for in fact ordinary language comprises both thing-directed *and* experience-directed terms, both ontic *and* transcendental terms. Therefore, the question is not how to bridge ordinary and phenomenological speech—both are possibilities of one's mother tongue—but how to activate possibilities for phenomenological exploration, possibilities inscribed into the very texture of ordinary speech. In this paper, I argue that such activation

occurs through a process I name "inflection." This term of enactment recalls two senses of the root word, "flexion."

First, flexion names the native part–whole structure of experienced things that becomes expressed by the attributive or predicative function of the verb, "to be." In the Sixth Investigation, Husserl argues that "the form-giving flexion being" (*die formgebende Flexion, das Sein*) does not arise through reflection even though it is not to be found in a straightforward perception of things: one sees paper and whiteness but not that the paper *is* white; one hears a creak but not that the door *is* creaking. The flexion expressed by being arises instead through a widened sense of perception called categorial intuition (Husserl 2001b, 277–81). Second, the root of inflection, flexion, also recalls the animate body—Merleau-Ponty's "flesh" (*chair*)—that enables presence to oneself and joint presence with others, a theme with anticipations in Augustine and parallels in Wittgenstein (Engelland 2014). One flexes one's joints in order to move toward and away from things or bring things close for inspection. In doing so, one advertises to others, whether with a communicative intention or not, which object is engaging one's attention. The parent who walks over and picks up the ball makes her ball-directed interest manifest simply in virtue of picking it up. Infants start to learn speech only after figuring out the meaning latent in this sort of disclosive movement. Such movement has to become emphasized, has to be sorted or understood in a new way to enable prelinguistic joint presence.

These two senses of flexion are entwined. Flexion suggests bending, especially limbs and joints. The natural jointure of the moving body mirrors the part–whole structure of perceived objects; just as we articulate our bodies, so we can, in speech, articulate things; speech in this way appears analogous to bodily grasping or gathering. Flexion also names the grammatical inflection of terms, and these terms function as they do so that the various words that comprise a

sentence fit together with the unity of a single, articulated body. To speak about things is to articulate their experienced flexion or tissue of relations at work in them.

Against this background, I argue that inflection names two processes of appropriation. (1) It names the way phenomenological terms arise through a process of appropriating the transcendental possibilities of our mother tongue. That is, initiates come to acquire phenomenological terms only once they have become clued in to the natural disclosive character of ordinary speech. (2) It also names the initiation of the means for appropriating our mother tongue in the first place. That is, infants come to learn their first words only once they have become clued in to the natural revelatory character of bodily movement. That primal, natural means of communication must itself be inflected just to get speech off the ground. The inflection that opens phenomenological word learning echoes the inflection that opens first word learning.

Words such as "experience" and "presence," as with the term "being," are not acquired through reflection or straightforward perception of things but instead belong to the natural transcendental vocabulary of experience. To inflect is to make explicit the implicit work of the flexion of experience, which highlights the interconnected and dynamic structure of the domain of experience: inflection alters the syntax but not the semantics of its terms by bringing out the latent transcendental resources of speech. Instead of a syntax geared toward things and their properties, inflection delivers a syntax geared toward the experiential domain. Inflection thereby appropriates what we might regard as the natural transcendental vocabulary of the vernacular.

To motivate my account of inflection, I introduce the difficulty of acquiring phenomenological terms by examining two high-profile criticisms of phenomenological speech in the figures of Carnap and Derrida, and I conclude that any account of how phenomenological speech is acquired must clarify its distinction from ordinary speech about things while not falling

prey to an esoteric separation. Second, I review the way Husserl, Scheler, and Heidegger offer "indication" as the way to distinguish but not separate the one and the other. Third, I point out that indication on its own suffers from Quinean indeterminacy and therefore requires some other resources for its successful enactment; I argue that the usual candidates for aiding indication—analogy, metaphor, and metonym—are insufficient for resolving this indeterminacy. Finally, I provide my own solution to the problem of philosophical speech, which approaches the question as one of genesis and acquisition: ordinary language embeds certain experiential terms that, when inflected, introduce the learner into the transcendental dimension of experience. I have in mind such terms as "presence," "absence," and even the word "interesting."[2] Inflection is the process of discovering that these terms express the experiential horizon of the speaker. My contribution, then, is to demonstrate the relevance of the question of language learning or acquisition for illuminating the nature of phenomenological language and its relation to ordinary speech.

My goal is not only to handle the indeterminacy of indication but also to show that phenomenology's reputation for obscurity is without foundation: phenomenological speech has its natural roots in our mother tongue (cf. Ricoeur 2014, 41), and its acquisition engenders no more vexing problems than the advent of our first language. In this way, I develop Ricoeur's fecund suggestion: "If phenomenological reduction is to be something other than the suspension of our links to the world, it must be the 'beginning' of a life of meaning, the simultaneous 'birth' of the spoken-being of the world and the speaking-being of man" (Ricoeur, 1967, 30). We can speak phenomenologically about experience because we can already speak ordinarily about the presence and absence of things that show up in the world around us.

## 1. THE PROBLEM OF ACQUIRING PHENOMENOLOGICAL SPEECH

How does one enter into phenomenology? The difficulty might seem akin to acquiring any technical vocabulary or perhaps akin to acquiring a second language. But I would like to suggest that the problem is equivalent to learning one's native language, and I want to suggest further than the acquisition of phenomenological speech is a way of bringing to completion the language one first learns, of actuating certain possibilities resident in it.

Phenomenology is not simply a technical vocabulary developed to conceptualize a region of investigation. Technical language occurs by means of a guided elucidation of examples offered for investigation. One acquires the language of mathematics, for example, by means of making sense of instances of number and counting. Here one can call upon the resources of the vernacular to disclose the region of things being investigated. But insofar as phenomenology deals with the domain of experience itself rather than types of things that show up in experience, it is not possible to handle its acquisition as another type of specialized discourse alongside the sciences and everyday technical vocabularies (talk of sports or of markets, for example).

