

Proceedings of the Kent State University May 4th Philosophy Graduate Student Conference

No. 005015 (2008) | ISSN: 1546-6663

Husserl on Signs

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Husserl's controversial distinction between meaning and indication in the *Logical Investigations* has been attacked by Derrida and others. In this paper I shall investigate the nature of this distinction, its meaning, and its implications for the philosophy of language and phenomenology.

Husserl's aim in the *Investigations* is to establish a phenomenological foundation for logic, that is, to refute psychologism instead of refusing to countenance it, and to account for the way human beings can know logical truths, instead of assuming either that logic is a property of the mind or that its accessibility to thought requires no explanation. Thus he walks a different path than both psychologism and the logical objectivism of Frege. Phenomenology, through its account of the relation between the intending subject and the intended object, has the resources to radically overcome both positions. Husserl does not reduce logic to mental states. He says, like Frege, that logic is part of a closed realm with no reference to real entities. But rather than trying to posit truth in a logical entity, he shows how truth is the experience of evidence brought about e.g. through language or mathematics. In the confines of this presentation, however, we must set this discussion aside.

In the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl points out an ambiguity in the word 'judgement': it can mean either the act of judging or the judgement itself, e.g. $2 \times 2 = 4$, which is the same whether you or I say it (*LI* ?11, 286).^[1] In The First Investigation, 'Expression and Meaning', he works out a similar ambiguity in the term 'sign'. The ambiguity, he points out, is that 'sign' seems to apply to both indication (*Anzeigen*) and expression (*Ausdrücke*). The same sign can both indicate and express, but some signs indicate without expressing (for example I can put a pencil on a book as a reminder to call a friend) and the essence of expression does not require an

external sign. Indications 'stand for' their objects, but expressions 'mean' their objects. Though at first it seems strange to say so, the argument of this essay is that in both ambiguities 'judgement and sign' Husserl is distinguishing between the act and its content.

At first Husserl distinguishes expressions from indications. In the closing paragraph of the First Investigation, however he goes much farther, revealing the real distinction he is after. There he claims that an expression has 'no intrinsic connection' to its meaning. These meanings, he goes on to say, are 'an ideally closed set of general objects, to which being thought or being expressed are alike contingent?', while the expression is the concrete sign (¶35, 333). In *La Voix et le Phénomène* Derrida interprets this apparent shift as a symptom of profound and untenable commitment on the part of Husserl. Indication, Derrida says, threatens to infect and occupy the meaning-function, for the indicative function seems to take over the expressed sign as the text progresses.^[2] According to Derrida, Husserl was committed to the idea that subjectivity could or does live in a pure ideal realm of meaning closed off from the real. Thus, Derrida contends, the apparent expansion of the realm of indication in Husserl's own text refutes his argument. This is the 'problem of the sign' to which Derrida refers in the subtitle of his book. Though a full defence of Husserl would require in addition at least an examination of the *Ideas*, here I argue for a different interpretation of language in Husserl, solely with reference to the *Logical Investigations*.

Husserl distinguished expression from indication at first because in speech and writing words have an 'additional expressiveness' that indications do not, namely, a *meaning* that sets the object itself before us. This is the primary function of expressions. We use expressions to point out this or that about a state of affairs, that is, to *mean something*. In other words, the difference between indication and meaning was the 'essential distinction' from the beginning.^[3] My central aim in this paper is to address the other function of signs, namely indication, which is often neglected in the literature, and which in Husserl's analysis is secondary to meaning. In any use of language, the physical words, whether heard or seen or touched, have a different kind of 'expressiveness' that does not set the object before us: they indicate something about the words themselves, e.g. the fact that it is a *person* who is speaking with us. I show that Husserl takes signs, in the sense of a Kantian transcendental clue, as evidence for the structure of the subjective acts that constitute them. Thus, Husserl's investigation into the ambiguity in the 'sign' leads us to the mind 'for only the mind can distinguish between the indicative and meaning-functions of signs.

