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# AMBULO!

## Structures of phenomenology and ontology in action

*David Woodruff Smith*

### **The complex structure of action**

The phenomenology of action was foreshadowed long ago by René Descartes in his reply to Pierre Gassendi's objection that the cogito inference (*cogito ergo sum*: "I am thinking, therefore I exist") should apply to "any of your other actions [*actiones*]". Descartes wrote:

I may not, for example, make the inference 'I am walking, therefore I exist' [*ego ambulo, ergo sum*], except in so far as the awareness [*conscientia*] of walking is a thought. The inference is certain only if applied to this awareness, and not to the movement of the body which sometimes—in the case of dreams—is not occurring at all, despite the fact that I seem to myself to be walking.

*(Descartes 1641/2013, Fifth Replies (to Gassendi): 137)*

Certainty, however, is not at stake here. Our concern is with the structure of a bodily action such as walking with awareness of walking. The distinction between action and awareness-of-action was precisely put by Descartes and would be amplified significantly as phenomenology took shape in our time (cf. Smith 2004b on distinguishing different aspects of the cogito).

On the analysis to follow here, an *action*—a conscious, intentional, volitional, embodied action—is a highly structured *whole*. One part of my action of walking is a certain *bodily movement* (a point of ontology). Another part of my action is my *experience* of so moving and doing so by will (a point of phenomenology). Central to my experience of acting is my *volition* to so act, my *willing* to walk.

Where successful, my volition *effects* my movement as I walk along. In a different way, though, my volition "intends" or, where successful, is *intentionally related* to my movement: in the Husserlian sense of intentionality, i.e., not purposefulness, but content-directedness. We shall assess the *content* of my volition in my experience of walking, treating the content as a complex form of *meaning* that Husserl called "noematic" content. We may gloss that content as something like <(I) walk!>, or <ambulo!>, or a bit more fully <I now hereby will myself to walk along this road!> (Angle quotes will be used to denote ideal contents of experience in a broadly Husserlian style.)

Within my action as a whole, then, we find two distinct *relations* between my willing and my movement. My willing *causes* my actual movement in the world. And my volition—my “act” of consciousness in so willing—is *intentionally related* to my movement. In successful action, that is, my movement satisfies the intentional content of my “act” of volition, which aims at said movement with a certain awareness of effecting that movement. Thus, we distinguish my movement itself from the *intentionality* of my volition in acting, my volition being both “directed” toward and effecting that movement. The content <(I) walk!> informs my volition as “aiming” toward my movement, but it is neural impulses near the frontal region of my brain that causally effect my bodily movement. To conflate the intentional relation with the physical causal relation within the action is simply a category mistake. Yet my action itself includes both of these relationships as dependent *parts*, each requiring the other within the action as a *whole*.

Crudely, the “act” of volition is the “action” shorn of the de facto bodily movement—that is, “bracketing” the question of the volition’s successfully effecting the movement. Alternatively, the “action” is the embodiment of the successful “act” of volition. Accordingly, we distinguish the *phenomenological structure* of my experience of walking from the *ontological structure* of the action.

The phenomenological structure is itself surprisingly complex. My *sense* of my body as I experience my ambulatory movement involves my *kinesthetic* awareness of my movement in walking. And my experience of willingly walking with that kinesthetic sense is interactive with my visual and tactile and auditory *perception of my environs* as I walk along the road. Furthermore, my “intended” action in walking is part of my immediate surrounding world, or *Umwelt*, wherein my action itself both *depends on* and is *intentionally guided by* my perception of my surroundings as I walk—lest I walk into a parked car or a spiny cactus, or lest my dog on leash bark at our approaching neighbor.

However, my kinesthetic, visual, tactile, and auditory forms of perception are not purely sensory “impressions”, but rather forms of perception both sensory and meaningful. As Husserl insisted: these perceptual acts involve a fusion of “sensory” and “noetic”, or meaningful, elements. Still, the point is not that I am attentively doing all these things at once: volitionally walking, while perceptually tracking my movements through kinesthetic, visual, tactile, and auditory elements of experience. Rather, as I walk along, my *attention* may move around among my bodily movements and parts of my environment as I perceive the pavement beneath me, the trees alongside the road, the pelicans I note skimming the waves in the ocean.

To be precise, my volition in walking “intends” my action as a whole, within my surrounding world. My bodily movement per se is an essential *part* of my action, but *what I will* in walking is my whole *action* in its significant context. I may focus for a moment on how I move my foot as I step over a slippery rock, or I may be focused on an abstract idea even as I walk along. Yet, in any case, my volition in walking is a foundational *part* of my consciously walking—I am neither robot nor zombie.