Acquiring phenomenology is not akin to learning a second or foreign language. While it is true that learning such a language challenges certain ways in which we carve up the world, it nonetheless proceeds through a process of translating. My own native language already shows me how to speak of things, and I learn a new language in light of the speaking I can already accomplish. Hence I am not learning to speak and understand in a radically different way; I am rather learning to speak and understand about the same things I would like to speak about and understand in my native language. Yes, I achieve a new distance to typical ways of articulating, becoming aware of the nuances at work in the way the languages differ in presenting things, but in doing so I do not accomplish a shift from things to their presentation. Hence, acquiring

phenomenological speech is not like acquiring a second language, because phenomenological speech purports to talk about something other than what ordinary speech ordinarily is thought to talk about.

I am suggesting instead that phenomenological speech poses a unique problem of acquisition. I think the best way to understand it is as a further move, an organic development of the acquisition of one's first language. The reason it is so important for phenomenology to clarify the problem of its acquisition, and to naturalize it along the lines I will be developing in this paper, is the fact that otherwise its terms can all too easily appear to be nonsensical or esoteric.

**1.1 Nonsensical**

Rudolf Carnap (1959) takes issue with the way in which Heidegger expresses himself in the notorious 1929 lecture, "What Is Metaphysics?" This is not surprising; even an astute phenomenologist such as Edith Stein recoils before the text's "mythological tones" (Stein 2007, 92) evident in such strange assertions as the following: "The nothing itself nihilates" (Heidegger 1998, 90). Nonetheless, there is something revealing about Carnap's criticism in terms of how phenomenological claims can routinely be misunderstood. He thinks all speech concerns things, because speech is bound by experience and experience concerns things. Heidegger, no less than Stein and Husserl, would accept the claim that speech is bound by experience while denying that experience exclusively concerns things. There is more to experience than the merely empirical; hence there is more to speech than what can be said by science. In this way, phenomenological experience involves not only new semantics but also a new syntax—"we lack not only most of the words but, above all, the 'grammar'" (Heidegger 1962, 63). What is this new grammar? Kisiel (1995) astutely characterizes it as a temporal grammar of presencing rather than an ontic

grammar of objects. Heidegger himself expresses the temporal grammar in 1928, "Timeliness brings itself forth" (*Zeitlichkeit sich zeitigt*) and in 1973, ". . . presencing itself presences" (Heidegger 1984, 212, trans. mod.; Heidegger 2003, 80). Carnap does not realize that phenomenological language is distinct not only semantically but also syntactically from everyday discourse about things. And yet the problem remains, how does phenomenology's vocabulary relate to this everyday discourse?

**1.2 Inaccessible**

Chief among the failings that Derrida sees in Husserl is the failure to give an account of language in general and phenomenological language in particular. Husserl insists on the otherness of philosophical investigation without recognizing that such otherness compromises the conditions for linguistic communication. He has no account of specifically phenomenological language but must implicitly assume the continuity of ordinary language or metaphysics with phenomenology in order to appeal to phenomenological terms as indications. Derrida writes, "The unity of ordinary language (or the language of traditional metaphysics) and the language of phenomenology is never broken in spite of the precautions, the 'brackets,' the renovations and innovations" (Derrida 1973, 8). But must the unity of language be broken? How can phenomenology be made accessible to initiates if it involves a rupture with ordinary language?

Phenomenology all too easily appears to be nonsensical or inaccessible. How can it maintain the distinctness of its speech without having it devolve into a separation? How can phenomenological speech—and its novel logic of experience—be introduced in the terms of ordinary speech?

## 2. THE PROPOSED SOLUTION: INDICATION

Max Scheler notes an early criticism of Husserl's *Logical Investigations* by Wilhelm Wundt, who complains that Husserl never gets around to defining his terms; instead, he says what the terms are not and then concludes his discussion with a tautology. Scheler remarks:

> What Wundt did not consider is nothing less than the possible sense of a phenomenological discussion. This sense is only: to *bring* the reader (or listener) to see that which, by its essence, can only be "seen"; it is in view of this that all the propositions which occur in the book, all the conclusions, all the provisional definitions which are introduced as they are needed, all the provisional descriptions, all the chains of argument and proof, have simply the function of a "pointer," pointing to what is to be brought to sight. (Scheler 1973a, 172–3)

Scheler, following Husserl and followed by Heidegger, regards phenomenological terms as in the first place indications; they "can only be *pointed to* [*aufgewiesen*]" in order "to make them *seen*" (Scheler 1973b, 50). In a phenomenological text, the reader comes across words expressed in ordinary language whose function is to indicate phenomenological experiences that must then be enacted by the reader for the sense to be made plain.

At the start of the First Investigation, Husserl introduces a crucial distinction between "indications" (*Anzeigen*) and "expressions" (*Ausdrücke*) (Husserl 2001, 183). Indications include marks and signals. Expressions include words, sentences, and language in general. Given his interest in logic, Husserl sets indications aside in order to focus on expressions, both simple and complex. It is thus curious that phenomenologists characterize phenomenological terms as indications rather than straightforward expressions. They do so because of the specific character of phenomenological speech, namely the fact that its terms are inseparable from phenomenological experience. Apart from such experience, the terms are meaningless; they merely indicate or point in the direction of that experience. Yet with that experience, they are meaningful expressions.

In the Sixth Investigation, Husserl analyzes what he calls "essentially occasional expressions," such as *this* or *I*. The indexed items might be absent to the auditor or reader. In such cases, the term indicates but does not express; there is no "definite reference" established apart from the requisite experience (Husserl 2001b, 199–200). Earlier Husserl distinguishes two kinds of meaning: "indicating" (*anzeigende)* and "indicated" (*angezeigte*); the former points out in an indeterminate way and the latter fixes the reference to something determinate. He says that all terms said in relation to oneself are essentially occasional (Husserl 2001a, 220). In this way, phenomenological terms follow the logic of the occasional. They have an implicit "this" placed before them that constitutes an invitation to the interlocutor to convert an indefinite to a definite expression by turning to see what it is that the speaker has seen and means. In *Ideas I*, Husserl calls these "intuitive pointers" (*intuitiven Aufweisungen*) in contrast to definitions (Husserl 2014, 164).

