

# Is modernity really so bad? John Deely and Husserl's phenomenology

DEREK S. JEFFREYS

## *Abstract*

*This essay critically assesses John Deely's treatment of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology in the Four ages of understanding. First, it outlines Deely's compelling account of how the modern "Way of Ideas" confuses representation and signification. Second, it notes Deely's charge that Husserl is an idealist who thinks the mind constitutes what it knows. Third, it maintains that the early Husserl cannot be an idealist because he attacks psychologism, nominalism, and modern representational epistemologies. Fourth, discussing intentionality, the essay considers Husserl's account of how the mind discovers that mental contents are ideal, atemporal entities. Finally, it suggests that by labeling Husserl an idealist, Deely disregards valuable aspects of modernity.*

*Keywords:* John Deely; phenomenology; Edmund Husserl; idealism; Thomism; intentionality.

Something new and positive has also emerged in the past four centuries. It is as though the ontological understanding of man and being at the end of the Middle Ages still left aspects to be developed. This surely is the fate of the finite condition of human understanding. In any given complex, as one aspect is brought forward, another may be pushed into the background.

—Schmitz (2007: 295)

## 1. Introduction

John Deely's *Four ages of understanding* is a remarkable book unlike any in the English language. Detailing the rich history of signs from pre-modern societies to twenty-first century semiotics, Deely maintains that we have entered a postmodern era. His analysis should interest many contemporary thinkers, but holds particular significance for Thomists. Deely carefully analyzes Thomas' philosophy and John of Poinsett's work, and links Thomism to Charles Sanders Peirce. For him, sign-theory completes and enhances medieval thought, a novel thesis among Thomistic thinkers.<sup>1</sup>

Because Deely engages Thomism so carefully, I was surprised at how he casually brands phenomenology a philosophical failure. For many philosophers, Edmund Husserl's 1901 work, *Logical investigations*, marked a watershed moment in modern philosophy. They believed it responded brilliantly to attempts to reduce philosophy to psychology or other sciences. In the early twentieth-century, Adolf Reinach, Edith Stein, Roman Ingarden, Dietrich Von Hildebrand and others welcomed Husserl's new approach to philosophy.<sup>2</sup> With them, the "possibility of recovering authentic knowledge of the amazing richness of manifold fields of being, including the human self, and especially the inexhaustible ideal realms of essence, resulted in a powerful surge of philosophical interest and activity" (Willard 2002: 73). For some, Husserl's work also enhanced Thomism. For example, Husserl's research assistant Edith Stein initially wrote on phenomenology, and then turned to Thomistic thought later in her career. Similarly, the late Pope John Paul II insisted that phenomenology illuminates Thomistic thought by emphasizing subjectivity. For these thinkers, Husserl offers important philosophical resources for Thomistic thought (Stein 2000; Wojtyła 1960).

Unfortunately, Deely ignores this fruitful philosophical work, dismissing phenomenology as "idealism." In this essay, I dissent from his assessment of Husserl's phenomenology, and urge Deely to look more carefully at Husserl's early work. First, I outline Deely's compelling account of how the modern "Way of Ideas" confuses representation and signification. Second, I note his charge that Husserl is an idealist who thinks the mind constitutes or makes what it knows. Third, I maintain that the early Husserl cannot be an idealist because he attacks psychologism, nominalism, and modern representational epistemologies. Fourth, discussing intentionality, I outline Husserl's distinction between mental acts, objects, and contents, emphasizing how the mind discovers that mental contents are ideal, atemporal entities. Finally, I argue that by labeling Husserl an "idealist," Deely disregards valuable aspects of modernity.

## 2. The flawed Way of Ideas

Deely divides the history of Western philosophy into Ancient, Latin, Modern, and Postmodern periods. He reserves his strongest criticism for the Modern period, at one point even noting how little time it endured. Deely summarizes his case against modern philosophy by saying that “for want of a doctrine of signs” it “takes an epistemological turn that leads the mind into and upon itself” (Deely 2001: 446). Modern philosophers, he maintains, cannot defend the “realm of mind-independent being such as the ancients and the medievals, together with the founders of modern science, had fancied themselves to discern” (Deely 2001: 446). Modern thought operates schizophrenically, proclaiming scientific objectivity, while undermining it philosophically.

This morass originates in a deep epistemological confusion about representation and signification. With representation, we have the “standing of one thing for another, whether “the other” might not really be *other* but rather *the same* thing” (Deely 2001: 695, italics in the original). In contrast, with signification, “an object or a concept can only present something other than itself” (Deely 2001: 520). It is *not* primarily an object of cognition, but a foundation for “relations constitutive of signs” (Deely 2001: 543). In fact, signification “always and necessarily consists in the relation as such, which is over and above that characteristic of a material being or psychological state of an organism upon which the relation itself is founded” (Deely 2001: 543). This relation radically distinguishes it from a representation.