Now suppose I am seated by the fire as I “think” or day-dream that I am walking along my familiar road. My mental *action* in so thinking is itself dependent on maintaining my bodily posture, in my “sitting” meditation, and so on my volition to sit in a way amenable to my meditating. Even this *mental* action is thus grounded in a form of embodied action. The possibility of disembodied consciousness or “action” we shall not consider here, for this possibility is not a “motivated” or “real” possibility—as Husserlian phenomenology would find, with apologies to science fiction enthusiasts, not to mention Descartes and Gassendi.

Suffice it to say, a simple action like walking is a complex phenomenon, within which we distinguish *phenomenological* and *ontological* structures of the action. (The present analysis extends that in Smith 1992/2004, “Consciousness in Action”, reprinted in Smith 2004. Relevant aspects of intentional causation are addressed, in a different context, in Searle 1983, 2015.)

Note, I shall use the term “phenomenology”—in the traditional sense following Husserl et al.—to mean the discipline of studying the character or structure of conscious experience (including action) from the first-person perspective. A cognate use of the term has recently taken root where an experience is said to have a “phenomenology”, that is, a phenomenal character. This character is commonly glossed as the character of “what it is like” for a subject to have such-and-such an experience. (This idiom has been canonized since Thomas Nagel’s classic 1974 essay “What Is It Like to be a Bat?”. Cf. Siewert 2013 for a nuanced treatment of phenomenal character.)

### **My lived body versus my physical body**

Within classical phenomenology Husserl focused often on perception as a paradigm of intentional experience. What is less appreciated is the rich characterization Husserl gave of the “lived” body, which led into Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of the “phenomenal field” of experience centered on the body as experienced. With a view to the phenomenology of body and embodied experience, in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, we can develop a detailed analysis of the structure of conscious intentional *action*. Ultimately, the model will include an appraisal of the ideal “noematic” content of volition in action, which itself involves a concrete sense of the subject’s “lived” body in action. That is the aim of the present study. (Cf. Husserl 1913/2014 [*Ideas I*]: §§28, 116; Husserl 1989/1912 [*Ideas II*]; Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012. Cf. Smith 2013 for the reconstruction of Husserl’s theory of intentionality on which I rely.)

Husserl did not lay out a detailed theory of action per se along the lines pursued below, nor did Merleau-Ponty. However, we may draw fruitfully on details in Husserl’s account of the lived body in *Ideas II* along with remarks in *Ideas I* about the structure of volition or will. Husserl frequently spoke of “willing” (*Wollen*) alongside seeing, thinking, feeling, and other forms of intentional experience, taking these as different types of “acts” of consciousness. And to “acts” of willing, as well as “acts” of seeing and thinking and desiring, he applied his mature theory of intentionality featuring “noetic” and “noematic” contents. Bear in mind that, in Husserl’s scheme, my “act” (*Akt*) of willing-to-walk is a proper and dependent *part* of my “action” (*Handeln*) of consciously walking along the road.

A theme in recent philosophy of mind is the issue of “cognitive phenomenology”. What (if any) is the *phenomenal character* or “phenomenology” of various types of consciousness: in pure sensation, in perception as cognitively informed sensory experience, in thought including thinking more abstractly than about what one sees or hears? Further, what (if any) is the phenomenal character of “conative” (effortful) or “volitional” (willful) forms of experience, that is, in the lived experience of action? There we find pointed issues of “action theory”: in the relevant structures of phenomenology and ontology in action, beginning with simple everyday actions like walking or throwing a ball or digging in the garden. At stake is the *phenomenal character* in one’s sense of one’s *lived body* in action.

So here I am, walking along my neighborhood road. I pause, gazing at the silvery gloss on the Pacific, while my dog sniffs her way along. I resume walking, in my normal gait. What could be more familiar?

What's new is my hip of Theseus. I now have a hip structure formed from titanium and polyurethane, replacing my original hip structure of bone and cartilage. In this respect we are naturally speaking of *my physical body*.

Nonetheless, as I walk along, I experience no unusual sensations in my movement, no novel kinesthetic feedback, and no variations in my "willing" to walk along. I am walking: experiencing a familiar form of conscious, phenomenal, intentional, volitional, embodied *action*. And my hip replacement notwithstanding, it is still I walking: myself-in-action, moving volitionally, as this body, *my lived body*.

Accordingly, my experience of walking is a case of everyday conscious volitional action, something I do, an activity incorporating both my *embodied movement* and my *consciousness* in and of and effecting that movement. We cannot make sense of the structure of action, however, without a careful distinction between my "physical body" and my "lived body".

### **The phenomenology versus ontology of my action in walking**

The *ontology* of my body in action as I walk is one thing: my body now incorporates a structure of titanium. 'Tis still me, my walking, my body doing its normal biological thing, with a twist of titanium, the physiology and biology and physics flowing as they will.

