An Intentional Analysis of the Law of Contradiction*

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1. The Authority of Logical Truth.

In this paper I shall develop an intentional analysis of the law of contradiction, which, I shall argue, is the basic logical structure involved in the (intuitive) judgment that some statement is necessarily true or false. My purpose is to clarify the basis of logical intuition, as a recognition of what Husserl called an "essential agreement" or correspondence between the intentional structure of some assertion and of some state of affairs. An intentional analysis of logical structures is necessary to provide a criterion which distinguishes logical intuition from, say, a (contingent) psychological feeling of conviction. Though Husserl was aware of the need for a clarification of logical truth (and, indeed, is known for his critique of psychologism), he did not provide a detailed description of the law of contradiction which would establish its necessity and show it to be the basis of logical judgment. In what follows, I shall attempt to provide exactly this analysis, through which the intuition of logical truth may be distinguished from the psychologically contingent experience of belief.

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Before presenting my own account of logical truth, I shall summarize Husserl's influential critique of Mill's psychologistic theory of logical judgment, in order subsequently to show how a phenomenological analysis escapes these criticisms.

2. Traditional Empiricism and the Problem of Psychologism.

In the Logical Investigations, Husserl develops four arguments against Mill's psychologistic view that logical truths reflect contingent laws of thought, or that they are merely inductive generalizations from "mental facts." For example, Mill viewed the law of contradiction (\(-(A \Rightarrow \neg A)\) ) as an induction or generalization from the familiar experience of the (mental) incompatibility of (simultaneous) belief in positive and negative modes or states of being. We experience the incompatibility of e.g. light and darkness, sound and silence, equality and inequality, succession and simultaneity, etc., and generalize from this experience that any positive phenomenon and its negation are distinct phenomena in a relation of extreme contrariety, and thus that one is always absent when the other is present. Mill accounts for the necessity of the law of contradiction in psychological terms: from our constant experience of the incompatibility of positive and negative modes, we form habits of association (e.g. between the idea of the existence of a positive or negative mode and belief in the non-existence of its contrary), such that we find it impossible to believe that contraries can exist as simultaneous modes of an object. The associations are, in turn, accounted for mechanistically, in terms of a theory of brain physiology, or arousal of the same area of the brain or nervous system by different stimuli. Thus, the law of contradiction has a merely factual basis, in a psychological inability to doubt it, or to believe that contrary or contradictory states (Mill does not seem to make a distinction) can co-occur. Summarizing his view of the status of the three basic logical laws (contradiction, excluded middle, and identity), Mill says of them:

"They may or may not be capable of alteration by experience, but the conditions of our existence deny to us the experience which would be required to alter them. Any assertion, therefore, which conflicts with one of these laws, any proposition, for instance, which asserts a contradiction, though it were on a subject wholly removed from the sphere of our experience, is to us unbelievable. The belief in such a proposition is, in the present constitution of nature, impossible as a mental fact."