Now, an expression essentially involves language, and it has three inseparable parts, or moments: intimation (a kind of indication), meaning, and the object meant. But a sign also has a physical or sensory contour, e.g. the sound or the ink on the page. The physical existence of the word does not refer us to, say, Napoleon 'it is, Husserl says, 'intrinsically indifferent' (I ¶8 279). 'A word,' he says, 'ceases to be a word when our interest stops at its sensory contour' (I ¶8 278).

Sokolowski describes a famous example of Husserl's in this way: suppose 'we are looking at some arabesques

and admiring their intricacy. Suddenly we realize that these elegant marks actually are words; they spell out someone's name or make some statement. For this change to occur, we must have to begin to 'intend' differently? the new intention goes beyond what is immediately present [i.e. the shapes of what seemed to be flowers before, to] say, Winston Churchill or the Gare St. Lazare? (Sokolowski 2002, 171). This new intention is what makes us experience them as words. In a word, the method of phenomenology, is to start with e.g. arabesques and signs, and, looking at the differences between them, work out the intentional structures by which we experience them the way we do.

Broadly put, Husserl's point is realist: we cannot give a coherent account of signs unless we account for them from the perspective of intelligent beings. A sign is not *for* something unless it is a sign *to* someone. Signs always turn us toward a *mind* living through their referring function, or intending their meaning. But they do not refer to anything if no-one is referred by them.

If we look carefully at the example, we discern two changes in the way we intend the signs: the first is to realize the arabesques actually are words, and the second is to be led by the words to, e.g. Winston Churchill. The first change, Husserl says, 'is effected by the physical side of speech', i.e. through indication, and leads to a 'correlation among the corresponding physical and mental experiences of communicating persons' (I §7 277). Then, he says, the indicative function gives rise to the meaning-function: for 'when the subjective act [of meaning-intention] is intimated [i.e. by the physical side of speech], something objective and ideal is brought to expression' (I §11 286). In every case, signs *indicate* subjectivity, that is, that someone lived, will live, or is living through their referring function.

This is, according to Husserl, the structure of indication: the reality of one thing motivates a belief in, or signals the existence of another real thing. It works through what Husserl calls the creativity of association: we feel A and B really belong together (§4 273-4). For example, a flag at half mast indicates someone has died, a referee's whistle indicates the beginning or end of the game.

Signs, then, indicate a *real* mind, though perhaps an indeterminate one. They do so insofar as they are real themselves. A sign motivates our belief in the existence of a more or less impersonal subjectivity, e.g. an author or speaker, to which we can really attribute the intention that constitutes the sign's referring function, but not much more. However, both I and this other subjectivity intend the same object ideally, for example, $1+1=2$, or 'The Tower of London'. Since real expressions are essentially meaningful, Husserl argues, the real is oriented to the ideal, but, as we shall see, the ideal is indifferent to the real. The word ideal, for Husserl, does not describe a separate realm of entities. It is related to the real the way the word 'umbrella' seems to clothe and belong sensibly to the umbrella, though it is not a physical part or real property of it (VI §6 688). Now we are ready to describe what meaning is, and what kind of demonstration or truth is proper to it.

Meaning

We need neither a real intuition nor a real object in order to understand an expression. Consider: 'the centre of the sun is 16,000,000°C'; 'a square circle is impossible'. Thus, if a woman says 'there is a café' with a red sign on Harvard Street in Cambridge' the café' does not have to be in sight for us to understand what she means. The essence of the expression, then, is neither the café', nor her words, but what she means. Husserl calls this the meaning-intention. The meaning of her expression is the same no matter who experiences it, for the meaning is not *her* act, but is instead the content of her act, namely, an *ideal* meaning-intention, an *intending sense*.

The ideal meaning-intention directs us to the ideal fulfilment of this act, namely, the act of perceiving the café' (*LI I*, §14 290). That is, her meaning suggests the ideal possibility of seeing this café'. That is, ultimately the expression *expresses* neither its meaning (i.e. meaning-intention), nor the object itself, but this *ideal* fulfilling act, the *fulfilling sense*.^[4] To mean, therefore, is not to direct one's thoughts to an ideal or closed realm of entities, but to turn them toward the possibility of experiencing a state of affairs. The ideal meaning-intention turns us toward an ideal fulfilment. What she said gave us in advance an empty intention to see the café' (which is not the same as a picture of it). Turning a corner, we see the café'. On the one hand we experience the words fitting the situation properly, and on the other hand, we experience the café' bring her description to life. In the real fulfilment the intention fuses with the possible fulfilment. This unification is the experience of truth or evidence 'an event that we cannot take as an object of thought.