The *phenomenology* of my body in action as I walk is however quite another thing: my lived experience of walking along, habitually moving one leg and then the other, in a thoroughly familiar form of activity.

My experience in walking is conscious, phenomenal, intentional, volitional, and experienced as embodied: in short, an experience of volitional bodily activity, or *action*. My experience of walking has a distinctive phenomenal intentional content: in brief, the content <I am walking!>, or better <I will to walk and so I walk!>, or (if you will) <I hereby walk!>, executing my self-executive order to walk. The Latin phrase "ambulo" is suggestive of an executive form of phenomenal intentional content: <ambulo!>. We'll return to this suggestion, but first we need to home in on the rich phenomenology of action launched by Husserl in his *Ideas II* (and expanded by Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception*).

To forestall a potential misconception, let us be clear that my experience of walking is not a form of *thinking*, say, where I think "Here I am walking" in some form of higher-order monitoring that "represents" my action while my body does its perambulatory thing. The phenomenology of action is very different from that of consciously thinking "I am walking"—thus our title "<ambulo!>". Nor is my experience of walking a purely habitual phenomenon with no consciousness, say, like sleep-walking with no memory thereof. Hubert Dreyfus has long stressed the skillful practices involved in action, and rightly so, but a Dreyfus-style account of "skillful coping" in walking should be compatible with the account unfolding here (cf. Dreyfus 2014). To be sure, Husserl held that the *form* of an "act" of consciousness is that of "the cogito" (1913/2014: §28). However, the Cartesian term belies the rich detail in Husserl's phenomenology of the "lived" body in *Ideas II*.

Accordingly, we turn to phenomenological reflection on my *experience* of walking. Fundamentally, *my body* appears in my experience as me walking: "I am walking!", consciously, intentionally, volitionally. Note the first-person *form* of my experience. By contrast, from a third-person scientific point of view, I may think about my walking by virtue of my new titanium hip, part of the structure of my *physical body*.

Here we emphasize what should be an obvious distinction between the *phenomenological structure* of my experience of walking and the *physiological structure* of the worldly movement

that defines my walking per se. Titanium is now part of that physical structure, but the sense <titanium> does not appear in the phenomenological content of my experience of walking. The case of my hip of Theseus serves to underscore the difference between my biological body per se and my body “as lived”.

To bring out this contrast, we turn, in further detail now, to Husserl’s distinction between the “lived body”, or *Leib*, and the “physical body”, or *Körper*. Importantly, that distinction we should see as a specialization of Husserl’s distinction between the *object* of an experience and its *mode of presentation* in consciousness: that is, between the *object itself* and an appropriate *sense* of that object appearing in a particular act of consciousness. Thus, we distinguish between my actual physical body in motion—featuring neuro-muscular contractions supported by skeletal configurations—and my *sense* of my body *as it appears* in my conscious experience of walking. And that distinction we shall set within Husserl’s phenomenological theory of intentionality.

Edmund Husserl launched the discipline of phenomenology a century ago. The foundations he laid in his *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901). His later, “transcendental” version of phenomenology he detailed in *Ideas I* (1913). There he used his famous method of *epoché* or “bracketing”: as I bracket the thesis of the existence of the world around me, I thereby focus on my consciousness of the world from the first-person perspective. Now, a common brief of Husserl’s conception of transcendental phenomenology sets consciousness out of connection with one’s surrounding world—in a supposedly “Cartesian” model of disembodied conscious experience. However, this common view of Husserlian phenomenology is strangely misbegotten. For in the summer of 1912 Husserl drafted *Ideas II* along with *Ideas I*, though he withheld *Ideas II* from publication. This authorial strategy led to endless misunderstandings. For in *Ideas II* Husserl practiced phenomenological analysis in close detail, while in *Ideas I* Husserl pitched his phenomenology in a style that emphasized high-altitude metaphilosophical themes largely in abstraction from the concrete analyses detailed in *Ideas II*. Yet the experience of *embodiment* is central to the forays of *Ideas II*. In short, consciousness is not experienced as disembodied—certainly not in our everyday life where an experience of walking is typical of conscious life, as I move around in my daily adventures, even as I practice phenomenological analysis here, typing away but going to the kitchen for a glass of wine.

In *Ideas II*, amplifying the story of phenomenology detailed in *Ideas I*, Husserl drew a sharp distinction between—in the first person—my “lived body”, or *Leib*, and my “physical body”, or *Körper*. As glossed above, my physical body is the biological system including my brain and limbs and organs and bones in complex interaction involving neural processes and all sorts of physiological activity—governed by the physics of relativity and quantum phenomena well beyond the reach of my consciousness. By contrast, my “lived body” is my body *only as I experience it*, for example, in my quotidian experience of walking.

