

CONTRA DEFICIENT CHILD PERCEPTION: A HUSSERLIAN ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

In this paper we use Husserl's theory of perception to explore how child and adult perception works through the same mechanisms. First, we explore Husserl's description of sensory perception, showing that the child, like the adult, will be able to enrich the total perception of the object through access to successive appearances of an object. Next, we explore how the child's ability to perceive objects can be enriched in complex ways, showing that an adult or a child will both be able to access a greater 'enduring entity' of the object. Finally, we consider the child's ability to remember their perceptions through memory, showing how the child and the adult use the ego's intentionality, rather than active remembering, as a component of the memory of a perception.

Key Words: Husserl, perception, children, phenomenology, Abschattung, memory



The adult attitude toward a child is often impacted by their negative biases concerning children. One example of a negative bias is the impression that children have delinquent perceptions of the world. Because their perceptions seem raw, naive, impractical, and underdeveloped, the child, as compared to an adult, are thus viewed as having delinquent perceptions. However, an analysis of Husserl's theory of perception shows that children do not have any more difference than adults in their abilities to perceive.

In this paper we use Husserl's theory of perception to explore how child and adult perception works through the same mechanisms. First, we explore Husserl's description of sensory perception, showing that the child, like the adult, will be able to enrich the total perception of the object through access to successive appearances of an object. Next, we explore how the child's ability to perceive objects can be enriched in complex ways, showing that an adult or a child will both be able to access a greater 'enduring entity' of the object. Finally, we consider the child's ability to remember their perceptions through memory, showing how the child and the adult use the ego's intentionality, rather than active remembering, as a component of the memory of a perception.

In conclusion, when considering Husserl's theory of perception and its relation to child and adult perception, we find several reasons to support the similarity between the perceptions of children and adults. We will show why the work one accomplishes with children must reflect this similarity. Consequently, we will posit some of the ways this similarity can lead to the alteration of the child's classroom experience.

The adult attitude toward a child is often impacted negatively by the adult's biases concerning children. One example of an adult bias toward children is the impression that children have deficient perceptions of the world. Children's perceptions are viewed as deficient because, in contrast to adult



perception, they seem raw, naive, impractical, and underdeveloped. According to this bias of perception, then, the child's deficiencies are contrasted with the adult's adequateness. An adult has adequate perception because their perceptions are informed, pragmatic, and well-developed. An adult has had the time to learn from their misperceptions. The child is still forming their ability, or skill, to perceive- an ability which has already been perfected by the adult's relative skill level. The bias, in short, promulgates the myth that the adult retains an advantage over the child in the range of perception.

However, if we consider perception from a Husserlian standpoint, using phenomenology, we should not discount child perception as being deficient. Similarly, we should not laude adult perception as being adequate. Rather, an analysis of Husserl's theory of perception shows that, phenomenologically, children do not have any more difference in their perceptions than do adults. Each perceives the world in a similar manner. If we consider these similarities more carefully, we will find that the child does not retain any perceptual deficiencies.

When we incorporate a Husserlian-phenomenological approach to our questions concerning these biases against the child, the biases do not stand. In this paper we shall present these biases more explicitly and submit them, systematically, to the Husserlian approach to perception. Consequently, we shall show that when one incorporates the phenomenological aspect of Husserl's theory of perception into their considerations, the biases against child perception cannot be retained. Instead, the child and adult similarity in perception must be maintained.



1. The Child's Sensory Perception.

Since it is through our senses that objects are initially presented, the role of the senses provides a strong starting point for considering a theory of perception. To this we add a question which is derived from our thesis: perhaps a difference exists for children and adults in the way they perceive objects with their senses. For instance, infants are often fooled to think an object has disappeared when it moves beyond their field of vision. An adult knows that the object has just moved beyond the range of their senses. They understand that humans have a specific range of perception beyond which the world does not disappear. A child, however, may think the object disappears because they do not understand that the world extends beyond their sensory perspective.

