

Thinking Together as One: Freire's Rewriting of Husserl

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When articulating the foundational concept of dialogic pedagogy, Paulo Freire describes critical consciousness as a *co-intentional* experience.¹ He writes that teachers and students who “co-intend on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators” (*PO*, 51). By describing critical consciousness as a *co-intentional* experience Freire is appropriating the philosophic language of Edmund Husserl in a particular, if not peculiar, manner. His use of Husserl's category appears unusual because, in his own work, Freire maintains that critical consciousness emerges from a *dialogic* experience, from an encounter *between* people. Yet, for Husserl, as I will show, intentionality is, first and foremost, the experience of a singular ego constructing meaning in the world. Indeed, in his principle work, *Ideas*, Husserl's phenomenology emerges from what he calls *Cartesian meditations*.² Does Freire's category of co-intentionality correspond to Husserl's qualification of the ego-subject's intentionality? How, if at all, does Freire's diverge from Husserl, and what are the consequences?

In the following, I will address these questions in order to present a nuanced understanding of Freire's category of critical consciousness. My aim is to explain why Freire's category of co-intentionality, insofar as it remains tied to the basic thrust of Husserl's phenomenology, identifies critical consciousness as a collective noetic experience, as *thinking together*.

HUSSERL'S CATEGORY OF INTENTIONALITY

The aim of Husserl's phenomenology is to reach a fundamental understanding of pure consciousness. When and if phenomenology is able to reach the “ground” of pure consciousness the endeavor “merits the title of *Transcendental Phenomenology*” (*ID*, 253). The objective is not unlike Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*.³ Husserl's phenomenology represents the philosopher's description of the process that produces philosophy. The results, whatever they are, also produce a description of the phenomenon of Mind (*Cogito*).

In the section, “The Essence of Consciousness as Theme of Inquiry” of *Ideas* Husserl explains the theme of his inquiry to be “Consciousness, or more distinctly, *Conscious experience (Erlebnis) in general*, to be taken in an extremely wide sense, about whose exact definition we are fortunately not concerned” (*ID*, 115). He informs us, “As a starting-point we take consciousness in a pregnant sense which suggests itself at once, most simply indicated through the Cartesian *cogito*, ‘I think’” (*ID*, 115). Whereas the meditative process may be similar to Descartes's, Husserl's project does not produce a “proof” for the existence of God, nor “establish” the separation of soul and body. Moreover, unlike Descartes, Husserl does not proceed from doubt. Rather, the starting point of phenomenology begins with the following

affirmation: “I, the real human being, am a real object like others in the natural world. I carry out cogitationes, ‘acts of consciousness’ in both a narrower and a wider sense, and these acts, as belonging to this human subject, are events of the same natural world” (*ID*, 113).

Husserl’s phenomenology can also be understood as a “science” of consciousness. That is, it is a bold attempt to understand the being of the very phenomenon that is involved in the process of understanding. Husserl offers a thumbnail sketch of his “science:”

What we lack above all is a certain general insight into the essence of consciousness in general, and quite specially also of consciousness, so far as in and through its essential Being, the “natural” fact-world comes to be known. In these studies we go so far as is needed to furnish the full insight at which we have been aiming, to wit, *that Consciousness in itself has a being of its own which in its absolute uniqueness of nature remains unaffected by the phenomenological disconnexion*. It therefore remains over as a “*phenomenological residuum*,” as a region of Being which is in principle unique, and can become in fact the field of a new science — the science of Phenomenology (*ID*, 113).

It is important to understand that Husserl’s use of the term “science” is a play on the term as it is commonly understood. Indeed, for Husserl, phenomenology occupies that fuzzy domain between speculative philosophy and natural science. It embraces the abstract and imaginative theoretic stance of the former, yet claims to situate this stance within the horizon of the natural world. Observations of the natural world produce descriptions that become the substance of transcendental meditations. Again, this is not unlike Descartes’ procedure, although Husserl appears to liken himself to Charles Darwin or John Muir. Husserl offers the following description of phenomenology: “Our procedure is that of a scientific traveller in an unknown part of the world who carefully describes what he finds on the trackless ways he takes — ways that will not always be the shortest” (*ID*, 280).