Husserl called my lived body the “zero point” or center-of-orientation of my everyday experience in my surrounding world, my *Umwelt*, and indeed the “organ of my will”. Perception and action are thus intertwined, on Husserl’s analysis. Merleau-Ponty followed suit in saying “my body” is the center, the organizing principle, of my “phenomenal field”. At issue, for the present essay, is how we should characterize “embodiment”, for the ontology and the phenomenology need to be carefully parsed and carefully related. In the present analysis we respect a broadly Cartesian aspect of the experience of walking, yet we reject the metaphysical dualism of mind and body that is often held up as a sort of bogeyman, not least since Gilbert Ryle cast Descartes’ vision as that of “the ghost in the machine”. On the story told here, I am no “ghost” and my body is no “machine”. We need a careful understanding of where the ontology and phenomenology of “my body” interact.

Interestingly, Husserl explicitly included volition or “willing” (*wollen*) under his broad sense of “cogito” (see Husserl 1913/2014: §28). And accordingly we may see in the “act” of willing the locus of interaction between the phenomenology of acting and the ontology of acting, namely, in the lived body. Thus, when I do something through my own volition, do something “bodily”, as in my action of walking, my embodied movement is *part* of the action. Within my very movement, however, we distinguish my “lived” body and my “physical” body. There is, in the world, one entity that is my body, but that entity has different aspects: properties given variously as “lived” and as “physical”. My volition in walking carries a content that prescribes my body by appeal to its “lived” properties, as in moving my legs by volition; but that content makes no appeal whatsoever to the physical composition of my hip, now formed partly from titanium.

We characterize the *content* of my “act” of willing as the special type of content <I walk!>, or <I hereby walk!>. The “hereby” means “by the force of my so willing”. This element of content indicates the *causal force* of my willing in action. However, the sense of causation in the content of willing does not “intend” a physiological process in my “physical” body, where a neural process in the frontal region of my brain initiates a transmission of signals ultimately stimulating muscle activities in my lower limbs. Rather, the “hereby” element in <I hereby walk!> means a *power* I experience in my “lived” body, a causal process *as experienced*. The “!” articulates that sense of *executing* my bodily movement in walking: by *fiat*, as it were.

Bear in mind that the *phenomenological* structure in my action takes its place within the wider *ontological* structure in my action within my surrounding world. My “act” of volition is a dependent *part* of my *action* of walking along the road (assuming I am not the victim of a Cartesian evil demon or, in the scifi variant, a brain-in-a-vat). And the *content* in my volition is satisfied only under a complex condition wherein my actual “physical” bodily movement is in accord with how my “lived” body is moving just as “intended” in my volition. In other words, normally there is a successful *intentional relation* between my “act” of volition and my bodily action of walking. And, furthermore, this relation occurs in a still more complex situation featuring my action *in my surrounding world* including road and trees and distant ocean. The intentional relation thus links my “act” of volition with my “action” of walking, thereby structuring my action within my *Umwelt*.

In Husserl’s idiom, the volition is a “moment”, or dependent part, of the action as a whole. Where successful, the action being in accord with the volition, the “act” of will is thus a part of the action that could not occur apart from the action. So the volition is dependent on its effect in bodily movement. In the normal course of events, then, the willing is *embodied* in that it is intentionally related to the action of which it is a dependent part.

(Husserl’s notion of *Leib* arises in various places in Husserl’s philosophical system: compare Smith 2013. Recent studies of the phenomenology of embodiment are the essays by Dermot Moran, Dorothée Legrand, and Komarine Romdenh-Romlunc, and Shaun Gallagher in Dahlstrom et al. 2015.)

### From cognitive to conative to volitional phenomenology

Classical phenomenology—in writings of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and others—seems to take it for granted that all conscious experiences are “phenomena” and so have a “phenomenal” or “phenomenological” character. I take it that a conscious experience normally and indeed constitutively involves a certain *phenomenal* character: the character of an experience as lived or experienced from the subjective first-person perspective. I see *phenomenality* itself as one factor among several in the structure of “awareness” characteristic of our typical

conscious experiences. Our concern here is how an *action* appears phenomenally in the experience of action. (My view on phenomenality is developed in Smith 1986, 2004, 2005, 2013, 2016a. Cf. Siewert 2005 on sensorimotor intentionality, Siewert 2013 on phenomenality, Dreyfus 2014 on skillful action, and Zahavi and Kriegel 2015 on phenomenality as for-me-ness.)