Every sign-relation has three terms, a sign-vehicle, a signified, and an interpretant (Deely 2001: 374). What we often think of as a sign (such as a stop sign) is in fact a sign-vehicle giving rise to a sign-relation. The significant is what the sign-vehicle signifies, but what is signified must be received by an interpretant. Latin philosophy (as Deely exhaustively shows) only gradually and imperfectly recognized the sign’s triadic structure. For example, Latins often confuse the sign and the sign-vehicle. Similarly, they sometimes think the interpretant can only be a mind. In contrast, Peirce rejects the mind/interpretant equation, creating the opportunity for modern zoosemiotics (the study of signs in the animal world) to develop (Deely 2001: 634–635).<sup>3</sup> The sign-relation’s triadic structure, Deely maintains, only becomes fully clear with Peirce’s writings.

Epistemologically, the sign-relation is vital because it transcends modes of being. Aquinas and other Latin thinkers distinguish between *ens reale* (mind-independent being) and *ens rationis* (mind-dependent being). However, we cannot reduce the sign-relation to either of these modes of being

because it can be each of the “opposed orders” of being (Deely 2001: 476). Poinsoot was the first thinker to fully develop this feature of the sign-relation. St. Augustine knew that a natural sign like fire need not depend on a mind, while a conventional one like a flag is mind-dependent. However, Poinsoot argues that a sign can sometimes be mind-dependent and at others times mind-independent. For example, a fossil is a sign-vehicle that can create both mind-dependent and mind-independent relations. Prior to its discovery, it creates a relation that no mind grasps (except for a Divine Mind) (Deely 2001: 638–639). However, once paleontologists discover it, the sign-relation becomes mind-dependent. Thus, “the being proper to sign consists, in every case of an ontological relation (a *relation secundum esse* as expressing the single definable structure common to relation regardless of the circumstances extraneously further differentiating the realization of this structure as categorical or “rational”, physical or objective, at a given moment)” (Deely 2001: 430). By bridging diverse modes of existence, the sign-relation thus prevents solipsism and subjectivism.

Modern thinkers unfortunately lack any sense of the “priority of signs to objects” (Deely 2001: 520). They falsely assume that “the very ideas formed by the human mind are as such the immediate and direct objects of experience at every level of cognitive activity” (Deely 2001: 695). As a result, they create insoluble epistemological dilemmas about how ideas relate to extra-mental realities. For example, many modern philosophers debate the existence of the external world.<sup>4</sup> This pseudo-problem, Deely maintains, originates in Descartes, and appears in Locke, Hume, Berkeley, and others. Naturally, if we only know our ideas we will struggle to relate to the external world. Descartes illustrates this difficulty well, pursuing a path “according to which there is nothing about ideas themselves which makes them link up with something beyond the subjectivity of the knower” (Deely 2001: 546). For Descartes, ideas exist independently of their relations to sensation and the world outside the mind. After him, ideas often represent only themselves.<sup>5</sup> Berkeley, Deely suggests, reasonably concludes from representationalism that we know only our ideas. For example, if knowing a house means I know its idea, I have no reason to think the house enjoys mind-independent existence (Deely 2001: 549). Instead, I should conclude that it is an idea. Far from being an anomaly, then, Berkeley simply articulates modern thought’s conceptual consequences.

Surveying this history, Deely maintains that the early moderns could conceive of no alternative to the Ways of Ideas. Their imaginative failure originates in part from the way they ignore Poinsoot’s ground-breaking work on signs. Sadly, Poinsoot represents modernity’s “road not taken”

because he links mind-dependent and mind-independent realities. For him, all “images and all ideas” are “related to their objects as signs to significates” (Deely 2001: 534). Sensations, perceptions, and acts of understanding form a “continuous network, tissue, or web of sign relations” (Deely 2001: 534). This remarkable vision dissolves the pseudo-problem of the existence of the external world. It also connects nature and culture, overcoming the many modern attempts to separate human consciousness from nature. For Deely, then, rather than being a marginal specialization in the philosophical enterprise, the doctrine of signs is “something central to it and at its core” (Deely 2001: 534). Modern philosophers fail to realize its centrality, and therefore, cannot escape their own epistemological traps.

### **3. Husserl and idealism**

By failing to distinguish between representation and signification, Deely maintains, modern philosophy inevitably degenerates into idealism. He defines idealism as the “distinctive position proper to modern philosophy as it developed from Descartes to Kant in revealing, by a series of logical consequences, that the common assumption of the early moderns (that ideas of the understanding are the direct objects of experience) leads inevitably to the conclusion that whatever the mind knows the mind itself constitutes or makes” (Deely 2001: 691). Deely labels Husserl an idealist<sup>6</sup> whose work “becomes but an extension of modern rationalism trapped within the boundaries of the modern idealist paradigm, rather than a work of semiotic” (Deely 2001: 220, note 30). Linking Husserl to Descartes, Deely notes that he “thought he was doing something radically new with his phenomenology. But one day he realized what was up and renamed his planned lecture series, which became one of his most important books, the *Cartesian Meditations*” (Deely 2001: 581). On Deely’s account, Husserl is an idealist who fails to overcome modern philosophy’s impasses.