INTENTIONALITY AS THE FUNDAMENTAL IDEA OF PHENOMENOLOGY

For Husserl, the aim of phenomenology is to reach a fundamental understanding of pure consciousness. The pursuit of this daunting challenge begins with the claim that consciousness is a meaning-making process. Husserl names this process intentionality. In turn, understanding consciousness involves thinking about intentionality. Intentionality is thus the starting-point and basis of phenomenology. Husserl identifies the category of Intentionality as the general theme of “objectively oriented phenomenology” (*ID*, 404). He writes, “The title of the problem which in its scope covers phenomenology in its entirety is Intentionality. This indeed expresses the fundamental property of consciousness” (*ID*, 404).

An initial and general description depicts intentionality as the act of a human being conscious of something. Or to put it simply: the mind (*cogito*) is intentionality. Husserl makes the following assertions: intentionality is the most general feature of *cogito*; any *cogito* that is said to be conscious of something is also said to be “intentionally related” to this something. From the standpoint of the natural world — the horizon of “objects” in which the *cogito* is one of many — intentionality can be described as a mutual endeavor. If by “*cogito*” we mean the act whereby “I have *consciousness* of something,” then the something is likewise that which *presents*

itself, or *appears* as bearer of intentionality (*ID*, 118). Husserl continues, “to have a meaning or to something ‘in mind,’ is the cardinal feature of all consciousness, that on account of which it is not only experience generally but meaningful, ‘noetic’” (*ID*, 261).

Intentionality, the act of consciousness, is also described by Husserl as an act of “glancing-towards” an intentional object. With this description, he is recovering the original significance of the Latin term *intentio*: stretching, straining, tension; attention, effort, exertion. Intentionality thus qualifies consciousness as the directed, intense attention that “springs forth” from the cogito. In turn, that which stands-out and holds our attention is the bearer of intentionality, the intentional object. Husserl summarizes, “It is intentionality which characterizes *consciousness* in the pregnant sense of the term, and justifies us in describing the whole stream of experience as at once a stream of consciousness and unity of *one* consciousness” (*ID*, 242).

IMMANENT AND TRANSCENDENT INTENTIONAL EXPERIENCES

In the preceding, when Husserl qualifies consciousness as the “unity of *one* consciousness” he introduces *the* fundamental issue for this essay. Indeed, how one understands “unity” and “*one* consciousness” will have important implications for the interpretation of Freire’s category of co-intentionality. Freire’s category, I conjectured above, can be understood as the *shared* experience of *thinking together*.

Intentionality implies a singular consciousness unified in the experience of meaning-making. Up to this point, intentionality and consciousness (“*consciousness-of*”) have been used in a virtually synonymous manner. Intentionality has been described as the process of meaning-making, or the *consciousness-of* something. However, this equation yields new results when, Husserl engages the “natural” phenomenon of other minds, and considers the intentional experience of the singular cogito in relation to itself as compared to the intentional experience of cogitos in relation to one another. For him *consciousness*, in the “pregnant” sense of the term, gives birth to twin categories, or two distinct types of intentional experiences: *immanently related* intentional experiences and *transcendentally directed* intentional experiences.