A recent line of debate in philosophy of mind has focused on the question of which—if any or if all—forms of mental activity have a bona fide *phenomenal character*, or “phenomenology” (in the current vernacular): the character of “what it is like” to experience that type of mental activity. Some philosophers have held, in a neo-Humean vein, that only *sensory* experiences like seeing a red round patch have a phenomenal character. Other philosophers hold that *cognitive* experiences also have a phenomenal character, where “cognitive” experiences range from seeing a red, round, ripening tomato on the window sill (where the content outruns sensory feel) to thinking about Kant’s Categorical Imperative (where the content is purely conceptual). Well, now, what about *actions*? Do we find a phenomenal character in a typical conscious, intentional action such as walking down the road, or hitting a tennis ball cross-court, or simply picking up a fork at dinner? If “cognitive” experiences have a phenomenal character, what about embodied conscious actions? (The spread of recent views on phenomenality and cognitive phenomenology is articulated in Bayne and Montague 2011. For my take on cognitive phenomenology, see Smith 2011, 2016a.)

“Conative” or “agentive” experiences, typically enacted in intentional bodily actions, include trying to do something, in using one’s body, guided by beliefs and desires and other background mental activities. What is the phenomenal character, if any, of *conative* or *agentive* experiences, viz., in experiencing an action? (See Horgan 2011 on “agentive” phenomenology, and Siewert 2005 on sensorimotor experience.)

The term “conation” or “conatus” literally means *trying* (from the Latin “conatus”), as in trying to do something (out of desire, belief, will). So the notion of “conative” experience connotes that aspect of action, of doing something, which in effect factors away the success of the “doing”. If we apply Husserl’s technique of *epoché* to an action, we “bracket” the actual bodily movement and thereby focus on the “pure” experience of acting: if you will, a “conative” act of consciousness, which consists in *trying* to do something.

Uriah Kriegel has outlined a phenomenological analysis that opens the door nicely to conative experiences: in his 2015 book *The Varieties of Consciousness* (ch. 2 on conative phenomenology; cf. Horgan 2011), Kriegel begins by grouping various types of “conative phenomena” including desiring to, wanting to, intending to, deciding to, being willing to, etc. All are aspects of the experience of *effort*, or “conatus”, as in everyday intentional actions. And all are offered specifically as having a distinctive phenomenal character, or “phenomenology”.

Kriegel then develops a particular account of the *structure* of phenomenal conative intentionality (ibid.: 83–96). First, he argues for a bona fide “primitive conatus”, a form of effortful experience with its own phenomenal character, a distinctive character not reducible to that of some other type of experience, such as a kinesthetic awareness of one’s arm moving, as opposed to moving one’s own arm conatively. Kriegel then proposes an analysis of the structure of this form of experience: a conative experience, he proposes, is a complex form that combines *decision* and *effort*. So a conative experience, for Kriegel, is a complex comprising two proper parts: a phenomenal *deciding to do* such-and-such, and a phenomenal *effort to do* such.

I would add, as a friendly refinement, that these two *components* in the conative experience of an action are normally *fused*, i.e., interdependent. Then there is but one form of



phenomenal character, whereby the phenomenal experience of *conatus* is a “decisive–effort”. And if the intentional *content* of this conatus is satisfied by the prescribed movement, then I take it the *action* consists in a structure comprising the conatus joined with the resulting successful movement, the embodied action.

This “conatus”, or “conation”, model strikes me as on the right track. However, I find the traditional term “volition” resonates more fully, and arguably for an interesting reason. In the theory of conscious intentional action, I would like to draw in a broadly Husserlian theory of *ideal content*, in a certain rendition of what Husserl called the “noema” of an act of consciousness. Specifically, the core content of an action, I want to say, is the ideal form of *willing* to act in a certain way, and that form of content deserves its own *logical force*: the force of “Do this!”—an executive order, as it were, rather than simply a feeling of effort. The aspect of “deciding” what to do (per Kriegel) I see as resolving instead into the “sense” (*Sinn*) of which form of action is willed.

For example, as “I will to walk”, we shall parse the structure of this volition into the character of willing and the characterization of what is willed. In Husserl’s terms, the noema of a volition parses into the “thetic” act-character of willing and the noematic “sense” (*Sinn*) of what is willed, here, my lived bodily movement in walking along the road. My volition in walking is thus informed by the content <I walk!>, which in the context of my action invokes a “horizon” of desire, belief, value, etc. The central player in the action, however, is the constituent volition bearing a properly volitional content.

For the record, Kriegel sees his account of “primitive conatus” as a development of Paul Ricœur’s phenomenological theory of the will. And Kriegel aptly notes the rich contributions of French phenomenologists to the characterization of various forms of conative experience, not least the existential model of choice in Jean-Paul Sartre and Simon de Beauvoir, among their contemporaries. Broadly speaking, existential analyses carried phenomenology from concrete embodied action into the wider social realm, where meaning is formed through intersubjective “constitution” of values, of self, or society. (Consider Crowell 2001, 2013, drawing on Husserl and Heidegger; Fricke and Føllesdal 2012 on intersubjectivity and values.)