### **4. Idealism and psychologism**

This idealist reading of Husserl ignores key phenomenological developments and distinctions. In particular, it disregards the intellectual milieu of Husserl’s early years, in which logicians expressed deep worries about modern representationalism. Gottlieb Frege is the most well-known of such thinkers, but others also voiced concerns about modern epistemology. In

his masterful study of Husserl's early philosophy, Dallas Willard discusses how Herman Lotze, Christopher Sigwart and others objected to using representation to explain logic (Willard 1984). Some insisted on distinguishing between representation and propositional content. For example, Lotze sharply differentiates *Vorstellungen* (ideas) from *Ideen* (Ideas). For him, ideas belong to the world of becoming, in which real events occur. In contrast, Ideas are atemporal, and include contents, propositions and truths (Willard 1984: 152–153). Here is a quote from Lotze expressing this point well:

Now ideas (*Vorstellungen*), insofar as they are present in our minds, possess reality in the sense of an Event — they occur in us; for as expressions of an activity of representing they are never finished Being, but a continual Becoming; their content, on the other hand, so far as we regard it in abstraction from the representing activity which we direct to it, can no longer be said to occur, through neither again does it exist as things exist. Rather, it only obtains. (Lotze, quoted in Willard 1984: 152)<sup>7</sup>

For Lotze, representations cannot ground knowledge because they are changing and unstable mental events in an individual mind. To establish logical truths, we need stable, atemporal mental contents. Frege makes similar comments, noting that

Logic, in no way, is part of psychology. The Pythagorean Theorem expresses the same thought for all men, while each person has his own representations, feelings, resolutions which are different from those of every other person. Thoughts are not psychic structures, and thinking is not an inner producing and forming, but an apprehension of thoughts which are already objectively given. (Frege, quoted in Mohanty 1982: 122)

Frege maintains that representationalism undermines knowledge because it identifies it with changing psychological states. He, Lotze, Sigwart, and others clearly recognize a significant problem in representational epistemologies.

Creatively responding to these intellectual currents, Husserl develops his brilliant criticism of psychologism. Psychologism was a nineteenth-century approach to logic that reduced it to psychology. In the “Forward” to the *Logical investigations*, Husserl describes how he initially believed that psychology “was the science from which logic in general, and the logic of the deductive sciences, had to hope for philosophical clarification” (Husserl 2001: 2).<sup>8</sup> However, he became disenchanted with this thesis, particularly by studying Bernard Bolzano, Frege, and others.<sup>9</sup> He

“became more and more disquieted by doubts of principle, as to how to reconcile the objectivity of mathematics, and all science in general, with a psychological foundation for logic” (Husserl 2001: 2). In the *Logical investigations*, he thus turns radically against psychologism.

Psychologism was originally a thesis about logic, but phenomenologists gradually extended it to other areas of philosophy and the social sciences. J. N. Mohanty helpfully distinguishes between weak and strong psychologism. Weak psychologism maintains that psychological investigation is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for understanding logic. Strong psychologism, in contrast, asserts that psychology constitutes “both the necessary and sufficient conditions for inquiry into the foundation of logic” (Mohanty 1982: 20). Husserl never denies psychology’s importance, and shows a deep interest in William James and other psychologists. However, he repudiates strong psychologism. Moving beyond logic, I will understand psychologism as the claim that “things like logic, truth, verification, evidence, and reasoning are simply empirical activities of our psyche” (Sokolowski 2000: 114). Debates about it seem dated because they concern technical logical issues holding little interest for contemporary thinkers. However, in its general form, psychologism remains common in academic disciplines. For example, some contemporary analytic philosophy of mind explains consciousness by reducing it to brain events. Although this approach differs from psychologism, it suffers from many of its conceptual defects. Thus, current thinkers can benefit from recalling Husserl’s treatment of psychologism.<sup>10</sup>

Husserl maintains that psychologism confuses facts and logical truths.<sup>11</sup> A logical truth differs fundamentally from a fact, which is “individually and therefore temporally determinate” (Husserl 2001: “Prolegomena to pure logic,” section 36, 80). For example, the fact, “human beings have well-developed brains” originated only after we evolved. A logical truth (the principle of non-contradiction, for example), on the other hand, is atemporal, and talk of “temporal determination” makes “no sense in regard to the truth itself” (Husserl 2001: “Prolegomena to pure logic,” section 36, 80). We cannot provide a date or time for the origin of logical truths. We apprehend them at particular times, but *what* we apprehended does not originate temporally. When eating a red apple, I recognize its redness, which then disappears when the apple enters my mouth. However, it would be absurd to declare that Redness comes into being and passes away (Husserl 2001: “Prolegomena to pure logic,” section 36, 86). Psychological changes affect the individual psyche, not logical truths.

Psychologism also mistakenly holds that the human mind makes, rather than discovers logical truths. Logical laws are not restricted to

“human or other kinds of judging persons,” but obtain without reference to kinds of minds (Husserl 2001: “Prolegomena to pure logic,” section 36, 94). Those who believe we create logical truths end up endorsing some form of relativism. Individual relativism, of course, assumes that “for each man that is true which seems to *him* true, one thing to one man and the opposite to another, if that is how he sees it” (Husserl 2001: “Prolegomena to pure logic,” section 77, 34). Husserl employs well-known objections to this kind of relativism. Species-specific relativism holds that truth is relative to the human species (a position Husserl calls *anthropologism*). It yields the absurd conclusion that a proposition can be simultaneously true and false (Husserl 2001: “Prolegomena to pure logic,” section 36, 79). A human and a Martian, for example, could differ on whether “ $2 + 2 = 4$ .” Naturally, the human would affirm this proposition’s truth because of her brain physiology. Possessing a different biological constitution, the Martian might declare it to be false. What then, should we say about the proposition’s truth value? We would be forced to conclude that it is simultaneously true and false, a preposterous idea. In this analysis, Husserl thus emphatically rejects the notion that we make or constitute the laws of logic.