To mean, then, is to point out something in the world as an object of possible experience. In the case of a 'square circle', the meaning-intention simply cannot be fulfilled because such an object is impossible. But the way that meaning points out objects differs from the way that indication motivates us.

Up to now, we have been discussing signs from the point of view of the hearer. To distinguish indication from meaning, Husserl switches to the point of view of the speaker. I'll give the (rather famous) quotation:

One of course speaks, in a certain sense, even in soliloquy, and [one can] think of oneself' even as speaking to oneself' but in the genuine sense of communication, there is no speech' nor does one tell oneself anything [in soliloquy or monologue. For the mental acts that real words would indicate] are themselves experienced by us at that very moment. (*LI I*, §8 280)

In soliloquy, we do not need the words to *indicate* our mental acts to us, Husserl says, for 'the existence of the sign neither 'motivates' the existence of the meaning, nor [properly speaking] our belief in the meaning's existence' (I §8 279). This is *not* because the meaning exists in separate, ideal realm but *because we live in the experience of the object*.^[5]

Words direct us to the experience of truth, and the possibility of this fulfilling sense is what animates an expression or sign. In short, the meaning-intention is what gives them direction. Since this meaning-intention is different from the real experience of the thing, it is mediated, ideal, possible, like the fulfilling sense toward which it directs us. The categories, then, are identical, ideal structures of this mediation. But when we are already living in the experience of the object, we would already be doing what the words set us to do, namely, intending the object.

Whether the words are real (e.g. spoken in dialogue) or not (e.g. when we speak to ourselves mentally), the meaning is the same. In a word, whether we speak aloud or not, we nevertheless intend the object (I ?8 278).

In arguing that meaning is not essentially related to signs Husserl is arguing precisely that we do *not* internalize and idealize spoken or written words, and Derrida would be right to criticize such an attempt. Whether we speak or not, we are meaningfully engaged with the world. We do not need to say words to ourselves in engaging things, but at the same time we are able to speak intelligently about our engagements with things afterward. A tennis player does not speak words to herself or narrate her actions to herself while she is playing, but when asked about her strategy and her reactions on the court she can nevertheless speak of her actions, her errors, the in-game atmosphere, and so on.

Deduction and Induction

So much for an account of meaning in Husserl. Now we must return to indication. To mean is to direct oneself to or be directed to the fulfilling sense. Husserl calls this 'the epistemological function of meanings' (I ?6 276). But a sign that stands for something stands in place of and apart from the object; we do not pass on to the object in it. This Husserl calls a 'symbolic' function.

When he argues that meaning has the same structure as deduction, he implies that indication is defined by induction. In deduction, Husserl says, we move from premises to conclusion by evident inference. We do not call such premises 'signs' or 'indications' of the conclusion because 'signs' have a physical moment. Thus, that which makes a thing a *sign* 'disappears', as it were, and the *meaning* directs us toward a state of affairs. *Meaning, like truth, is not intrinsically related to signs, but only to the things themselves.* The meaning is somewhat like a pair of glasses, only it does not exist *in-between* you and what you are experiencing. To the contrary, it picks out or highlights features of the state of affairs with which you are engaged.

But with indication it is quite different: we still call the 'indicating' term a 'sign' of the 'indicated' term. Indication does not bring things about the world to light; it refers you to another entity. A crown carved into a chair really remains a sign of the king, whether he is sitting there or not. Thus, indication, according to Husserl, has a necessarily physical moment, while expression and meaning do not.

I have argued that in the *Logical Investigations* meaning is a way in which we are always engaged in the world and directed toward things and the features of things. This is why it is not essentially related to signs or expressions. What is conspicuous about signs is their opacity, their physical moment. This is what allows them to indicate modes of intentionality. But signs or expressions are not thereby mere external representations of internal phenomena. Quite to the contrary, because of this physical moment they have a different structure from our normal way of engaging with things. Signs refer to us and our way of intending objects. In the course of our normal engagement with things we do not necessarily become aware of ourselves or of consciousness; things do not always indicate consciousness ? until we begin to do phenomenology.