### The “fiat!” character of volition in action

Husserl often mentions willing (*wollen*) as an “act” of consciousness. Yet we turn to William James for a specific model of the *form* of consciousness in willing in action.

In his *Principles of Psychology* (1891/1983: 1098), William James addressed the will in terms appropriate to our discussion:

Desire, wish, will, are states of mind which everyone knows . . . If with the desire there goes a sense that attainment is not possible, we simply *wish*; but if we believe that the end is in our power, we *will* that the desired feeling, having, or doing shall be real; and real it presently becomes . . . The only ends which follow immediately upon our willing seem to be movements of our own bodies.

The proto-phenomenologist James soon declared:

. . . *whether or no there be anything else in the mind at the moment when we consciously will a certain act [i.e. action], a mental conception made up of memory-images of these sensations, defining which special act it is, must be there.*

. . . there need be nothing else, and . . . in perfectly simple voluntary acts there is nothing else, in the mind but the kinaesthetic idea, thus defined, of what the act is to be.

(James 1891/1983: 1104)

Thus, for James, willing aims specifically at “the act that is to be”, that is, the intended or willed action *as defined by* that “kinaesthetic idea”. In Husserlian terms, I will my bodily action just *as defined by* the noematic sense in my volitional act of consciousness, that is, I will my “lived” bodily action, which I experience kinesthetically.

With a fine nose for the phenomenology of volition, James notes: “One has only to play ten-pins or billiards, or throw a ball, to catch his will in the act . . . , when it says ‘Now go!’ ” (1891/1983: 1105). In our running example of walking: my will is exercised *by fiat* as I will, “Now I walk along this road!”—nicely put as, “Now go!”

“*Effort of attention*”, James holds, “*is . . . the essential phenomenon of will*” (1891/1983: 1167). That is, where will is applied to the type of action to be executed, James holds that *attention* is essential to holding in mind that action type. Husserl would translate the point into “intention”: framing the type of action willed through an appropriate meaning—such as “walking”, “throwing a ball”, or “shooting billiards”.

Broadly, then, James affirms a basic structure of action whereby a mental “act” of willing is applied to an “attended” type of bodily “act” defined kinesthetically. Looking to the phenomenological structure of a voluntary action, we draw from the Jamesian account of will a distinction between: (a) my *willing* per se, in the form <Now go!>, and (b) my *sense* of the action willed, e.g., <I walk>, where the form of action is defined kinesthetically—as a “lived” bodily movement of walking. So the executive fiat “Now go!” applies to the kinesthetic form of movement “I walk”: the form of volitional action applying the fiat to the form of movement, thus < Go! (I walk) >. These two aspects of volition form a Jamesian account of the structure of action. But we need to draw in details of Husserl’s mature theory of intentionality, featuring the structure of “noematic” content in an intentional action.

### The noematic structure in volition: “Ambulo!”, “I walk!”

Husserl distinguished the “real” or temporally flowing content of an “act” of consciousness from the “ideal” meaning content entertained in the act. These two types of content Husserl called “noesis” and “noema” respectively. Interpolating among details in Husserl’s theory of intentionality in *Ideas I*, I propose, we may mark out a distinctly Husserlian theory of the *formal structure* of volition: the structure of the noematic content or *noema* of volition in an action such as walking.

On Husserl’s analysis, the *noema* of an intentional act of consciousness has two formal parts: (i) a *sense* (*Sinn*) that prescribes the object toward which the act is directed, carrying the phenomenological force of “the object *as intended*”; and (ii) a *thetic* or *positing* (*setzen*) component that prescribes the type of act executed, carrying the phenomenological force of how the object as intended is “posited”, say, in seeing, judging, imagining, etc.

Thus, when I think that Descartes was born in La Haye, the *sense* of my experience is the propositional sense <Descartes was born in La Haye>, and the *thetic character* of my experience is the modifying or “modalizing” content <think>, or rather <I think>, or <cogito>. Similarly, when I see a black dog sauntering along the road, the *sense* of my experience is the content <that black dog sauntering along the road>, and the *thetic character* of my experience is the modifying *visual* content <I see>. The full noema of an experience

is thus a *structured* meaning content combining *Sinn* andthetic content, for example, in these two cases:

- < I think that Descartes was born in La Haye >,
- < I see that black dog sauntering along the road >.

(Cf. Husserl 1913/2014: §§28, 88–94 ff., and §§128–133, on the structure of an act’s noema featuring *Sinn* plusthetic character, and §95 on valuing and willing. For details on Husserl’s model of the noema, see Smith 2013: ch. 6, especially 267ff., and ch. 9. Where Husserl used German-style quotation marks to denote noematic content, we are here using angle brackets for content “quotation”.)