## 5. Is nominalism the answer?

A critic might respond to Husserl’s critique of psychologism by arguing that our knowledge consists of “only complexes of mental experiences that are similar to one another” (Ingarden 1989: 17). If sophisticated, she might explain this similarity psychologically or philosophically. In Husserl’s day, such a critic would embrace Hume’s philosophy or associationalist psychology, in our day she might adopt a physicalist conception of the mind. For such thinkers, the mind constitutes the unity, which is absent in mind-independent reality. We think objects possess unity because of our inexact ways of speaking. Take Frege’s example of the Pythagorean Theorem. When a nineteenth-century German student learned it, and I learned in the 1970s, we were not learning the same thing. For social purposes, we assert historical continuity between these experiences, but ontologically, we have only similar mental events at different times and places.

Husserl responds to such arguments when attacking modern nominalism.<sup>12</sup> Phenomenologically, nominalists fail to differentiate between grasping a universal and grasping a particular. A universal is an ideal unity or Species, and the “act in which we mean the Species, is in fact essentially different from the act in which we mean the individual” (Husserl



2001: II, 1, 239). Nominalists repeatedly confuse these acts, trying to reduce apprehending universals to grasping individuals. We must access both universals and individuals through sense perception, but sense perception sustains “different acts in the two cases” (Husserl 2001: II, 1, 239). We cannot apprehend universals simply by adding up experiences of individuals. Instead, we have to engage in an act of abstraction. Moderns like Locke and Hume repeatedly misunderstand abstraction, creating deep epistemological difficulties.<sup>13</sup> Husserl is convinced, however, that careful phenomenological analysis reveals that meaning an individual and meaning a universal differ fundamentally.

In addition to ignoring this phenomenological distinction, nominalists create confusion by thinking that mental objects represent extra-mental realities. Husserl quotes from Hans Cornelius, a psychologist who maintains that

the distinction of differing features . . . is based . . . on the fact that the contents are gathered into groups according to similarities, and are named with common names. There is therefore nothing else that *we mean* when we talk of the varying features of a content, than the fact that this content belongs to various groups of contents, all mentally similar and therefore called by the same name. (Husserl 2001: II, Appendix, 303)

Cornelius captures the main features of the Humean mental representation. It holds that similarity mediates “the relation between a general name and the class it applies to” (Husserl 2001: V, Appendix, 305). Representations serve as convenient classificatory devices that simplify cognition. In Husserl’s time, thinkers were already linking this account of universals to evolutionary theory, arguing that they are devices for economizing thought (Husserl 2001: II, 24). Today, of course, we see this same move among evolutionary psychologists.

Husserl rejects such nominalist arguments because they offer no reason to link particular representations and objects. He makes this point when discussing image-theory, which holds that when apprehending a universal, an image. It “does duty” for an extra-mental object by representing it (Husserl 2001: V, Appendix to sections 11 and 20, 125). Husserl notes that a representation is “no ‘real predicate,’ no intrinsic character of the object which functions as image” (Husserl 2001: V, Appendix to sections 11 and 20, 125). We can arbitrarily posit resemblance between things and images, but resemblance “between two objects, however precise, does not make the one be an image of the other” (Husserl 2001: V, Appendix to sections 11 and 20, 125).<sup>14</sup> What reason do we have for taking one object to image another?

Husserl develops this criticism of nominalism further by noting difficulties in identifying similarities in objects. The Humean nominalist wants us to believe that meaning arises by surveying particularly. However, Husserl correctly notes that we cannot discern unity without already possessing a criterion of similarity. The nominalist offers only a series of different particulars, each with distinct temporal properties alone, they cannot explain why we group items together. For example, we might sort my red hair, a red car, and a red rose together because they have a similar color, red. We do so, however, only because we already possess a conception of redness. Remove it, and we cannot justify linking these objects. For the nominalist, unity magically emerges from experiences of hair, cars, and roses. Instead of explaining it, she offers a genetic account of how general concepts originate, which cannot explain unity. We can always ask why we *should* use a universal to classify objects. For Husserl, the failure to explain universals represents one of the main inadequacies of the Way of Ideas.

## 6. Intentionality and mental contents

Husserl enhances his attack on representationalism with his famous discussion of intentionality in the *Logical Investigations*. There, he takes up Franz Brentano's thesis that intentionality or object-directedness defines the mental. He agrees with Brentano that "in perception, something is perceived, in imagination, something imagined, in a statement something stated, in love, something loved, in hated, hated, in desire, desired, etc." (Husserl 2001: V, section 10, 95). In each of these cases, we intend the same object through different acts. Husserl takes this to be Brentano's great insights, and it became the focus of his attention for many years.