Husserl becomes increasingly concerned with the question of language. In the *Crisis*, he notes a tension between the ordinary and the phenomenological; it is not only "unavoidable" for phenomenology to use ordinary language, it is "unavoidable" for the meanings of these ordinary terms to be "transformed" (Husserl 1970, 210). How shall we construe the relation between the two? In *Ideas III*, he provides two essential directives. First, phenomenological terms are not the same as ordinary words brought to fulfillment but have a different meaning determined by the intuited essences (Husserl 1980, 48). Second, ordinary words are connected to phenomenological terms as indications of the direction of phenomenological experience (Husserl 1980, 48). This raises the question of just how it is that an ordinary word can point to an experience other than its own proper fulfillment. How can it be bent to indicate something, strictly speaking, equivocal?

Heidegger's formal indication takes over the Husserl–Scheler thesis of indication, but it also draws upon Husserl's resources of formalization to explain the problem of redirection (Engelland 2017, 45–54). Unlike the logic of the general that proceeds from species to genus to higher levels of abstraction, the phenomenological indication points to greater degrees of formalization as it drills down into the apriori structures of experience. Formal indication negates the thing-directedness of speech, and it implicates a textual web of interconnected meanings concerning the structure of human existence as the place of experience. Yet the tension remains: as expressions these terms mislead but as indications they can lead into the phenomenological domain:

> All statements about the being of human existence, all propositions about time, all propositions within the problematic of the essence of ur-temporality have, as expressed propositions, the character of indication [*Anzeige*]. But they indicate [*indizieren*] only human existence, even though, as expressed propositions, they nonetheless first refer to something merely-present. They indicate human existence and the structure of human existence and of time. They indicate the possible understanding of the structure of human existence, and, to the degree that it is available in such understanding, the possible conceptualizability of that structure. (Heidegger 2010, 339)

How can a familiar expression be repurposed as a formal indication? While the phenomenological account of indication in Scheler, Husserl, and Heidegger preserves the difference between ordinary and phenomenological terms, it does so only by leaving unexplained just how an ordinary term might redirect us to the phenomenological domain of experience. When we think of a phenomenological text as not only or perhaps even in the first place a record of phenomenological insights but instead as a mode of writing conveying possibilities for philosophical analysis, a mode of speech introducing phenomenology to the uninitiated, the problem of language becomes heightened. Language is there not simply to remind us of insights but to occasion them. How can the direction of these indications be ascertained by the reader?

Before attending to this question, let me consider an objection: how novel is this appeal to indication? After all, *any* unknown word—everyday or phenomenological—appears at first as an expression that points rather than expresses. The listener or reader is rebuffed by the new combination of characters or the word-sound; that is to say, she cannot find her way into the word and through the word to the meant thing in the way she does automatically and without trouble for those words she knows. The unknown word-sound elicits our attention and instigates a wonder: "What does 'intercalate' mean?" To be told, "It means to interweave, such as fingers interlocked," fills in the expression's empty meaning. The unknown word-sound intimates the unknown thoughts of the speaker who speaks with understanding. To learn the meaning is to learn those selfsame thoughts. Thereafter, the word fulfills its nature; it no longer points but expresses.

Although every unknown word occurs first in conversation as a pointer, phenomenological terms are different in that they cannot be learned by furnishing a definition or by attending to linguistic context. Instead the interlocutor must first look to see what is there to be seen and thereby discover the meaning of the words in question. In this way, phenomenological indications are in fact ostensions or words whose meanings are clarified by an act of pointing that is brought to completion by the auditor's looking and understanding the referent for herself. In place of phenomenological definitions there are only phenomenological exhibitions achieved by following up the promptings of phenomenological indications. Nonetheless, the problem remains: just how do these indications indicate?

**3. INDICATION'S PROBLEM OF INDETERMINACY**

Because phenomenological terms arise through ostension they are subject to Quine's worries about indeterminacy. Quine (1969) illustrates these worries by imagining a linguist in the field eavesdropping on the unknown speech of a native. When a rabbit hops past, the native says, "Gavagai." What, Quine asks, should the linguist write down as the meaning of the word, 'gavagai'? Is it animal, rabbitness, hopping, moving, whiteness, furriness, or what? Quine's analysis underscores an observation made earlier by Wittgenstein (1958) and much earlier by Augustine (1995): any act of pointing is inherently ambiguous concerning its scope, for it cannot specify which present thing or which level of the present thing is being pointed out (Quine 1969, 31). The ambiguity is aggravated when it comes to making sense of phenomenological language, because phenomenology points to something, the field of experience, that will remain inconspicuous unless the person does something determinate, but this determinate action is just what is unknown. A reader comes across the word "Dasein." What does it mean? Is it ego, self, person, existent, rational animal, *homo sapiens*, or what? Heidegger aims to indicate not one of these things but rather to designate something that can be fixed only thanks to a series of phenomenological analyses. In this way, phenomenological indications are cases of *linguistic ostensions*. They are indications that have the implicit conditional, *if you follow my lead*, you will see what I mean.

Indication preserves the difference between ordinary and phenomenological terms but only by exacerbating worries about indeterminacy. In a somewhat different context, Daniel Dahlstrom calls for mediating terms to clarify the relation between the ontic and the ontological: "Yet the danger of confusing or collapsing the levels (ontic and ontological) is all the greater the more ambiguously their relations are construed or the more they are left unaddressed"

(Dahlstrom 2001, 452). How, then, can the relation be clarified? Commentators have made several suggestions for disambiguating indication, for providing a needed direction for its deployment: analogy, metaphor, and metonym. In my view, these are helpful but insufficient.