Husserl introduced the theory of noema, famously, with an example of seeing a tree, characterizing the *Sinn* in the noema of the visual experience as “the perceived tree *as perceived*”. What would the noema of an experience of *action* look like—viz., in an “act” of willing in action?

Intriguingly, Husserl explicitly addressed the *form* of the noema of an act of *willing*: in *Ideas I*, §95 on valuing and willing. In an act of *valuing* (*Werthen*), Husserl holds, the noesis and the corresponding noema has a structure of “intentional layering” (*Schichtungen*). Within the act’s noesis, there is a dependent layer (*Moment*) of “valuing” (*Werthen*) that is “built-upon” (“*aufgeschichtet*”) a layer of presentation that is not dependent on the valuing layer. Accordingly, within the *Sinn* component of the noema, there is a higher layer (*Schicht*) of meaning, presenting an intended *value*, that is *founded on* a lower layer of meaning, presenting an *object* or state of affairs which ostensibly carries the intended *value*. Thus, the higher level of meaning (presenting a value) is *dependent on* the lower level of meaning (presenting an object), but the lower is not dependent on the higher. The noematic *Sinn* thus forms a “foundational whole” (*Fundierungsganzes*).

Similarly, Husserl holds, in an act of *willing* (*Wollen*), the noesis and corresponding noema has a layered structure. Thus, within the act’s noema: a higher layer of *Sinn*, presenting the *action-as-willed*, is founded on a lower layer of *Sinn*, presenting the *action* (*Handeln*) itself (the effected action “simpliciter”). The higher level of *Sinn* within the act’s noema—in willing as in valuing—is thus a layer “built-upon” (“*aufgeschichtet*”) the lower level of *Sinn*. For Husserl, the “willed as such” (*das Gewolltes als solches*) is thus founded upon the “presented as such” (the “action as presented”), the former meaning dependent on the latter. In his discussion in §95 Husserl pointedly uses quotation marks to denote the *Sinn* (or *Meinung*) within the noema of the act of willing. We should think of the noema in an act of willing as the ideal meaning content abstracted from the concrete act of willing. And accordingly Husserl explicitly analyzes the “logical” structure of the noematic content of willing. (My translations here from the German. Cf. Peucker 2012 for a discussion of Husserl’s evolving views of volitional consciousness.)

Let us see how Husserl’s model would work for everyday cases.

Suppose I see a “good dog” sitting patiently by the door of a café. Within the noematic sense <this good dog sitting by the café>, the noematic meaning <good> is *founded on* the meaning <this dog sitting by the door>. Husserl uses quotation marks, as in characterizing my seeing “this good dog . . .”, to signify *noematic meanings*, so what is at stake is the structure of the noema, rather than the actual properties “meant” or “intended” of the animal. In this case, then, the meaning <good> is founded on the meaning <this dog . . .>, and this “layering” structures the noematic *Sinn* in my value-laden perception of the sitting dog. The act’s full noema we then articulate as:

- < I see this good dog sitting by the café >,

where the sense <good> “is supervenient on” the sense <this dog>. Interestingly, Husserl’s term “*aufgeschichtet*” is translated as “supervenes on” in the 2014 translation of the passage in §95—a term resonant with recent interests in supervenience as a form of dependence.

Now suppose that I am walking along the road. A key part of my action of walking is my willing to so walk: I will that “I hereby walk!” On a Husserlian analysis, then, the noema of my act of willing includes the *Sinn* <I hereby walk!>. We add the “!” to articulate the executive “fiat” aspect of my perambulatory movement *as willed*. Within the *Sinn* in the act’s noema, then, we find a “layered” structure where the executive force <hereby!>, expressed in <I hereby walk!>, is founded on the sense of my movement <I walk>. And so the full noema of my act of willing we may specify as:

< I will that I hereby walk! >.

The logic of this form of noema is remarkable. For Husserl, the act’s thetic character is manifest within the act’s full noema in two ways: first, in the thetic content <I will>; and second, in the *Sinn* content <I hereby walk!>, where “hereby!” means “so willed by *fiat*” in the intended action.

Husserl’s claim, by interpolation, is that the *Sinn* is “layered” so that the higher level <willed by fiat> is *founded on* the lower level <I walk>. Then <willed> is treated like <valued>. Moreover, Husserl pointedly treats willing as itself founded on valuing and “deciding” what action is willed (cf. §95).