Moreover, a cogito in relation to itself represents consciousness as a singular unity. He calls this unity Ego. Intentional experiences where the *intentio* (the attention, the effort) and the intentional object (the “bearer” of meaning) are related *within* the cogito are described by Husserl as *immanently related*. Whenever an act is related to an act of the same Ego, a unity of experience (a stream of consciousness emerging in time) occurs as an immanently related intentional experience. Names for this type of experience include “contemplation,” “meditation,” and “reflection;” namely, experiences where the “mind” (“soul”) is directed toward itself. Using a general name, one could describe this category of experiences as Thinking.⁴ Husserl summarizes the issue when he writes this:

Under *acts immanently directed*... we include those acts which are *essentially* so constituted that their *intentional objects*, when these exist at all, belong to the same stream of experience as themselves. We have an instance of this wherever an act is related to an act (a *cogitatio* to a *cogitatio*) of the same Ego... Consciousness and its object build up an individual unity purely set up through experiences (*ID*, 124).

Transcendentally directed experiences, however, are intentional experiences for which the individual unity of consciousness does not hold. For example, they are intentional acts directed “towards the intentional experiences of other Egos with other experience-streams” (ID, 124). While Husserl does not suggest it, an important example of *transcendental* intentionality is philosophic dialogue. In dialogue, the attention of the participants is turned toward the meaning-making of others. Dialogue is the event or act by which cogitos collaborate to construct meaning. That which “stands-out” as the intentional objects are precisely the intentional experiences of another consciousness. In dialogue, the intentional objects are the “outward” (communicated) expressions of immanently directed intentional experiences.⁵

For Husserl, dialogue, understood in this way, could not be considered an immanently directed intentional experience. And the reason appears to be obvious: in dialogue the cogito is directed toward others and away from the self-contained unity of its own consciousness. Dialogue, understood as an event of plurality, occurs *between* individual and unified consciousnesses. Thus, as a transcendent experience, dialogue produces meanings through a *mediated plurality* of cogitos. Again, according to Husserl, the “essential” characteristic of the immanent experience is the constitution of “an unmediated unity, that of a single concrete cogitatio.” He adds, “This type of *real (reellen) self-containedness*...is a *distinctive characteristic of immanent perception and of mental attitudes founded upon it*” (ID, 124). Thus, if we maintain a “strict” reading of Husserl, dialogue must be understood as a transcendent intentional experience.

FREIRE’S RE-WRITING OF HUSSERL

Freire’s understanding of literacy includes the ideal that the reader should engage a text with a critical eye. Freire categorizes this ideal as *serious study*:

It is impossible to study seriously if the reader faces a text as though magnetized by the author’s word, mesmerized by a magical force; if the reader behaves passively and becomes “domesticated,” trying only to memorize the author’s ideas; if the reader let’s himself or herself be “invaded” by what the author affirms; if the reader is transformed into a “vessel” filled by extracts from an internalized text....Seriously studying a text...is a form of reinventing, re-creating, rewriting; and this is a subject’s, not an object’s, task. Further, with this approach, a reader cannot separate himself or herself from the text because she or he would be renouncing a critical attitude toward the text.⁶

If we embrace Freire’s method of serious study, then reading his texts will inevitably involve some detective work. That is, as we read him we should keep ourselves alert for the idiosyncratic and, perhaps, counter-intuitive deployments of traditional philosophic categories. This type of sleuth-work lead me, during one of many close readings of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to discover a peculiar rendering of a major category from Husserl’s *Ideas*.

The identification of Freire’s rewriting of Husserl occurred while I was completing a reading of Freire and Hegel. The conclusion of the Freire/Hegel essay underlined the following: the pedagogy that follows from critical consciousness is based on the epistemological experience Freire names *co-intentionality*. My conclusion also suggested that any apparent connection between Freire and Husserl starts

to loosen when co-intentionality is considered in light of Freire's Hegelian inspired dialectic of *conscientizacjon* (critical consciousness). I concluded that Husserl's category of intra-ego-subjectivity (identified in transcendent intentionality) is superseded by Freire's inter-subjectivity. In reaching this conclusion, I relied upon an insight offered by Quentin Lauer who wrote, "The affirmation of life which is essential to self-consciousness cannot be the affirmation of one's own life alone," because "unlike the Husserlian phenomenology of intersubjectivity which first discovers the self and then seeks to 'constitute' a world of other selves, the Hegelian phenomenology finds that other selves are essential to the discovery of one's own self and that this 'discovery' is actually a producing of oneself in relation to others."⁷