This highlights the special nature of signs for Husserl's thought.^[6] Not all signs express something about a state of affairs; some merely refer us to an object through indication. But all signs, however, have a physical moment that turns us toward consciousness. In the First Investigation consciousness (and therefore the ideal) seems to be neither internal nor external, since it comes to light through the physical phenomena of the sign.

Intimation

Though as we have seen meaning is not essentially related to expressions, expressions are essentially meaningful. Understanding an expression is, as it were, a double movement: a sign points us toward an impersonal consciousness that animates it, and then we follow its intention to the object. That the first moment is not essential to meaning is clear from Augustine's argument in *De Magistro*. There he says that words do not indicate what another person is thinking. But in his conclusion, and without giving a reason, he concedes that words do in fact disclose that people are thinking about what they are saying.^[7] Husserl calls this the intimating function of signs, thus giving us *two* conceptual determinations of indication, namely as real signs, and as intimation.

In communicative expression, he says, speech differs from unintentional gesture. Speech expresses a meaning, but unintentional gesture merely indicates. In the consciousness of the speaker expressions are ?phenomenally one with the experiences made manifest in them?, and when the speaker intends to ?put certain ?thoughts? on record expressively?, her expression has a meaning (*LI I*, ?5 275). To ?put thoughts on record? is to think in and through one's expression, so that the expression is phenomenally one with the experiences it manifests. In other words, to speak is to intend the state of affairs aloud.

The distinction between speech and unintentional gesture is between the phenomenal unity of speech with an experience, and the disunity of indication with its object.^[8] Thus we live through and manifest experiences we do not intentionally express or connect with their manifestations. For Husserl these do not mean anything, but since they are not intended to be indications, neither do they ?stand for? anything (*I*, ?2 270). A woman with a dull headache may not notice that she is massaging her temples. In this case her pain is not phenomenally one with her gestures ? it is not through her gestures that her pain becomes clear to her, that is, it is not through her

gestures that she intends her pain.^[9] Instead, her gestures are swallowed up in and flow out from her pain. So to others, her gestures do not 'stand for' her pain, they show or express it (I, ¶ 278).^[10] For the observer, they are phenomenally one with her pain.

The physical side of a sign or expression is not sufficient to account for the character of a sign unless it also discloses subjectivity. We can apply this idea to speech as follows: when one person is speaking, like her listeners she usually intends the state of affairs she is expressing, rather than e.g. her experience of telling it. But her audience perceives the experiences she is having in and through her gestures, changes in inflection, dilation of the pupils, and the supremely rich detail of communication. But an audience does not perceive these adequately; for her, the experience of being referred to and the meaning are one, but for the audience it is not.^[11] The unintentional display does not point to the meaning, however. It refers only to her own experience. More specifically, it discloses the meaning-intending, the phenomenal unity of the real living subject with the fulfilling sense of the expression. The meaning comes from the intentional side of speech.

Thus, her conscious acts appear to have direction not through the sound of her words, but through her attention moving to the state of affairs, i.e. through the meaning-intention. She cannot speak the movement of her attention from this thing to that, but this is disclosed alongside her words; she intimates it. Her experience is disclosed inadequately alongside the intending sense that has been worked up into words. Since the audience does not perceive adequately what she is experiencing, they are invited to live through the same meaning-intending acts as she.

But just as words do not communicate without intimation, intimation is not articulate and does not appear as surplus without words. Sokolowski points out that syncategorematic parts of speech (words like in, and, but, the, is, etc.) do not refer to anything in the world, but refer instead to the activity of the speaker, and invite the listener to think the meaning of the expression.^[12]

