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# ERKENNTNIS- UND WISSENSCHAFTSTHEORIE

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## ACTS AND THEIR OBJECTS

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I shall begin with the assumption that there are, among our mental acts, some which stand in direct contact with objects in the material world. The aim of this paper will be to clarify and to draw out certain implications of this somewhat trivial assumption, and ultimately to say something about the ontological structure of those of our acts which effect the function of bringing us into contact with material objects—acts which serve, as we might say, as the *äußersten Punkte des Bewußtseins, die die zu erfassenden Gegenstände berühren*.

Amongst material objects I shall include not only material *things* such as tables and persons, but also for example *masses of stuff, individual moments* of things and stuffs (including acts themselves, actions, processes, etc.)—and parts and aggregates of objects of all of these kinds.<sup>1</sup>

The realist position here defended was shared by Wittgenstein and by the Husserl of the *Logische Untersuchungen*. It can be contrasted with various forms of idealism which would either deny any possibility of our acts bringing us into contact with what is external, or restrict the range of such contact to a thin sliver of residual surface-phenomena ('sense data', '*Empfindungen*', etc.). It conflicts also, though less radically, with representationalism, which asserts that even in the most favourable of circumstances an act can serve *at best* as internal copy or image of its object.

The acts which serve as the most obvious candidates for bringing us into contact with real material objects are of course acts of perception, and applied to perceptual acts the realist thesis may be formulated as follows: the broad mass of those of our acts which, as they occur, are experienced as perceivings, do in fact bring us into contact with material objects. The exceptions are provided by certain kinds of strictly hallucinatory phenomena such as might occur on the edge of sleep. A strictly hallucinatory act, as I shall understand this term, corresponds to no external object whatsoever, even though, whilst it is occurring, we are unable to differentiate it from a perceptual act.

For our present purposes it will be useful to concentrate particularly upon the category of *material-object-giving acts*, i.e. of acts which are given as presenting or as being directed towards material objects. (Acts which *bring us into contact* with material objects will be seen to constitute a special case of material-object-giving acts.) Outside this category will fall those acts which are given as being directed towards objects or purported objects of other kinds (numbers, propositions, concepts, universals, and so on), and also acts—for example acts of will, or reflexive acts—which are not object-giving in any sense, or which involve acts which are not object-giving. Whilst in the present paper I shall be concerned only peripherally with acts of these latter varieties, I do not deny that the standpoint here defined will face difficult problems when extended to such acts.

The notion expressed by the term 'material-object-giving' is recognisably an approximation to the more familiar notion of intentionality. An act is intentional, it is said, which is directed towards an object—whereby it is left unsaid whether the object in question does or does not exist. Here, however, our attentions are directed to the peculiarity of those of our acts which bring us into contact with the world, and hence these attentions must be focussed precisely upon the differences, amongst material-object-giving acts, between those which have and those which lack an object. We shall accordingly begin by dividing the category of material-object-giving acts into the two sub-categories of *veridical* and *non-veridical*. A material-object-giving act is veridical which corresponds to some real material object in the

world. A material-object-giving act is non-veridical which, whilst it seems to be directed towards such an object, in fact corresponds to nothing at all.

Note that veridical and non-veridical acts are, as they occur, phenomenologically indistinguishable. The veridical/non-veridical opposition is in this sense purely ontological in nature. It has to do with *how things*—including acts—are in the world; not with how things are conceived to be by the experiencing subject. The status of non-veridicality can be assigned at best only retrospectively or by some external observer. A hallucinatory act involving some moment of reflection, i.e. one that is such that the subject in question is aware that he is hallucinating, must for this reason be excluded from the category of material-object-giving acts as here conceived: the distinction between reflexive and non-reflexive acts, too, is an ontological distinction; but it is not purely ontological, since it is marked phenomenologically.

Precisely because veridical and non-veridical acts, as they occur, are phenomenologically indistinguishable, the treatment of intentionality in the phenomenologically inspired literature has tended to ignore their ontological peculiarities.<sup>2</sup> The phenomenologist does of course embrace some correlate of the distinction between veridical and non-veridical, but he is unable to penetrate to the foundations of this distinction. He concentrates upon certain associated distinctions amongst *sequences of acts* in which 'empty' or signitive contents become verified or falsified through acts which are relatively 'full' (most typically acts of perception). But whilst the phenomenologist is looking in the right place—among the structures of acts and act-complexes—his purely immanent account ultimately by-passes the veridical/non-veridical distinction because it makes no reference at all to transcendent objects (as is to be expected, of course, from a philosophy which would put the world into brackets). The phenomenologist can capture only those distinctions amongst acts that are made effective within the cumulative flow of evidence-gatherings and evidence-cancellings which makes up consciousness as immanently conceived.

What, then, is the peculiarity of veridical acts? This question will remain ambiguous as long as it has not been made clear what is meant by the phrase 'corresponds to an object' occurring in the definition of veridicality. We can uncover a first ambiguity in this phrase by contrasting it with the realist's notion of an act's *standing in direct contact with a material object*. As already pointed out, the most obvious examples of acts in which such contact is established are acts of perception. Note, however, that when it is said of such an act that it 'corresponds to an object', this need not in every case imply that the act in question brings its subject into contact with precisely that object with which, as it occurs, the subject in question supposes he is in contact. Thus when, after a hard day walking through a desert landscape, I have the illusion that I am perceiving an oasis, my perceptual act brings me into contact not with an oasis but with a highly complex aggregate of sand and moving air-molecules. When I mistake a distant boulder for a cow, my perceptual act brings me into contact with the boulder, even though I suppose, mistakenly, that I am in contact with a cow. (My act is then, as Twardowski might say, characterised as having a bovine content.)