**3.1 Analogy**

Eugen Fink's *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, written in consultation with Husserl, has the great merit of focusing on the question of phenomenological language. However, rather than framing the problem of such language in a fruitful way, the text makes it insoluble. As Steven Crowell remarks, Fink gives us a "gnostic" phenomenology that represents the phenomenological reduction after the fashion of Hegel as a kind of inverted world (Crowell 2001, 246). Fink, starkly contrasting the everyday and the phenomenological, attempts to bridge them in terms of a doubled analogy. Ordinarily, we speak of existent things in the world. Phenomenologically, we speak instead about what transcends the world. To speak phenomenologically, then, we have to help ourselves to a unique analogy: *not* the analogy of two things in the world, but an analogy of one thing in the world to the transcendental consciousness outside of the world:

> If, now, natural language, which is exhibited by the phenomenological epoche as a dispositional habituality of the *constituting* I, is claimed by the *phenomenologizing onlooker* for the explication of his "theoretical experience"—which does not deal with what is "existent" (with that which is end-constituted), but with that constituting life which actualizes itself and the world in stages of *"pre-being"*—then the natural meanings of words and sentences cannot stand in a relationship of analogical predication to the intended transcendental sense-elements. This is because *ontic* meanings just cannot form an analogy to *"non-ontic"* transcendental meanings, for the two cannot be at all compared with one another. . . . The "*transcendental* analogy of signifying" which governs the whole of phenomenological predicative explication is thus *not* an analogy possible *within* natural speech, but an *analogy to the analogy* that is found within natural speech; and it is the phenomenological reduction that makes that possible. (Fink 1995, 90–1)

For Fink, then, the phenomenological logos emerges by means of a doubled analogy that exceeds natural speech. In my view, Fink rightly underscores the limits of ontic relations for exhibiting phenomenological ones, but he fails to appreciate the amplitude of natural speech, which includes not only the ontic but also the transcendental, and that failure presents an insurmountable obstacle to the acquisition of phenomenological speech. It is indeed a gnostic path.

**3.2 Metaphor and Metonym**

Sokolowski handles the problem of phenomenological speech by underscoring the way in which ordinary language and experience ever remain on the verge of phenomenological experience and speech. He points out that talk about such topics as "truth" and "presence" are "scraps of transcendentalese in the vernacular" (Sokolowski 1974, 254). Attempts to make sense of them without entering into phenomenology result in hopeless confusion. "But failure to make the transcendental turn prevents one from speaking coherently about truth and presencing, because objects will always be intruding where the presence of objects should be discussed" (Sokolowski 1974, 254). He also suggests that some phenomenological terms arise at first as metaphors and they retain a residue of their pre-metaphorical or ordinary, everyday meaning (Sokolowski 1974, 255; Sokolowski 2008, 33, 304, 312). A related strategy can be found in Crowell, who thinks that phenomenological terms are not analogous to ordinary ones but are instead bound up with them due to the way contexts shift meaning. The reduction is not a rupture but a change of focus that presents for consideration that which was already there in experience. He thinks the transition from ontic to transcendental discourse happens thanks to "metonymy." Here a word is substituted for something it is associated with. "In this account, terms like 'experience' or 'life'

make sense in a transcendental context because the natural attitude is already pervaded by the transcendental—not as something radically other, a gnostic spark hidden within it, but as something customarily overlooked, anonymous" (Crowell 2001, 262).

According to the Sokolowksi–Crowell thesis, then, everyday life is not tidily restricted to mundane talk about things: instead, the transcendental is a possibility *of* the vernacular. There remains in our mother tongue terms such as "truth," "life," "presence," and "experience" that do not express things but instead our having a world. In this way, an ordinary speaker of English, who bemoans the absence of a friend or who invokes the word "truth" in a thoughtful way, is on the verge of the phenomenological enterprise. These terms mean more than our ordinary grammar can express. They implicate us in a phenomenological grammar than requires an explicit appropriation to be understood as such. These are ordinary terms with transcendental meanings.

Given the Sokolowksi–Crowell thesis, what should we make of their particular proposals that the phenomenological logos is helped by metonym—the transposition of meaning via contiguity—or metaphor—the transposition of meaning via similarity? The problem is that both metaphor and metonym appear to be based on relations among things; they thus appear ill-suited for expressing the essential shift to the *experience* of things.[3] Only if we understand metaphor and metonym according to the new grammar of experience instead of the old grammar of things will metaphor and metonym be able to function in a phenomenological context. In the new grammar, contiguity and similarity can indeed take us beyond things: we can speak, for example, metaphorically about the domain of experience as a "clearing" or metonymically (and metaphorically) about a thing's "adumbrations." Sokolowski, for his part, recognizes that metaphor works only against the backdrop of literal meaning (1974, 255). Hence the crucial

question, which must be addressed, concerns how the new grammar can be established, that is, how the ordinary, anonymous scraps of transcendentalese might be appropriated in the first place so that the domain might open and specific terms be introduced via metaphor and metonym. I therefore want to follow the Sokolowski–Crowell thesis that terms such as experience, life, truth, and presence, while found in ordinary speech, carry a transcendental meaning, but I want to explain how these transcendental meanings become activated.

## 4. THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM: INFLECTION

Carnap's misunderstanding of phenomenology reminds us of the need to mind the *difference* between ontic speech about things and transcendental speech about their presence; Derrida's critique of phenomenology reminds us of the need to see this difference as *a distinction, not a separation*. Indication on its own cannot explain the redirection needed to move from ordinary speech about things to phenomenological speech about the structure of experience. Analogy, metaphor, and metonym, as prima facie relations among things, cannot save indication from indeterminacy when it concerns the turn to experience. To meet the challenge, phenomenology must give an account of how its speech expresses a distinction in experience, a distinction that can be expressed in words and understood by others. The Sokolowski–Crowell thesis rightly advances the view that transcendental terms naturally occur in the vernacular but in an incoherent manner. The question then becomes how these ordinary terms can be appropriated phenomenologically.

In my view, phenomenology begins by a process I call "inflection"—language speakers alter the syntax but not the semantics of certain critical everyday experiential terms and thereby allow these terms to emerge in their interconnection with one another as the first expression of

the phenomenological domain. The manner in which a neophyte acquires phenomenological speech repeats the manner in which an infant acquires ordinary speech. Infants break into speech by first selecting out and inflecting animate movement—movement which enables sharing joint experience—from other sorts of movement; philosophers break into phenomenological speech by selecting out and inflecting experiential terms from other sorts of speech. The acquisition of phenomenology therefore comes as the specific appropriation of what makes the acquisition of ordinary speech possible. Phenomenology brings joint experience to expression.