In light of Lauer's reading, I concluded that Freire's category of co-intentionality was rooted in the Hegelian phenomenology of intersubjectivity and its ontology of human freedom. This ontology insists that *being* and *becoming more* human occurs always and everywhere *with* others. For Freire (following Hegel) the human being is not simply *in* the world like some inanimate object, but *with* the world and others, an intersubject creating history. Freire writes that the intersubjective praxis of freedom "is a liberation of women and men, not things. Accordingly, while no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others" (PO, 48). For Freire, the process of liberation is a shared experience, an authentically *collective* experience. Liberation is the experience of people acting together as one, and this event of acting together is captured in the category of co-intentionality.

THE (APPARENT) CONTRAST YIELDS A NOVEL SYNTHESIS

The contrast between Freire and Husserl seems evident. For Husserl, phenomenology is concerned with understanding the experiences of the singular, unified cogito, and, ultimately, attaining knowledge of pure consciousness. Phenomenology identifies the noetic experience of intentionality in the individual "ego" constructing meaning in the world from its own vantage point. For Freire, on the other hand, the "individual" emerges in-and-through a collaborative act of unveiling and transforming the world. Following Hegel, he assumes the act of creating meaning is a shared experience. Thus, "the pursuit of full humanity...cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity....Attempting to be more human, individualistically, leads to having more egotistically, a form of dehumanization" (PO, 66-67).

The contrast produces a series of questions. Why would Freire use Husserl's language in an attempt to articulate the dialogic basis of critical consciousness? Why not stay the course with the Hegelian dialectic? Surely Freire was aware that intentionality is, first and foremost, the experience of a singular ego constructing meaning in the world, and phenomenology a philosophical "science" that follows from Cartesian styled meditations? In light of Freire's ideal of serious study, I reject the idea that Freire mis-read Husserl. Rather, I conjecture that he purposefully re-read and re-wrote Husserl. That is, he engaged in a serious study of Husserl. What did his serious study produce?

Freire, I speculate, recognized that invoking Husserl's category of intentionality enabled him to characterize his own unique understanding of the relationship

between dialogue and critical consciousness. By describing it as co-intentionality, Freire was able to identify critical consciousness as *thinking together with others*. When understood against the backdrop of Husserl and the tradition of Western philosophy (in which Freire was partially situated) the category of co-intentionality signifies no less a radical step than the move to collapse the two fundamental categories of action (*vita activa*) and contemplation (*vita contemplativa*).⁸ To make this claim is to suggest that Freire was purposefully rereading Husserl's account of the Ego, and affirming that the experience described by Husserl as *immanent* intentionality could, indeed, occur as a *shared* experience. Does this conjecture violate Husserl's categories of intentionality? Is this a violent reworking of phenomenology that deconstructs its foundation so as to render it impotent? In order to answer this, it is necessary to discuss why Freire's category of co-intentionality (critical consciousness) can be understood as *thinking together* with others.

In light of the general issue I have taken up in this essay, my use of dialogue, to distinguish immanent from transcendent intentional experiences should not appear as a surprise. If it is indeed the case that dialogue is an example of transcendent intentional experience, then my fundamental questions have, in effect, been answered. It is now simply a matter of identifying Freire's category of co-intentionality as a noetic description of dialogue. In turn, co-intentionality is understood to be Freire's name for transcendent intentional experience. However, it is not necessarily the case that dialogue, particularly as it is understood by Freire, must be classified as transcendent intentional experience. Moreover, in the spirit of Freirean serious study, it does not follow that the categories of immanent and transcendent intentionality must remain petrified within the parameters of Husserl's description. Indeed, perhaps co-intentionality might be a useful way to describe the experience that is somewhere "in between" *self-containedness* and *other-directedness*. It may be the case that philosophical dialogue mediates an experience in which multiple cogitos experience the *same* stream of consciousness. In the next section I will offer a description of philosophic dialogue and critical consciousness that blurs the lines between the participants' cogitos.