We shall employ the term *relational* to designate the category of acts which bring us into direct contact with material objects. Relational acts are, like other varieties of acts, real material objects in their own right. But they have a quite peculiar, i.e. precisely relational, form. Like individual relations of other kinds they serve to connect material objects one to another: here, to connect persons with the material objects of which they are conscious. The notion of a real material relation, current amongst the realist scholastics, has nowadays gone somewhat out of favour. Yet many familiar examples can be provided: individual relations of magnetic attraction, hits, kisses, contracts, promises, conversations, and so on. Real material relations are distinguished from other, non-relational material objects which do the job of tying things together—pieces of string, masses of glue, cartilaginous bands—by the fact that, as a matter of necessity, they cannot exist in separation from the objects which they connect.

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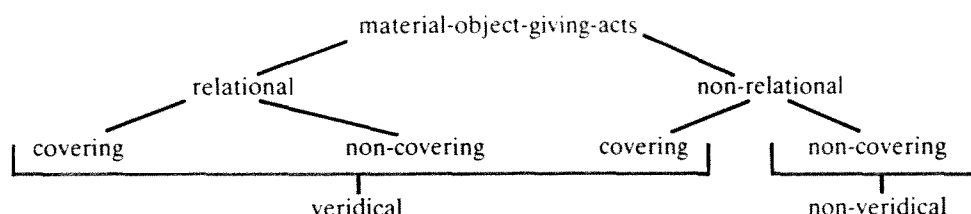
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Relational acts may now be divided, in the light of the oasis/cow examples above, into the two sub-categories of *covering* and *non-covering*. A covering relational act is directed towards just that object toward which its subject supposes it is directed: here there is a perfect match (*vollkommene Deckung*) between content and object. A non-covering relational act is one which brings us into contact with some object, but which is characterised by the fact that there is some relevant mis-match between its content and this object. This distinction is provisional only: in a more adequate account, which would presuppose an analysis of the kind of contents which (material-object-giving) acts may possess, the simple opposition between covering and non-covering would have to give way to a complex spectrum of different kinds of cases. Already, however, we can see that the status of veridicality can be assigned to non-covering relational acts only with caution. For whilst such acts are veridical in the sense of our definition—they correspond to some real material object,—it must be borne in mind that the object in question is not the *right* object from the point of view of the experiencing subject.

The distinctions between relational and non-relational and between covering and non-covering acts are, once more, ontological in nature: they correspond to nothing of which the subject in question is aware whilst his act is occurring. Relational acts are acts which bring us into direct contact with objects in the material world, but we are not specifically aware that such contact has been established, for we impute the character of relationality as a matter of course to all our (non-reflexive, material-object-giving) acts. And thus also we often mistakenly suppose that relational contact has been established where in reality it has not. An object-giving act thus fails to be relational in one of two ways. It may be simply non-veridical: may correspond to no object at all. Or it may correspond to an object (because its *content* meets certain conditions), yet fail to bring its subject into real relational contact with that object. An example here would be, for example, the case of the detective *X* who is at some moment thinking about the murderer *Y* of *Z*. This act does not bring *X* into direct contact with *Y* because, as we shall suppose, *X* does not yet know who *Y* is. Yet still this act may correctly be said to correspond to an object (i.e. under the assumption that there is just one murderer of *Z*). Amongst veridical non-relational acts of this and associated types there is no opposition such as that between covering and non-covering amongst relational acts, since here the function of 'corresponding to an object' is exercised entirely by the content of the act, and therefore any mis-match between content and object must automatically render the act non-veridical.

This gives rise to a categorisation of material-object-giving acts somewhat as follows:



We stress once more that there is no internal mark or criterion of any of the distinctions here portrayed. This is the case, in particular, in relation to the property of relationality. The detective may for example be in possession of a proper name or of a whole sequence of independent, uniquely specifying descriptions of the murderer *Y*, yet still not be in relational contact with *Y*, still not know who *Y* is, in the relevant sense. Those philosophers who have sought to supply internal or epistemological criteria for what I have called relationality are therefore, I suggest, on the wrong track. Only an ontological account of the structures of acts, and of the relations between acts and objects, can do justice to oppositions of the type discussed in this paper.<sup>3</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A more detailed account of the ontology which underlies this paper is to be found in B. Smith and K. Mulligan, "Pieces of a Theory", in: B. Smith (ed.), *Parts and Moments. Studies in Logic and Formal Ontology* (Munich 1982), pp. 15-109. Cf. also K. Mulligan, P. M. Simons and B. Smith, "Truth-Makers", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> This holds true also of the more recent semantic investigations of intentionality, for example in terms of possible worlds, which have concentrated too narrowly upon the semantic properties of first-person reports of mental experience.

<sup>3</sup> I have developed some of these ideas further in my paper "Acta cum fundamentis in re", forthcoming in *Dialectica*.

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