## 4.1 Inflected Animate Action and Ostension

How do infants acquire their mother tongue? How do they come to learn the conventional words spoken around them so that they can become fellow speakers of that speech? Once words are learned they can bring about joint presence, but how can prelinguistic joint presence be achieved so that an infant's first words may be learned?

Before inquiring into the *how* of prelinguistic joint presence we would do well to clarify just what it is. I offer it as a phenomenological appropriation of the terminology of "joint attention" employed by psychologists to explain the means of first word learning; the term "attention" is mental and thus internal and individual: What can join prelinguistic *attention*? The concept goes along with appeals to inferential "mind-reading" skills. Following Merleau-Ponty I think it is rather external and intersubjective presence, established relative to the exploratory movements of our animate bodies, that makes first word learning possible (Engelland 2014). Joint presence suggests the way that presence happens for each of us together thanks to our bodies; our joints join together our experiential explorations of a world of things. Hence, I think the term "joint presence" more adequately expresses the phenomenon that enables infants to

learn their first words: it is not thanks to mind-reading attentions but understanding embodied presences.

How can prelinguistic presence occur, and how can prelinguistic presence give way to linguistic transcendence of immediate presence? Here our phenomenological project concerning word learning will be helped by availing ourselves of the phenomenological insights of Wittgenstein and Augustine (Engelland 2014, Engelland 2018). Though Wittgenstein (1958) criticizes Augustine (1991) as an account of the nature of language, he does not do so as an account of how infants break into speech; Wittgenstein acknowledges that the way they do so will depend on (1) ostension in the context of routine behavior and (2) a language more primitive than our own.

*1. Ostension*

Wittgenstein follows Augustine in thinking that there must be a prelinguistic "common human way of acting [*Handlungsweise*]" (Wittgenstein 1958, 82, trans. mod.). Merleau-Ponty (1973, 2012) likewise emphasizes the way our flesh advertises our affective lives to each other. Hence, the child can look to the language speaker and see what that speaker is attending to. The first words a child learns comes by way of the child tuning in to the prelinguistic meaning of bodily exploration. This tuning in consists in the natural ability to select out from movement in general movements manifesting experiential engagement: the movement toward and away from things, the tone of excitement or the tone of disappointment, the gesture of pointing or the face that either grimaces or melts with recognition. Other movements, such as sitting or standing, respiring or coughing, scratching and rubbing, are not directly relevant for making sense of the intentional, experiential lives of language users. Hence in order for bodily movement to serve as

the prelinguistic basis for joint presence, it is necessary to thematize a particular aspect of movement, movement as manifesting experiential engagement. To learn their first words children must first clue in to this aspect of bodily movement, the way it discloses our engagement with the things we might talk about. It should be emphasized that this class of movement need not be deployed with the intention to communicate—just insofar as I experientially explore the world, I must move and in doing so others can see this whether or not I am trying to get them to do so.

Beginning around nine months of age, expressive movement is, as it were, emphasized or inflected, and that is what establishes prelinguistic joint presence, affording the child the possibility of breaking into speech (Engelland 2014, Tomasello 1999). The advent of ordinary speech, then, involves highlighting movement expressing experiential engagement from the full range of bodily movements. This expressive movement enables ostensions: unknown words can thereby be converted to identifications via attending to joint presence. The child hears a word, looks to see the highlighted item of interest, and registers that word's meaning.

Of course any appeal to ostension is hounded by the notorious ambiguity of pointing gestures. Wittgenstein thinks the language teacher solves the gavagai-problem for the auditor by correcting mistakes; Quine thinks that the linguist solves the gavagai-problem by projecting his own understanding on what is objectively indeterminate: "The implicit maxim guiding his choice of 'rabbit,' and similar choices for other native words, is that an enduring and relatively homogeneous object, moving as a whole against a contrasting background, is a likely reference for a short expression" (Quine 1969, 34). In *Ostension*, I argue that a child handles radical indeterminacy, because there is more to experience than Wittgenstein and Quine fathom (Engelland 2014). In particular, the transcendental structure of human experience naturally

profiles movement over rest and difference over sameness. A gesture accordingly attracts our attention but routine sitting still does not. There are certain natural constraints such as a bias toward the novel, toward certain-sized objects, toward a certain kind of thing, toward essential rather than accidental properties, and toward a certain level of generalization. The child's natural wants, the context of everyday routines and games, and repetition across various contexts helps constrain the logically endless possibilities of ostension, thereby enabling children to learn the meaning of their words. The logic of experience makes prelinguistic joint presence possible and its natural ambiguity manageable.

*2. From Protolanguage to Language*

Insofar as language is a system of signs and any given move in a language game makes sense only relative to a whole complex of others, it seems silly to say that there can be such a thing as a first word: "What sort of folly is it to say that a child speaks a 'first' word" (Gadamer 1976, 63). And yet every parent recalls the first words of a child: "mom," "dad," "ball," "dog." These words are blunt instruments at first, lacking the art of careful contextual embedding that will come later with syntax, but there remains a continuity between "Mom!" said as a first word and "Mom, may I borrow the car, please?" said years later. Wittgenstein rightly points out that learning language as a system of signs requires an intermediary mode of speaking that introduces the first assortment of terms: "A child uses such primitive forms of language when it learns to talk" (Wittgenstein 1958, 4). Before one learns to play chess, one has to be able to distinguish the pieces from one another; before speaking full-blown speech, children must get a handle on some characteristic pieces, although this first grasp cannot be equated with mature language: "Naming

is so far not a move in the language-game—any more than putting a piece in its place on the board is a move in chess" (Wittgenstein 1958, 24).

This first language, protolanguage, is semantics bereft of syntax, and it is typical of four language groups: children from about one to two years of age, trained chimps, feral children, and speakers of pidgin (that is, speakers of different languages thrown together who improvise a new system of communicating). From about ages one to two, children are able to learn words, but they do not combine the words syntactically. Instead they string them together serially. But who gave what to whom and when remains undetermined, although context proves helpful (Bickerton 1990, Bickerton 1995, Sokolowski 2008).