In its character as a transcendental clue, the indicative function is not essentially arbitrary or associative.^[13] Husserl distinguishes between two kinds of indication: indication in general, and intimation, the essence of which is the transcendental clue. These two senses of induction (and therefore indication) correspond to the following examples: 1) if all the swans I see are white I can conclude that all swans are white. This is generalization to an empirical principle based on particular empirical evidence. 2) If I draw the arc of a curve (i.e. a straight line that meets the curve in two places), and to reduce the length of the line, I approximate the curve with increasing accuracy. If I make the line infinitely small — i.e. a point, then the 'straight' line will coincide with the curve. Thus I can make a formula to calculate the slope of the curve, and 'reduce' a line to a curve by an algebraic equation. This kind of induction does not yield an empirical principle based on generalization from particular evidence; it yields an *a priori* principle and a grasp of what curve and line are. It is in the second sense that induction is essentially 'transcendental clue'.^[14]

Indication and the Possibility of Phenomenology

I will conclude with a remark on the role of indication in phenomenology. Through Husserl's investigation of signs, we begin to see come into view the fundamental principle of phenomenology: intentionality. Put simply, the principle of intentionality is that consciousness is always consciousness of something. But *because* of this, we can never leave ourselves and occupy the pole of the intended object. We cannot look directly at ourselves: subjectivity can only ever be *apperceived*. Any full account of consciousness or of the world, however, requires both poles – the intending subject, and the intended state of affairs – act, and content. We are always already engaged meaningfully with things in the world. It is becoming aware of ourselves that is the difficulty, and it is by indication that we first do so. Indication secures the possibility of self-consciousness, and opens the gateway to phenomenology.

For this reason the investigation of signs is an excellent first example of the method of phenomenology, for in the distinction between their indicative and meaning-functions we find consciousness with the world. When Husserl first describes intentionality explicitly in Investigation II, he does so with remarkable ease, for he has already established it through these "Essential Distinctions" in the First Investigation. Thus, the ambiguity in the word "sign" is the same as the ambiguity in the word "judgement". We should agree with Derrida, then, that the ambiguity in the term "sign" is the subject, but only on the condition that the subject is the principle of the distinction between meaning and indication. To attack this distinction is to argue that consciousness is not consciousness of something. *Contra* Derrida, the Husserlian subject is not self-enclosed; it exceeds self-identity insofar as it is intentional.[\[15\]](#)

Through the meaning we do not discover who is speaking; "who" is intimated. But we can only discover "what" the subject is by being led toward "who".[\[1\]](#) Thus "who" will always renew the understanding of "what" we are.

Thus Husserl radically overcomes both psychologism and logical objectivism through the distinction between meaning and indication and the introduction of intentional subjectivity.[\[16\]](#) Phenomenology incorporates and nuances logical objectivism in its account of meaning, and psychologism in its rich account of indication. For the decisive problem with both is that they do not distinguish acts from their content. This distinction is possible only by grasping their principle: subjectivity. Where there is a faulty account of subjectivity, act will be conflated with content. Therefore, which is the same thing, wherever indication is confused with meaning we will find mistaken conclusions about subjectivity, and the things themselves.

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, all in-text references are to Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Findlay (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2000). They are in the following format: *LI* [investigation], [section] [page number].

[2] Jacques Derrida, *La Voix et Le Phénomène: Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967).

[3] This point is overlooked by J. Claude Evans, whose critique of Derrida's reading of Husserl "Indication and Occasional Expressions" appeared in *Derrida and Phenomenology*, ed. William R. McKenna and J. Claude Evans (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), p. 43-60.

[4] Why not say that the meaning-intention directs us to the *real* fulfilling act, or to the object itself? To say what ideal means is very difficult indeed. For a comparison of Derrida and Husserl on ideal being and presence. See Dallas Willard, "Is Derrida's View of Ideal Being Rationally Defensible?" in *Derrida and Phenomenology*, edited by McKenna, W. R. and J.C. Evans (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), p.23-41

[5] A full investigation into ideal meanings, including mathematics, etc. is beyond the scope of this essay.

[6] Robert Sokolowski comments that "By starting with signs, Husserl begins his philosophy in the most felicitous way possible, with something that is a material entity but is also saturated with the presence of thinking?", in his "Semiotics in Husserl's *Logical Investigations*" in *One Hundred Years of Phenomenology*, ed. D. Zahavi and F. Stjernfelt (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 171

[7] St. Augustine, *The Teacher*, Ibid. At 13.42 he argues that words, which do not give us the object, also do not show what the speaker is thinking. But at 13.45 he controverts the latter.