Worrying about psychologism, Husserl rejects Brentano's claim that intentionality includes the "intentional inexistence" of the intended object. Talk of "immanent objectivity" or "mental inexistence" confuses a psychological event with the object intended. Furthermore, it undermines the act's unity by accentuating the difference between the activity and its object. Finally, the concept of mental inexistence ignores how intentional relations are indifferent to the extra-mental existence of objects. For example, Husserl considers the idea of the god Jupiter. Talk of mental inexistence suggests that when I think about Jupiter, some real object constitutes my intention. However, "this intentional experience may be dismembered as one chooses in descriptive analysis, but the god Jupiter naturally will not be found in it" (Husserl 2001: V, section 11, 95). Jupiter does not exist at all, but if I think about him, some intentional relation

still obtains.<sup>15</sup> In sum, Husserl advises against talking about objects residing in consciousness because “all modern psychology and epistemology have been confused by these and similar equivocations” (Husserl 2001: V, section 11, 100). Because of psychologism’s popularity, we should always guard against confusing psychological states and intentional objects.

## 7. Intentionality and the structure of an act

With this anti-psychologism caveat clear, Husserl again rejects representationalism by analyzing mental acts, contents, and objects. To illustrate this distinction, take Husserl’s example of perceiving a house. I perceive it at a particular time and place, and my brain undergoes modifications during this perception. However, this act differs from the object I intend, which is the house, and the act’s content, which depends on how I perceive the house. I may perceive the front of the house, and the content would then be “the front of a house.” When presenting such distinctions, Husserl insists that intentionality relates to objects, rather than simply connecting mental events. It is a “serious error to draw a real (reel) distinction between the ‘merely’ immanent’ or ‘intentional’ objects on the one hand, and the ‘transcendent’, ‘actual’ objects which may correspond to them on the other” (Husserl 2001: V, Appendix to 11 and 20, 126). In fact, we must recognize that the “*intentional object of a presentation is the same as its actual object, and on occasion as its external object, and that it is absurd to distinguish them*” (Husserl 2001: V, Appendix to 11 and 20, 127, italics in original). Mental acts intend not other mental acts or states, but real and ideal objects.

The act’s content explains how we can repeatedly intend the same object. It is “that *in* the act that *accounts for* the act’s being directed toward, or being of or about its object” (Smith and McIntyre 1982: 109). In his early works, Husserl contrasts an act’s content and quality. Quality classifies the nature of the act (perceiving, judging, and asserting), while content “stamps it as presenting *this*, as judging *that* etc.” (Husserl 2001: V, section 20, 19, italics in the original). For example, we can have two judgments, “Husserl is a good philosopher” and “the doctrine of signs is important”. They have the same quality, but differ in content. Or, we can have qualitatively different acts that intend identical contents, such as when I believe or assert that, “the doctrine of signs is important”. Acts may differ phenomenologically, but such differences are “quite irrelevant to the essential content, the interpretative sense” of the acts. (Husserl 2001: V, section 21, 124). You may remember a house vividly, while I only vaguely recall it. In both cases, the meaning “stays unchanged,

identically determined” because of identical content (Husserl 2001: V, section 21, 124).

In contrast to representationalism, the act’s content guarantees a close connection between mind-dependent and mind-independent realities. It gives directional quality to intentionality, and if an extra-mental object exists, determines its nature. A pointing character is “an *intrinsic* feature of the content, due to its very own nature alone” (Smith and McIntyre 1982: 106). Husserl often illustrates this pointing character by discussing how contents suggest an object’s unexplored features. When I intend the house with the content, “the front of the house,” I am aware that it also has a back part. The content points to the entire house, even I have a limited perception. I know my perception is partial, and does not exhaust the object intended. Such unexplored features of an object show that rather than being self-made, content connects to an object. It “does not intervene between the act and its object, and does not close the mind off from the very objects or world that it was supposed to make accessible” (Willard 2002: 74). Its intentional character precludes it from become the terminus of cognition.<sup>16</sup>

An act’s content also cannot be a subjective representation because of its atemporal and aspatial character. Notoriously, Husserl “brackets” questions about an object’s real existence, maintaining that intentionality is indifferent to real existence.<sup>17</sup> However, he also insists that mental contents are not subject to time and space. Commenting on the idea of pure logic, for example, Husserl maintains that scientific methods are temporal and changing, but the “objective content” of a science is “quite independent of the scientist’s subjectivity, of the peculiarities of human nature in general. It is objective truth” (Husserl 2001: “Prolegomena to pure logic, 105).<sup>18</sup> When discussing nominalism, he defines real being by stating that “temporality is a sufficient mark of reality. Real being and temporal being may not be identical notions, but they coincide in extension” (Husserl 2001: II, section 8, 249).<sup>19</sup> Objects like redness, numbers, and act-contents “exist genuinely,” but differ from real objects temporally (Husserl 2001: II, section 8, 249). They cannot be merely private thoughts, but always have a public character accessible to other thinking beings. From this discussion, then, we clearly see that for Husserl, the mind does not make or constitute what it knows. If it did, mental contents would originate in time, an idea Husserl repeatedly rejects.

