Husserl and the Inner Structure of Feeling-Acts

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Edmund Husserl’s theory of feeling has been one of the least known and yet one of the most innovative aspects of his philosophy. Its relative unknownness can be explained by the fact that an extremely small portion of his published writings have been concerned with feelings.1 But within these fragmentary analyses there can be found a number of new and important distinctions that Husserl made in the nature of feeling. Instead of adopting the traditional tendency of simply describing the different “objects” and “causes” of feeling, Husserl made as his theme the inner structure of feelings themselves. He was thereby able to discover the descriptive differences between feeling-acts and feeling-sensations, and between feeling-emotions and feeling-tonalities. He was also able to bring to a new degree of clarity the substantial difference between feeling objects and the underlying “objects” that the feeling objects are founded upon. In this paper we would like to elucidate these and other distinctions that Husserl made, and to develop or modify some of his conclusions that we believe are in need of further analysis. To this end we shall discuss 1) feelings as act-matters, 2) the proper intentionality of feelings, and the relation of feelings to presentation, 3) feeling-sensations and their intentional interpretation, and 4) feeling-qualities and feeling-flows.

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1. Feelings as Act-Matters

Husserl’s first description of feeling-acts can be found in Chapter Two of the Fifth Logical Investigation. Here he describes feelings as qualities of intentional acts, rather than as matters of these acts. An act-quality is the moment of an intentional act which determines the way in which the act intends its object, whereas an act-matter is the moment which determines what object the act intends. With regard to the act-matter, Husserl writes “the matter . . must be that element in an act which first gives it reference to an object . . The matter — to carry clearness a little further — is that peculiar side of an act’s phenomenological content that not only determines that it grasps the object but also as what it grasps it, the properties, relations, categorial forms, that it itself attributes to it. It is the act’s matter that makes it count as this object and no other”. For example, it is the act-matter that determines the reference to a green house, a person who is standing before me, or a universal category.

The act-quality, on the other hand, is “the manner of objective reference”. It can be “an act-quality of the objectifying kind”, which divides into existentially positing acts and existentially non-positing acts, the latter which “leave the existence of their object unsettled: the object may, objectively considered, exist, but it is not referred to as existent”. Objectifying act-qualities thus are the moments of an act which either posit existence or some modality of existence, or do not posit at all — and remain neutral to the existential status of their object.

There is also another kind of act-quality. This kind encompasses the sphere of “non-objectifying acts such as joys, wishes, volitions”. Non-objectifying act-qualities are predominantly feeling-acts, and are such that they are always founded on objectifying act-qualities. A feeling-act can never be experienced by itself, but can only be experienced as a way of referring to an object that is posited (or not-posited) as having a certain mode of existence. For example, I cannot experience joy by itself, but must experience joy in a person or event that is posited as existent.

Hence in any complex intentional act it is possible to distinguish three different moments. If we take the joyful perception of a person, it is possible to distinguish the act-matter, which is the reference to the object, a person, the objectifying act-quality, which is the existentially positing way

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2 Logical Investigations, op. cit., p. 589.
3 Ibid.,
4 Ibid., p. 649.
5 Ibid., p. 638.
6 Ibid., p. 651.