[8] In indication A refers to B, but remains a sign distinct from it. Unlike Freud, Husserl does not address the possibility of unintentional *speech* or inability to speak. Freud, if he used Husserlian terms, might account for this phenomenon as follows: arising from the unconscious, unintentional gestures (and words) are in fact one with the experiences made manifest in them, but are separated from one another through repression or the inability to experience them meaningfully. Thus, these gestures and words are traces of a formal unity we are unable to grasp completely due to the structural disruption of the subject. This puts study of these phenomena beyond the field of Husserlian phenomenology. In the *Logical Investigations* Husserl has no name for this kind of indication. Nevertheless, Husserl argues in the *Crisis* that we can discover through "the basic psychological method" of "phenomenological-psychological reduction", that the "unconscious" intentionalities disclosed by recent "depth psychology" [also] have their modes of validity like their conscious counterparts (Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston: Northwestern U.P., 1970), 269-237). The *epoche* demands a suspension of the basic belief in, i.e. position-taking about, the existence of the object, so it does not need to posit the unconscious as an explanatory concept.

[9] A person may not be self-conscious of her feeling of pain until she sees someone else who suffers the same pain, or until she articulates it. For example, a woman whose husband has died but who finds herself unable to mourn may begin to do so upon hearing of someone who was unable to mourn.

[10] C.f. Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous distinction between depicting and displaying, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (NY: Routledge, 2001) 2.172. To react to a fresh wound or pleasure could be quite a different matter insofar as it may be naturally communicative. But insofar as the act shows an experience, but not adequately, it resembles intimation.

[11] Of course, when we perceive someone experiencing we never expect to have their experience the way they do, e.g. when I perceive you looking at me, I do not imagine I should thereby see myself. See J. L. Austin's essay "Other Minds" in *Philosophical Papers* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1961). I will, of course, feel myself being looked at, though I will never know what I look like. Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans Hazel E. Barnes, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993), Part III; The Existence of Others.

[12] See his "Semiotics in Husserl's *Logical Investigations*" in *One Hundred Years of Phenomenology*, ed. Zahavi, D. and F. Stjernfelt. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002. p. 171-182.

[13] Husserl seems to characterize it as such, but his characterization is incomplete. My own argument in this section is an attempt to solve a problem that Husserl does not adequately address, by gathering his arguments on intimation. The extent to which this argument diverges from Husserl's can be measured on this point.

[14] Heidegger refers to Aristotle in elaborating the same distinction. He says the translation of *epagoge* should not be 'induction', for the former means 'leading toward' what comes into view insofar as we have previously looked *away*, over and *beyond* individual beings. At what? At being. For example, only if we already have treeness in view can we identify individual trees. [*Epagoge*] is seeing and making visible what already stands in view.' Martin Heidegger, 'On the Essence and Concept of $\Phi\acute{\upsilon}\sigma\iota\varsigma$ in Aristotle's *Physics B, 1*' in *Pathmarks*, trans. Thomas Sheehan, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1998). p. 187.

[15] Husserl says 'self-consciousness and consciousness of others are inseparable; it is unthinkable, and not merely [contrary to] fact, that I be man in a world without being *a* man' (*Crisis*, Ibid., ?71 253). In the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl argues for the same thing, saying that 'who' includes one's animate organism 'the living body' (*CM*, Ibid., ?44 96ff). Even in the Transcendental Ego the psychophysical remains, as '*transcendentally secondary*' (*CM*, Ibid., ?45 100). Thus the core sense of intimation is part of the pure sphere of ownness. One could add in a Heideggerian vein, that since people are finite, mortal beings, 'who' a person is, is not an absolutely self-enclosed subject matter.

[16] As Husserl says in the *Crisis*, 'what was decisively new in my *Logical Investigations*' is found not at all in the merely ontological investigations' but rather in the subjectively directed investigations' and especially in the fifth and sixth (*Crisis*, Ibid. ?68 p.234).

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Proceedings of the Kent State University
May 4th Philosophy Graduate Student Conference
No. 005015 (2008)

<http://philosophy.kent.edu/journal/>

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