CO-INTENTIONALITY AS THINKING TOGETHER

Hannah Arendt offers a paradoxical conclusion to her treatise on the *vita activa*, in this quotation at the end of *The Human Condition*: "*Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret, numquam minus solum esse quam solus esset* — Never is one more active than when one does nothing, never is one less alone than when one is by oneself."⁹ Not coincidentally, these same lines from the Roman statesman Cato appear as part of the epigraph to her treatise on the *vita contemplativa*, *Life of the Mind*.¹⁰

What is it about these "tantalizing ambiguous lines from Cato" that Arendt found to be so revealing?¹¹ There are several aspects that speak to her, but, for the purposes of the current essay, I mention only the essentials. For Arendt, these lines identify the dialogic quality of thinking, and, more importantly, underline the fact that thinking, or experience of the single Ego, is actually a two-in-one relationship. These lines describe thinking as the experience of the mind when "I" withdraw to

my “abode” to be with “myself.” She explains, “For nothing can be itself and at the same time for itself but the two-in-one that Socrates discovered as the essence of thought and Plato translated into conceptual language as the soundless dialogue *eme emautō* — between me and myself.”¹² Cato’s lines demonstrate the hidden *plurality* within the unified and singular cogito. Arendt continues,

We call *consciousness* (literally, as we have seen, “to know with myself”) the curious fact that in a sense I also am for myself, though I hardly appear to me, which indicates that the Socratic “being one” is not so unproblematic as it seems; I am not only for others but for myself, and in this latter case, I clearly am not just one. A difference is inserted into my Oneness.¹³

I quote Arendt, and offer her depiction of thinking, to draw an analogy with the description of consciousness that follows from Freire’s rewriting of Husserl. When Freire tells us that critical consciousness is a co-intentional experience, we are inclined to identify this description as an example of what Husserl calls transcendent intentional experience. Yet, if we look closely at Freire’s texts, we understand why co-intentionality is analogous to what Arendt calls thinking: the two-in-one dialogic relation within the “singular” stream of consciousness. If we accept this analogy, we can then identify Freirean pedagogy as yielding the harmony that Socrates believed only happened in the soul’s dialogue with itself. For Freire, this harmony manifests in the unification of the participants who meet in dialogue. In fact, this *reconciliation* of the participants, where all “are simultaneously teachers *and* students,” is the *raison d’être* of liberatory education (*PO*, 53). Thus, co-intentionality synthesizes the fundamental characteristics of immanent *and* transcendent intentionality.

Freire’s co-intentionality signifies the profound unanimity that emerges between subjects who meet, in dialogue, to name the world. This unanimity expresses the depth of solidarity involved in the pedagogical project of *co-intentional* education: the experience in which “teachers and students...co-intent on reality.” This education can be said to produce a shared and unified intentional experience. Indeed, problem-posing education produces “knowledge of reality through *common* reflection and action” (*PO*, 53). Given Husserl’s depiction of intentionality, we should not underestimate the significance of Freire’s describing co-intentionality as a *common* reflection. In sum, the dialogic and communicative basis of problem-posing yields an experience of co-intentionality that is akin to a plurality of subjects thinking together as *One*. Freire puts it thusly:

“Problem-posing” education, responding to the essence of consciousness — *intentionality* — rejects communiques and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being *conscious of*, not only as intent on objects but as turned upon itself... consciousness as consciousness of consciousness (*PO*, 60).