Husserl retained the distinction between acts, objects, and content throughout his career, but developed it using new vocabulary. His followers disagree about which terms we should use to describe it.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the key distinction between mental acts, content and objects remains a telling criticism of representationalism. Despite Deely’s asser-

tion, Husserl's account of cognition, therefore, "is not a species of 'representationalism' in that sense, akin to theories holding that we are properly or directly aware only of our own 'ideas', which in turn stand for or represent external objects" (Smith and McIntyre 1982: 144). From his earliest works, he was a consistent and careful critic of modern representationalism.

Let me summarize what I have said about Husserl and idealism. His attacks on psychologism and nominalism, and his analysis of acts all reveal why he cannot be an idealist (in Deely's sense of the term). In his careful attack on psychologism, he insists that humanity is not the creator of all truth. He repudiates nominalism and all forms of mental representationalism. And finally, he painstakingly distinguishes between mental acts and contents, insisting that contents are atemporal entities. With all three topics, Husserl rejects the modern Way of Ideas and its "thoroughly debauched epistemology" (Husserl 2001: "Prolegomena to pure logic," section 22, 273).

## **8. An idealist conversion? The later Husserl**

A critic of my argument might concede that the early Husserl was a realist, but maintain that he devolved into idealism later in life. This appears to be Deely's position. He says little about Husserl's early work, but offers a cursory account of Husserl's intellectual development. To again quote what he says on this matter, Deely alleges that Husserl "thought he was doing something radically new with his phenomenology. But one day he realized what was up and renamed his planned lecture series, which became one of his most important books, the *Cartesian meditations*" (Deely 2001: 581). On this account, Husserl began as a promising critic of modernity, but went nowhere because he embraced Cartesian idealism.

Deely fails to substantiate this controversial reading of Husserl's work, citing only the writings of Herbert Spiegelberg and Thomas Langan. Undoubtedly, around 1908, Husserl changed his approach to phenomenology dramatically. Moreover, in the *Cartesian meditations*, he creates many epistemological difficulties, long recognized by Husserl scholars.<sup>21</sup> However, we cannot simply assert that the later Husserl embraced idealism. Even Roman Ingarden, one of Husserl's fiercest realist critics, recognizes the complexities of Husserl's idealism. Carefully discussing different understandings of the term "idealism," he argues that Husserl is no Berkeleyan idealist (Ingarden 1964). In light of these complex debates about Husserl's idealism, Deely must do more to demonstrate that Husserl became an idealist in the *Cartesian Meditations*.

More importantly, even if Husserl endorsed idealism later in life, his early writings remain valuable. In them, Husserl is “an outstanding thinker working upon a set of fundamental and quite nonpartisan problems about the nature of cognitive experience” (Willard 1982: xii). We can appreciate this work regardless of later developments in his thought. Edith Stein, Adolf Reinach, Roman Ingarden, and others rejected what they took to be Husserl’s later idealism, but embraced his early work. Contemporary scholars like John F. Crosby follow them, retrieving important insights about the person from the early Husserl (Crosby 2004). Early phenomenology offers remarkable philosophical resources for engaging modern logic, ethics, the philosophy of law and other topics. We should not neglect them by focusing unproductively on Husserl’s intellectual development.

## 9. Lost opportunities

By labeling Husserl an idealist, Deely disregards some of modernity’s valuable developments. When discussing modern philosophy, he frequently adopts a negative tone, urging readers to abandon it in favor of post-modernity. This attitude contrasts sharply with the more positive approach we see in some other critics of modernity who value its turn toward the subject. For example, Kenneth Schmitz notes that “it is important for those who value the great tradition, and who are acutely aware of the deficiencies of modern thought, to appreciate the great advance in self-understanding that has been brought about — as a byproduct, so to speak, through an admittedly exaggerated emphasis upon self-identity and self-reference” (Schmitz 2007: 111). Phenomenology helps us understand “the proper status and role of consciousness within the human person” (Schmitz 1993: 138). Likewise, John Paul II distinguishes between cosmological and personalist approaches to the person (Wojtyla 1993: 209–217). A cosmological approach considers the person from without, defining her nature and interaction with the environment. A personalist approach focuses on the person’s interior facets. For John Paul II, phenomenology reveals aspects of the person that medieval thinkers underemphasize or ignore. He uses them in remarkable ways to reflect on suffering, history, and ethics. Finally, W. Norris Clarke, S.J. appreciates modernity’s accent on interiority. Emphasizing modern movements that value dialogue between persons, he proposes a “creative integration” of Thomistic thought and phenomenology (Clarke 1993). All three of these thinkers recognize modernity’s dangers, but retrieve its valuable elements.

In contrast, Deely scornfully dismisses modern thought, finding little value in its turn toward the person.

This negative stance toward modern thinkers discourages fruitful philosophical engagement with them. For example, by charging Husserl with idealism, Deely disregards his remarkable reflections on modern logic and epistemology. Rather than adopting this stand, why not recognize that phenomenology “begins philosophy in a manner different from the way Thomism begins it, but in a way that complements and does not contradict the Thomistic approach” (Sokolowski 2000: 207). Critically retrieved, phenomenology validates our natural attitude toward the world, helping Thomism develop its metaphysics. Thomists differ from Husserl over issues like the ontological status of meanings, the phenomenological reduction, and a metaphysics of *esse*. Rather than dismissing Husserl with labels, Deely should engage him on specific philosophical differences. For too long the idealist label has served as a conversation stopper prematurely ending philosophical engagement.