We should not take the phenomenology of willing to hold that a temporal sequence of independent “acts” ensues within action: first a presentation of a putative action, then a deciding-valuing of that action, then a willing of that valued action. The whole point of foundation (*Fundierung*) is that some parts of the action are ontologically dependent on others, and founding relations can link various parts without a temporal ordering or even a “layering” order. We should see the action as a *whole* with various *parts*, some *dependent* on others. We thus experience an act of willing, say, in the case of my walking, as a unified whole whose noematic *Sinn* <I hereby walk!> is structured so that the fiat content <hereby!> is *founded on* the presentational content <I walk>. The intentional force of the *Sinn*, whence of the noetic elements in my willing, is dependent on the way these meaning elements interact. The center of action in willing, per Husserl, is thus this *structure* in its volitional meaning content in the act of willing.

However, we should not treat the character of being-willed as solely a feature of the *Sinn* in the act’s noema, as in <I hereby walk!>. For the *Sinn* is itself modified by the thetic content, as in <I will that I hereby walk!>. Accordingly, a stronger analysis treats *willing*, like thinking or seeing, as a form of “intentional modality”—following what I have called the “modal model” of (self-) consciousness. Let us see how that approach treats the experience of action.

### The modal model of volition in action

A particular account of phenomenological structure follows the “modal model” of consciousness. Where Husserl spoke of “modalities” of belief (such as expected probability), the modal model articulates elements in the form following a conception of *intentional modalities* including perception, thought, and now volition. Thetic or positing character begins with an intentional modality such as perceiving or judging or thinking or, here, *willing*. And this “modal” character would modify the *Sinn* content in an intentional act of consciousness.

(See *Ideas I*: §§129 and 132–133 on thethetic component in an act’s noema, and §§103–105 on “modalities” of belief including a sense of probability, falling under thethetic or positing character. See Hintikka 1962, 1969 on intentional modalities, and see Smith and McIntyre 1982 on applying the notion of intentional modalities to Husserl’s conception of the “horizon” of possibilities “predelineated” by the content of an experience. On the modal model of (self-) consciousness, see Smith 1986, 2004a, “Return to Consciousness”, and Smith 2013, 2016a.)

Following the modal model, we may articulate the structure of the noematic content of my act of volition in walking as follows:

< Phenomenally in this very experience I now here will  
that I hereby now here walk down this road! >.

Specifically, the form of my lived bodily *action as intended* is articulated by the *Sinn* content:

< . . . I hereby now here walk down this road! >.

And the form of my consciously *executing* my action through willing is articulated by the “modal” content:

< Phenomenally in this very experience I now here *will* that . . . >.

This complex thetic content distinguishes several factors in the way I enact the action by willing: phenomenally, with awareness, by the subject “I”, from a viewpoint “here now”.

Notice how the *Sinn* content is tied back—reflexively or anaphorically—into the *modal* thetic content. First, the content in <I walk!> (*Sinn*) is bound back into the content in <I will> (modal content). Second, the content <hereby!> in < I hereby walk! > is bound back into the content <will> in the modal content.

Thus, in the action of walking, the object of my volition is not simply my physical body nor even my lived body moving in a walking style. Rather, the object of my volition is my *action* in walking. What I will is the action as a whole within which my willing is an essential, dependent, and executive part.

### **Toward a formal phenomenological ontology of action**

The types of structure we have charted in action—featuring parts, wholes, and dependencies in an action and its phenomenological content—fall under *formal ontology*. In opening *Ideas I*, Husserl outlined an ontology of formal and material categories. *Material* categories include Nature, Consciousness, and Geist (social “spirit”). These categories are constrained by *formal* categories including Individual, Property, Relation, Part/Whole, Dependence, Number, Set, Manifold, and so on. Meaning seems to be a “logical” category that either falls under formal categories of object (such as those just listed), or merits its own place in formal ontology (including distinctive meaning categories articulated in mathematical logic and model theory). (Husserl’s ontology is reconstructed in Smith 2013.)

Over the long course of *Ideas I*, Husserl developed in effect a feedback loop as his analysis of the phenomenology of perception, judgment, and action both draws upon his formal ontology and grounds or justifies the ontology. The point should not be that the ontology is reduced to phenomenology, where being is reduced to appearance. Rather, the ontology

is interdependent with the phenomenology. Indeed, Husserlian epoché itself follows a “zig-zag” back-and-forth between the world and consciousness thereof (cf. Smith 2016b). (I see a kindred meta-ontology in the neo-Carnapian approach to ontology defended by Amie L. Thomasson in Thomasson 2015.)

In the spirit of formal ontology, *action* provides an especially forcing and revealing case study in the interplay between phenomenology and ontology. Indeed, action is the crux of our relation to the world!

## Related topics

See Chapters 2 (on Pfänder and Husserl), 21 (Hanna), 24 (De Monticelli), and 25 (Drummond).

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