The preceding identification of problem posing with consciousness simultaneously confirms and defies Husserl’s categories of immanent and transcendent intentionality. In fact, it collapses the two into one: when a plurality of subjects meet and dialogue happens, they produce a singular, unified and common reflection. Thus, problem posing pedagogy produces a collective critical consciousness. Indeed, the need to collapse the two categories follows from Freire’s conviction, as an educator, that the Cartesian noetic positionality yields an oppressive pedagogy. Thus, in

contrast to the dialogic pedagogy that produces the co-intentional experience, Freire describes banking education as that which “inhibits creativity and domesticates (although it cannot completely destroy) the intentionality of consciousness by isolating consciousness from the world, thereby denying people their ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (*PO*, 65).

Dialogic or problem-posing education is both grounded in and “responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation” (*PO*, 65). Here, Freire’s use of the plural form provides some support to the claim that co-intentionality is the shared experience of thinking together. Indeed, the *authentic* experience of becoming fully human is located, not with the experience of cogito, but with *persons* engaged together in inquiry. This inquiry defines education as the collective practice of freedom, “the permanent search of people together with others for their becoming more fully human in the world in which they exist.”¹⁴ And, for Freire, this sort of inquiry is realized in problem-posing education, the dialogic pedagogy that produces nothing less than an experience of collective consciousness, or thinking with others.

CONCLUSION: TRANSITION: THE “OPEN-ENDEDNESS” OF HUSSERL’S PROJECT

This essay was written in the spirit of Freirean serious study. In turn, I have tried to avoid being “mesmerized” by Husserl’s and Freire’s discourses. On the contrary, I have played the two off one another in order to recreate the category of *conscientizacion* (critical consciousness). Using elements from both, I have suggested that co-intentionality identifies the experience of collective consciousness that emerges from dialogue; namely, the type of dialogue that is carried out “in fellowship and solidarity” in “the pursuit of full humanity” (*PO*, 66). My aim has been to share a reading that may reveal new understandings of the noetic experience of dialogue. At the same time, I have attempted to offer an analysis that is perhaps distinct from the “inherited” readings of Freire and Husserl.

In the spirit of Freirean serious study, it is appropriate to conclude this essay by recalling that Husserl understood phenomenology to be an interpretative and open-ended “science.” This is evident throughout his text where he identifies the difficulties, and paradoxes, associated with the task of understanding the process of “meaning-making.” For example, he declares that his phenomenology subjects “[consciousness] in its essential nature to a systemic though in no sense exhaustive analysis” (*ID*, 113). To announce the project as such is not to renounce the phenomenological project, but, rather, to invite others to join it. It is to claim that the project is in-exhaustible, or ongoing. In some sense, Husserl is deferring the question of “pure consciousness” and the “essence of intentionality” for another time and, perhaps, another philosopher. Yet, in doing so, he is clearing an interpretative space for others in which to move. Perhaps it is within this hermeneutic clearing that Freire was able to think with Husserl, and thereby articulate his rewriting of the phenomenology of consciousness.

1. Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 51. This book will be cited as *PO* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969). This book will be cited as *ID* in the text for all subsequent references.
3. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (New York: Hackett Publishing, 1979).
4. This denotation, however, may serve to confuse as much as clarify. Indeed, the term thinking (*Denken*) is not a prominent category in *Ideas*.
5. Husserl seems loathe to use the categories “inner” and “outer” to designate fields or domains of perception. Immanent and transcendent are meant to replace these terms. Thus, when introducing these two categories of intentional experience he writes, “We avoid talking about inner and outer perception as there are serious objections to this way of speaking” (*ID*, 124).
6. Paulo Freire, *Politics of Education* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1985), 2.
7. Quentin Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), 99 and 101.
8. For a detailed historico-philosophical narrative of these two categories see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).
9. *Ibid.*, 325.
10. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt-Brace-Jovanovich, 1971).
11. Phillip Hansen, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, History, Citizenship* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993), 197.
12. Arendt, *The Life of Mind*, 185.
13. *Ibid.*, 123.
14. Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum 1973), 95 and 96.