Contra Wittgenstein, but in accord with Augustine, the infant need not be taught this primitive language game; rather, the child is able to pick up speech by eavesdropping on conversations (Bloom 2000). The novel word-sounds constitute so many indications or invitations for the child to look into the field of joint experience and register identities and meanings. While eavesdropping, a child must look about for relevant items, ignoring much that is said, for the environment does not afford the possibility of learning the meaning of all the words spoken; a child cannot learn as its first words terms for things that are not present or on the verge of being present. "The milk's not warm enough," says the mother as she passes the bottle back to the father. The child can pair the word-sound *milk* and milk in this way. But consider an infant overhearing this sentence: "There's no way the president will win reelection." Here *president* and *reelection* cannot be paired with these absent objects. Note the situation is no different for the child of the president. The referents for such terms as 'president' and 'reelection' cannot be present in the way medium-sized perceptual objects, such as milk, ball,

mom, dad, and truck, can be made present. The child can achieve a beachhead in speech only regarding things and actions present to perception.

Beginning about age two, though, infants start to combine words in increasingly unambiguous ways thanks to the ordering clarity of syntactical arrangement: protolanguage yields to language, which differentiates subjects from objects and makes definitions possible. Where does syntax come from? The very part–whole structures at work in the experienced world instigate the child, who is primed by nature to register such things, to bring together words as parts into sentential wholes (Husserl 1948, Sokolowski 2008, 48–67). The terms are fitted together or inflected in order to express the fitted togetherness or flexion of experience.

Now, once syntax kicks in, the field of joint presence ranges beyond one's immediate reach; heretofore absent or abstract terms can be adopted. Thanks to the part–whole structure of syntax, the child can identify missing parts and venture to ask the question, "What is that?" While first words must be learned through perceptual presence, second words can be learned through definition in the absence of their referents. Thanks to syntax, the child can solicit definitions and be able thereby to learn what *president* and *reelection* mean, and then the child might even bring about a kind of presence to these terms, as she watches the victory speech of the president or sees him sign some piece of legislation. Protolanguage brings about presences— "Milk!" the child cries—or registers presences—"Digger!"—but it cannot articulate the presence and absence of things. It targets things in a holistic way from within the ambit of desire or interest but without being able to articulate this desire and interest. Syntax not only allows us to articulate the structures of things and relations at work in states of affairs; it also centrally requires us to tense our actions, and these tenses involve us in a continual navigation of the presence and absence of what we're talking about. It rained yesterday, but it is sunny today.

Syntax's structure enables the speaker of language to do something that the speaker of protolanguage cannot: to track the interplay of presence and absence and speak of things to others in a variegated manner. In this way, speech catches up to the complex interplay constitutive of experience itself.

**4.2 The Ordinary Vocabulary Inflected**

We can therefore distinguish first words, requiring joint presence, from second words, which arise through definition and syntax relative to these first words. The first words, established by joint presence, allow the second words, marked by absence or abstraction, to be acquired. Just as ordinary language comes about in two stages, the acquisition of phenomenological speech requires two stages. In the first, there are the inconspicuous but transcendental features of ordinary language. Only having acquired these terms as such is it possible to enter the second stage: making sense of indications that point in the direction of phenomenological experience. Phenomenological initiation is a matter of calling attention to these strange everyday words, of highlighting them, of explicating and thematizing them. How do the elemental phenomenological terms arise so that advanced terms can be indicated?

For a phenomenological indication to function, the general domain must first be expressed, however obscurely, thanks to heretofore unnoticed horizons of ordinary speech. Phenomenology converts these terms into phenomenological ones, not by inverting or transforming their meaning but by noticing them. The phenomenological act of appropriating an ordinary term while preserving the ordinary meaning I call *inflection*. In doing so, I would highlight three of the word's ordinary senses outlined by the Oxford English Dictionary: (1) Regarding movement, inflection names a bending of something in toward oneself. Charles

Darwin, for example, writes of the inflection of a plant's tentacle. (2) Regarding the spoken word, it names a modulation of voice. (3) Regarding grammar, it speaks of the way the same words can enter into different grammatical relations, including declension, conjugation, and comparison, precisely in order to comprise a single linguistic whole; instead of being serially arranged, they are interconnected. Phenomenology begins by inflecting or bending toward oneself a set of ordinary transcendental terms by stressing them in speech; it thereby alters not the meaning but the interconnected grammar of these words; in doing so, it talks not about things per se but about our experience of them. In *Ideas I*, Husserl says that in transcendental reflection ordinary terms, such as apple tree, should appear only in quotation marks to mark the difference in approach (Husserl 2014, 176); conversely, I think we might consider transcendental terms as carrying implicit quotation marks when they occur in ordinary speech. Phenomenology actualizes these ordinary terms by dropping the quotation marks and speaking about them straightforwardly.

Let's take the phenomenological claim that experience is the interplay of presence and absence or that perception is a matter of making something present.[4] In ordinary speech, we talk about the presence or absence of something or someone—a lifeguard, for example—but not presence and absence as such: "Samantha, the sign says no swimming when the lifeguard is not present." Or, when we say, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," we have in mind not absence per se but the absence of a loved one. To inflect presence and absence means to shift from something or someone to presence and absence as such. The implicit interplay becomes explicit. In doing so the experiential agency relative to which presence and absence occur becomes heighted. Having become inflected, presence and absence becomes the syntax for a thoroughgoing exploration of all the structures of experience. We can now speak, for example, of

the interplay of presence and absence even regarding a present object of perception, arrayed necessarily in such a way that some sides are absent while others are present. Hence, inflection retains the meaning of these ordinary experiential terms but places them in a new context determined by the experiential engagement with things.

The working out of phenomenology is the development of this new syntax of experience. Presence and absence are rooted in our bodily being which situates us in a particular locale, a "here" relative to other "theres." It is the interchange of these locative terms—the fact that my *here* is your *there* and your *here* is my *there*—that lies at the basis of Husserl's account of transcendental intersubjectivity in the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl 1977). Such thoughts occur to us slowly but they are experienced quite early. The infant lives in the interplay of the presence and absence of what it needs and wants; the joy of crawling and then walking concerns in part the ability to take the play of presence and absence into one's own hands. The child's game of peekaboo takes its joy from interpersonal absence-canceling-presence.