Finally, by labeling Husserl an idealist, Deely ignores him as a potential interlocutor about sign-theory. Husserl shows a deep interest in sign-theory, particularly when writing about mathematics. For example, he discusses signs in the *Philosophy of Arithmetic*, exploring how mathematics relates to intuition (also see Willard 1984: Ch. 3). He puzzled over how complex mathematical formulae could serve as signs. He also devotes considerable attention to signs in the *Logical investigations*, considering words and signs.<sup>22</sup> In fact, he devotes long sections in the *Logical investigations* to discussing signs and expressions (Husserl 2001: VI, 183–225). Deely notes none of this intriguing work, losing a valuable opportunity to engage Husserl on the doctrine of signs. Because he concludes that Husserl is an idealist, Deely apparently thinks Husserl has nothing worthwhile to say about signs.

## 10. Conclusion

With care and precision, Deely demonstrates deep difficulty in modern thought. By translating and explaining Poincaré’s remarkable work, he opens areas of inquiry vitally important for contemporary philosophers. However, he makes the unfounded charge that Husserl is an idealist, and is apparently unaware of Husserl’s careful attacks on psychologism, nominalism, and representationalism. Consequently, he overlooks some of modernity’s valuable elements. Despite their failure to understand signs and a deeply flawed epistemology, modern thinkers highlight important aspects of consciousness. Phenomenology, in particular, offers deep

insights into our interior lives. By casually dismissing Husserl as an idealist, Deely does a disservice to a great thinker who shares some of his concerns about modernity. More importantly, he jettisons important advances in our understanding of the person. His impressive narrative reads as if the modern world is entirely corrupt, without light or insight. I hope, however, that a more careful look at Husserl and phenomenology might persuade Deely to see some merit in modernity's struggles and achievements.

## Notes

1. For good Thomistic responses to Deely, see Ashley (2005) and Clarke (2005).
2. For a classical account of Husserl's influence on his students, see Spiegelberg (1965). Dallas Willard (2002) offers a more recent assessment.
3. For a careful discussion of animals and signs, see Deely (2000).
4. Deely (2001: 527–539) provides an excellent analysis of modernity's confusions about primary and secondary qualities.
5. In a sophisticated reading of Locke, Deely (2001: Ch. 14) notes Locke's suggestive, but incomplete comments on signs.
6. For two Thomists who adopt this approach to Husserl, see Maritain (1959: 101–111), and Pegis (1984: 109–134).
7. Bernard Bolzano also attacked psychologism and idealism: see Sebestik (2003), and George (2003).
8. When referring to the *Logical investigations*, I cite both section and page numbers.
9. The conventional wisdom about Frege and Husserl is that Frege woke Husserl from his psychologistic slumber when he reviewed his book, *The philosophy of mathematics*. However, this is a far too simplistic an account of the relationship between these two thinkers. For two good discussions of Frege and Husserl, see Mohanty (1982) and Willard (1984).
10. Good discussions of psychologism and the social sciences are in Notturmo (1989).
11. Husserl develops many interesting criticisms of psychologism that I will not consider in this essay. For example, he rejects empiricist understanding of logic, considers if logic is a normative discipline, and discusses particular psychologistic analyses of the syllogism.
12. Husserl uses the term “nominalism” as a conceptual rather than an historical term. It describes those who deny that universals exist outside of the mind's activity. He attributes nominalism to Locke, Hume, and Mill. Contemporary scholars in medieval philosophy would, of course, insist on greater precision in using the term “nominalism.”
13. Husserl also provides an excellent analysis of how nominalism fails to understand abstraction, see Husserl (2001: II, 1–5, 239–288).
14. Such arguments against nominalist are quite familiar to Thomists who have written about William of Ockham.
15. On the question of mental inexistence, Thomistic analyses of intentionality differ dramatically from Husserl's account. For some discussions of Thomistic intentionality, see Hayen (1939: 385–410), De Finance (1960), Perler (2001), and Deely (2007).



16. Sokolowski brilliantly explores this area of Husserl's thought, focusing on the idea of an *empty intention*. An empty intention "targets something that is not there, something absent, something not present to the one who intends" (Sokolowski 2000: 33).
17. For a good discussion of the phenomenological and other reductions in Husserl, see Sokolowski (2000: Ch. 4).
18. Aron Gurwitsch (1974) develops a wonderful criticism of Hume on temporality. I have learned a great deal from this article. I thank Gilbert T. Null for interesting conversations about Hume.
19. For a different understanding of the mark of real being, see Clarke (1993), and De Finance (1960). Both of these thinkers maintain that activity is the criterion for real being. Because God is atemporal, obviously, they cannot identify the real with the temporal because this would make God an ideal entity.
20. For a good overview of the development of Husserl's thought, see Mohanty (1995: 45–77). For discussions of the idealism/realism issue in Husserl, see Harrison Hall (1982: 169–190), and Zahavi (2002: 93–111).
21. These difficulties concern intersubjectivity, which some scholars think Husserl fails to explain. Alfred Schutz (1970) makes this argument well. I am persuaded by Schutz's argument, and unlike Deely, do not think *Cartesian meditations* is one of Husserl's most important works.
22. Sokolowski (2002: 171–183) discusses this theme well.

