Husserl’s Theory of Parts and Wholes: The Dynamic of Individuating and Contextualizing Interpretation
—Übergehen, Abheben, Ergänzungsbedürftigkeit

JAY LAMPERT
Howard University

I am going to argue that Husserl’s theory of parts and wholes in the third Logical Investigation is a theory of the dynamic self-development of objectifying interpretations. I will develop three of Husserl’s descriptive categories which commentators rarely thematize, namely the categories of “passing over borders” (übergehen), of “lifting off in relief” (abheben), and of the “demand for supplementation” (Ergänzungsbedürftigkeit). Parts pass over into, and lift off from, one another, so that when we see an object partially, those parts demand that we see more, when we know it partially, those parts demand that we interpret it further, and when our interpretations are only partially unified, those parts demand a closed unity of consciousness. On this reading, the ideal closure of the whole operates within systems of openness: each part opens up the demands for larger contexts, while each whole opens up the demand for internal articulation. How, then, does each part of an object demand its own supplementation? What is the ground of the dynamic of passing over from part to part? How is a thing more than it is?

On my reading, then, Husserl’s theory of parts and wholes is among other things designed to provide a phenomenological account of the processes responsible for the synthetic unity of consciousness as a whole. Now this sort
of approach has been forcefully objected to in Seebohm’s essay on “Reflexion and Totality in the Philosophy of E. Husserl”. Seebohm denies that Husserl is interested in the totalization of consciousness, and hence that Husserl avoids having to compete with Hegelian phenomenology’s “philosophy of concrete totality” (p. 20). We might add that if Seebohm is right to say that Husserl is interested only in “relative” and never in “absolute” wholes (p. 23), it would follow that Husserl would also avoid the deconstructive issue of the indefinite deferral of totalized consciousness.

Seebohm’s central argument is that wholes for Husserl are objects of consciousness only in the sense that consciousness can refer to complex objects founded on simple presentations (p. 24). As such, a “concrete whole” is a sensible object individuated relative to a context (p. 23). One can perceive complex objects, and one can abstract from complex objects to formal categories of wholes and parts (p. 24), but one cannot presuppose that either the world or consciousness makes up absolute wholes over and above the relative wholes that are individuated in concrete experience (p. 21, 30). I do not argue with the claims that for Husserl no given whole is necessary and that wholes are given relative to interpretative activities founded on the objects of other interpretative activities. However, I will argue that there is a sense in which totality is presupposed notwithstanding. Indeed, I will argue that it is precisely the relativity of wholes in contexts, and the open-endedness of interpretation that that entails, that entitles the phenomenologist to speak of intentional unities that are as yet unachieved, and in the limiting case, of a concrete totality towards which all interpretations pass over into one another.

The best known commentary on this material is Sokolowski’s (1967–68) essay on “The Logic of Parts and Wholes in Husserl’s Investigations”. According to Sokolowski, the theory of parts and wholes concerns the constitution of objectivity within subjectivity. It describes the ways in which parts are “blended” according to “rules” in such a way as to “structure given regions of reality” (p. 537). Since the blending of parts is law-governed, it may be understood scientifically, and hence objectively. All of this is true enough. But it gives the impression, which Husserl himself sometimes gives, that rules are static, that parts are given, that scientific knowledge is immediate, that wholes are stable, and that blending is easy. Yet the problematical character of parts and wholes becomes apparent if we press Sokolowski’s own formulations of Husserl’s basic distinction between independent parts and nonindependent parts.

An independent part of a whole, Sokolowski says, is a part that “can be a phenomenon for consciousness apart from its whole” (p. 539). A nonindependent part is inseparable from the whole, and “each [nonindependent] part, by virtue of what it is, contains within itself a rule dictating a necessary