The poet's pen too touches on this theme. The presence and the absence of the beloved affects our experience of the whole field of experience. In Sonnet 15, Shakespeare writes, "When I consider every thing that grows / Holds in perfection but a little moment, / That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows / Whereon the stars in secret influence comment." In this case, the field of presence makes changing things manifest in their manifestation. This field of presence in turn affects the experience of others. In Sonnet 97, he likewise writes, "How like a winter hath my absence been / From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year! / What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen! / What old December's bareness every where!" Here the absence of the beloved's field of presence makes the world of nature mean nothing: its springtime therefore becomes as winter without the transfiguring presence of the beloved's field of experience.

Shakespeare's speech demonstrates that the interplay of the beloved's presence and absence interests us in the interplay of presence and absence. Inflection takes such interest and makes it thematic.

Presence entails the presence in the flesh *of* something or someone *to* someone against the backdrop of possible absence. Experience takes place thanks to the interplay of the presence and absence of things to us. Now things are the things they are, independently of whether they are present or absent; presence and absence, moreover, remain what they are, independently of *what* happens to be present or absent. Things transcend experience, and experience transcends things. Nevertheless, it is due to experience that we can experience things as transcending that selfsame experience. In the field of presence, things can come to presence or return to absence while remaining the things they are. Phenomenology arises as the possibility of thinking about and experiencing presence and absence as such.

The inflection that stands at the basis of phenomenological speech resembles the inflection at the basis of ordinary speech. For it is only by inflecting specifically purposive bodily movement from the general class of bodily movements that one establishes the prelinguistic joint presence necessary for acquiring an initial vocabulary, and it is only by inflecting such terms as presence and absence that one establishes the domain necessary for instituting an initial phenomenological vocabulary.

**Table 15.1** Two Features of Inflection

|  | **Uninflected** | **Inflected** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Mereology* | Disparate pieces: presence, absence | Interconnected moments: presence *and* absence |
| *Shift* | *Something* present | *Presence* of something *to us* |

**4.3 The Technical Vocabulary Indicated, Exemplified, and Expressed**

Inflection communicates the opening of the domain: terms such as presence and absence become changed in their syntax but not their semantics. No longer are they attributes of things; thanks to inflection they become distinguished from the things that are present and absent. Once inflection expresses the opened phenomenological domain, it becomes possible to introduce phenomenology's suite of technical terms. Ordinary speech is not adequate for all aspects of the domain of experience. There are equivocations to be worked out, and words such as "noesis" must be coined to name new aspects of the domain (Husserl 2014, 167). Such technical terms can be introduced through directional negation. That is, introducing the phenomenological term involves identifying a term from ordinary discourse or creating a new one while establishing the term's present incomprehensibility. "On pain of absurdity, $phenomenon_1$ is not x, y, or z." Well, what is it? The negations do not merely eliminate candidates. They also move in a particular direction; that is, they convert an ambiguous or unknown term into an indication. Recall Wundt's observations, mentioned above, concerning the roundabout way Husserl's breakthrough work, *Logical Investigations*, introduces its novel vocabulary, including truth and knowledge, but also meaning-intention, meaning-fulfillment, confirmation, and categorial perception. Husserl takes a term and makes it questionable in such a way that a peculiar direction is established toward its fulfillment. Or Heidegger introduces a term such as "being-in-the-world" by telling us he does *not* mean by "in" the sense in which some object is inside another, he does *not* mean by "being" the sense in which something is an object or a tool, and he does *not* mean by "world" a spatial container. The exasperated reader runs out of options for understanding and feels keenly the question, "Well, what then!?" One is eavesdropping here in the specific sense that one is not yet

able to understand this speech let alone produce it. It may indeed be addressed to the interlocutor as a reader or as a student, but insofar as it cannot yet be understood as addressed, it remains a message intercepted rather than one that is properly one's own.

Phenomenology is a science built not on indications but on expressions, although these expressions must necessarily first be understood as indications before they can be confirmed and understood as such. It is here that the philosophical example becomes crucial, for the described example provides the occasion for the reader to fix the meaning of the phenomenological terms. Phenomenology, Husserl says,

> has to place before its eyes pure occurrences of consciousness as exemplars; it has to bring them to ever more perfect clarity; within this clarity it has to analyze them and apprehend their essences, it has to pursue the patently discernible connections among the essences and take up what is respectively seen into faithful conceptual expressions that allows them to dictate their sense purely through what is seen or generally discerned, and so forth. (Husserl 2014, 119)

For example, in the *Logical Investigations* Husserl points out that one and the same perceived event, such as the blackbird's flying away, can be expressed through a variety of sentences. In doing so, he provides a window for the reader onto his distinction between meaning-intention and meaning-fulfillment. Similarly, Heidegger's classic example of the hammer that becomes an object of thematic regard when it is broken or missing provides a window for the reader onto the inconspicuousness of everyday presence and the way in which such presences are related to human projects and the transcendental structure of world. The importance of examples in this respect approaches that of the role ascribed to them by Kuhn (1977) for scientific revolutions. It is not by mastering rules that a scientific shift occurs; it is by thinking through a new paradigmatic example that one starts to think of the whole in a new way. One glimpses Plato's doctrine of forms by following a discussion of piety or justice, and one makes sense of Descartes's *res extensa* by thinking through the wax example in the second of the *Meditations on*

*First Philosophy*. So it is with phenomenology: the phenomenological indications are converted into phenomenological expressions by means of thinking through the articulation of examples. Husserl underscores the importance of exemplars, delineated by imagination, for fulfilling the meaning of scientific terms (Husserl 1980, 86). By considering the ostended examples, we can convert the indication into an expression, the pointer into a term.