## References

- Ashley, Benedict, O. P. 2005. A postmodern history of philosophy. *American Journal of Semiotics* 21(1–4). 5–10.
- Clarke, Norris W., S. J. 1993. *Person and being*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press.
- Clarke, Norris W., S. J. 2005. Reflections on Deely's *Four ages*. *American Journal of Semiotics* 21(1–4). 11–28.
- Crosby, John F. 2004. *Personalist papers*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
- Deely, John. 2000. *What distinguishes human understanding?* South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press.
- Deely, John. 2001. *Four ages of understanding: The first postmodern survey of philosophy from ancient times to the turn of the twenty-first century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Deely, John. 2007. *Intentionality and semiotics: A story of mutual fecundation*. Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press.
- Finance, Joseph de. 1960. *Être et agir dans la philosophie de S. Thomas*. Rome. Università Gregoriana.
- George, Rolf. 2003. Bolzano and the problem of psychologism. In Denis Fisette (ed.), *Husserl's Logical investigations reconsidered*, 95–108. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Gurwitsch, Aron. 1974. *Phenomenology and the theory of science*, Lester Embree (ed.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Hall, Harrison. 1982. Was Husserl a realist or an idealist? In Herbert L. Dreyfus and Harrison Hall (eds.), *Husserl, intentionality and cognitive science*, 169–190. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hayen, André. 1939. L'intentionnalité de l'être et métaphysique de la participation. *Revue néoscholastique* 42. 385–410.

- Husserl, Edmund. 2001. *Logical investigations*, J. N. Findlay (trans.). London: Routledge.
- Ingarden, Roman. 1964. *Time and modes of being*, Helen R. Michejda (trans.). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Ingarden, Roman. 1989. *Ontology of the work of art: The musical work, the picture, the architectural work, the film*, Raymond Meyer and John T. Goldthwait (trans.). Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Maritain, Jacques. 1959. *Distinguish to unite or the degrees of knowledge*, Gerald B. Phelan (trans.). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Mohanty, J. N. 1982. *Husserl and Frege*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Mohanty, J. N. 1995. The development of Husserl's thought. In Barry Smith & David Woodruff Smith (eds.), *Cambridge companion to Husserl*, 45–77. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Notturmo, Mark A. 1989. *Perspectives on psychologism*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Pegis, Anton. 1984. St. Thomas and Husserl on intentionality. In Victor B. Brezik (ed.), *Thomistic papers I*, 109–134. Houston: University of St. Thomas, Center for Thomistic Studies.
- Perler, Dominik. 2001. *Ancient and Medieval theories of intentionality*. Boston, MA: Brill.
- Schmitz, Kenneth L. 1993. *At the center of the human drama: The philosophical anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
- Schmitz, Kenneth L. 2007. Creative receptivity and the philosophy of the concrete. In *The texture of being: Essays in first philosophy*, 106–131. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
- Schutz, Alfred. 1970. The problem of transcendental subjectivity in Husserl. In Maurice Natanson (ed.), *Collected papers III*, 51–91. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Sebestik, Jan. 2003. Husserl reader of Bolzano. In Denis Fisette (ed.), *Husserl's Logical investigations reconsidered*, 59–81. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Smith, David Woodruff & Ronald McIntyre. 1982. *Husserl and intentionality*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- Sokolowski, Robert. 2000. *Introduction to phenomenology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sokolowski, Robert. 2002. Semiotics in Husserl's *Logical investigations*. In Dan Zahavi & Frederik Stjernfelt (eds.), *One hundred years of phenomenology: Husserl's Logical investigations revisited*, 171–183. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Spiegelberg, Herbert. 1965. *The phenomenological movement*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Stein, Edith. 2000. An attempt to contrast Husserl's phenomenology and the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. In *Knowledge and faith: The collected works of Edith Stein*, Walter Redmond (trans.), vol. 8, 1–63. Washington, DC: ICS.
- Willard, Dallas. 1984. *Logic and objectivity in Husserl's early philosophy*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Willard, Dallas. 2002. The world well won: Husserl's epistemic realism one hundred years later. In Dan Zahavi & Frederik Stjernfelt (eds.), *One hundred years of phenomenology: Husserl's Logical investigations revisited*, 69–78. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Wojtyla, Karol. 1960. *Love and responsibility*, H. T. Willetts (trans.). New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Wojtyla, Karol. 1993. Subjectivity and the irreducible in the human being. In *Person and community: Selected essays*, Teresa Sandock (trans.), 209–217. New York: Peter Lang.
- Zahavi, Dan. 2002. Metaphysical neutrality in *Logical Investigations*. In Dan Zahavi & Frederik Stjernfelt (eds.), *One hundred years of phenomenology: Husserl's Logical investigations revisited*, 93–111. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.

Derek S. Jeffreys (b. 1964) is an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin <jeffreyd@uwgb.edu>. His research interests include ethics and politics, and Thomism and politics. His publications include *Defending human dignity: John Paul II and political realism* (2004) and *Spirituality and the ethics of torture* (2009).