Heidegger's infamous inaugural lecture, "What Is Metaphysics?" serves to accomplish the initiation into phenomenological experience and speech. He takes an ordinary word, "nothing," and introduces it through strategic negations: though it is presupposed by access to things, it is *not* any *thing*. Perhaps he thinks he is inflecting a term, but in fact he presses the word into a new meaning, one that it does not enjoy in the vernacular. He has thereby sought to convert an ordinary word into an indication by highlighting its halo of confusion. And he further wants to convert the indication to an expression by getting us to see it as the correlate of angst. The real obstacle to understanding this text is its failure to inflect ordinary words and instead to lead with an indication. Carnap demonstrates the perils of the procedure. He eavesdrops, but being disoriented by Heidegger's failure to inflect the natural transcendental language of experience, does not mind the negations and so cannot grasp the indication as indication. Carnap reads the indication within the horizon of ordinary speech about things. He does not fathom the fact that phenomenology instead expresses the presence of things. To ward off such misunderstandings, phenomenology does well to begin with inflection rather than indication, and then to indicate only while being continually perspicacious and forthright about the character— and limits—of such indication (Engelland 2020b). Phenomenology, it is true, will not travel far without indication, but it will not get started without inflection.

**Table 15.2** Stages of Phenomenological Initiation

|  | **Auditor** | **Speaker** |
|---|---|---|
| *Neophyte* | Eavesdropping on nonsense | Inflection of vernacular's transcendental terms |
| *Amateur* | Inflection of vernacular's transcendental terms | Dialectical differentiations establishing indications |
| *Proficient* | Established indications | Indications elucidated via examples |
| *Expert* | Indications converted to expressions via elucidation | Phenomenological conversation |

## 5. CONCLUSION

Phenomenological speech is not disconnected from ordinary language. It arises as a distinct possibility within ordinary speech, a possibility that when enacted unfolds as a new manner of speaking, based in part on inflecting the old and acquiring novel terms through exemplification. We learn to speak our mother tongue thanks to joint presence; and we learn to speak our phenomenological tongue by speaking directly about what is ordinarily inconspicuous: the interplay of presence and absence thanks to which things and others are experienced as intelligible and sayable.

Just as animate movement harbors the possibility of joint presence and thus semantics, which subverts itself by opening the possibility of language and joint absence, so language itself harbors the possibility of making presence and absence itself into an explicit theme. Like the child's breakthrough into speech, the breakthrough into phenomenology presupposes prior powers while transcending them. It is not the case that ordinary language must become what it is not. It is rather the case that the vernacular, harboring within it not only the power to speak about things but also about their presence, naturally affords possibilities that phenomenology explicitly

enacts and on the basis of which its novel terms can be pointed out. The inflection of the vernacular's transcendental terms achieves linguistic articulation of the logic of experience, and it was just this logic of experience that enabled the joint presence necessary for acquiring our mother tongue. In this way, phenomenological speech is nothing other than the expression of ordinary speech's own origins in joint experience. Inflected terms in turn make understandable the introduction of indications, which are often made less indeterminate by means of analogies, metaphors, and metonyms. Such indications are converted to expressions through following dialectical differentiation and the elucidation of examples.

Gary Gutting (2012) observed, "The continental-analytic gap will begin to be bridged only when seminal thinkers of the Continent begin to write more clearly." They will begin to write more clearly, I submit, only when they explicitly recognize the origin of the phenomenological logos in the inflection of certain terms already operative in everyday language. For, as the poets bear witness and everyday life attests, there is more to our mother tongue than just more and more talk about the properties of things. Readers of phenomenological texts should be put on notice that phenomenologists will have them speaking in ways that are both familiar and strange.

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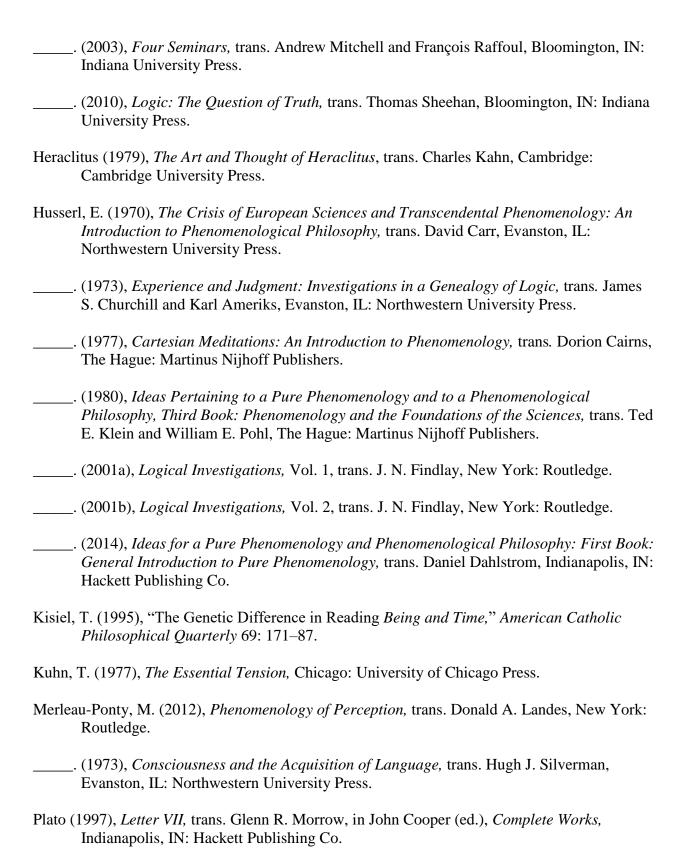Augustine (1995), *The Teacher,* in trans. Peter King, *Against the Academicians; The Teacher*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co.

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[1] Heraclitus 1979, 29. For helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I am indebted to Molly McGrath, Scott Roniger, and many participants of the 2019 North Texas Philosophical Association meeting.

[2] On "interesting," see Engelland 2020a.

3. This seems to be the thought behind Heidegger's rejection of metaphor as "the norm for our conception of the essence of language" (Heidegger 1991, 48).

4. See Heidegger's remarks concerning Husserl's characterization of perception as "making present" in the *Logical Investigations* (Heidegger 1962, 363n23).