Husserl considers the way objects pass through our field of vision.ⁱ He finds that the senses denote a limit or a field of perspective. He considers an object- we will imagine a red ball- moving through the field of our perspective; the red ball starts from our forehead and then moves away into the distance. “The series of the object has (1) a distance limit, beyond which the object no longer appears . . . and (2) a near limit, the limit of optimal clarity and distinctness.”ⁱⁱⁱ

By considering the movement of the red ball to be a series, beginning at the near limit and proceeding toward the distant limit, Husserl indicates important information about the object we perceive. Each successive appearance of the object in the series is preceded by a memory of the appearance directly before it. The initial memory of the appearance of the red ball as it enters the near limit precedes the second, successive appearance of the red ball in the series. Each preceding memory of an appearance informs the perception of the successive appearance as the red ball is viewed.

Thus, even as the red ball moves away toward the distance limit away from the viewer, the viewer's perception of the ball is enriched by each new memory of the preceding appearance. As Husserl writes, “each appearance of the object as further away is not only an appearance of the



object, but also an appearance of the appearance of the object as nearer.”ⁱⁱⁱ Because our vision may be interpreted in this series of appearances, our perception of an object is always becoming enriched as the series continues.

Husserl thought that both the child and the adult’s vision may be interpreted as a successive series of appearances and that this common experience is a part of normal sensory perception. As for a child who witnesses the red ball’s movement, whether or not they understand the ball to disappear when it leaves their visual field, the child still perceived the successive series of appearances through which their perception of the object is enriched. It would be wrong for an adult to discount the child’s sensory perception since each successive appearance in a series enriches the perception and no successive appearance in a series makes the perception deficient. This judgment is appropriately Husserlian because the enriching potential of perception focuses precisely on the perceiver and the perceived.^{iv}

2. The Child’s Perception of Complexly Constituted Objects.

Perhaps if the child and the adult have similar sensory perceptions the information each derives from those sensory perceptions will be different. Even if the successive appearances of an object in a series enrich the perception of the object as constituted, the complexity of these appearances would become greater as more appearances become available. For some adults the resulting complexity may account for a deficiency in a child’s perception because children are considered by some adults to possess less of an ability to understand the complexly constituted object.

Husserl does not believe the child’s ability to understand perceived information, specifically the complexly constituted object, to be lacking. He understands the complexly constituted object to become part of a larger hyletic flow which creates a ‘material side’ within the visual field. When we



consider the successive appearances of the object, like the red ball, the continual constitution creates a ‘simultaneous’ hyletic flow from which we are given the understanding of an ‘enduring entity’.^v

That is, the enduring entity of our perception of the red ball is formed by the hyletic flow of data from each successive appearance.^{vi} Both the child and the adult access an enduring entity through the hyletic flow of visual or tactile data from the successive appearances of an object. However, how can we be sure that the adult’s ‘enduring entity’ is no more complex than the child’s ‘enduring entity’?

Husserl answers this objection with an explanation of the term *Abschattung*. The hyletic flow which forms an enduring entity can be understood in its entirety as an *Abschattung* (adumbration) of an enduring being.

Husserl refers to the potential of the *Abschattung* as a “further element which is the basis for taking as an appearance of an object which actually appears in it but might appear in other appearances.”^{vii} The *Abschattung* allows the complex constitution of perceptions of objects like the red ball to be given as an enduring being; through the *Abschattung* we perceive future or potential appearances of the ball.

Therefore, the *Abschattung* represents a givenness which allows the object to become perceived more deeply. It increases the richness of the hyletic flow and creates a connection between the body and the red ball. Husserl understands the *Abschattung* as giving “the basis for grasping space as the continuum of loci my body can occupy, and then as the loci of other things with reference to my body.”^{viii} The *Abschattung* aids in our experience of the red ball because through it we are able to understand the relationship of our body to the space wherein the perceived ball exists.

The ability given through the *Abschattung* to grasp every potential appearance of the red ball as well as its relationship to the body in space is important. The *Abschattung* is a further perception which allows access to the enduring being of the object in every potential complexity or special



quality. The continuum given by the *Abschattung* may be accessed through the enduring entity of a child's perceptions or an adult's perceptions. It assures that even if there are complex constitutions of the enduring entity, the object is equally accessible to everyone. Therefore the child's perceptions are not deficient next to the adult's perceptions.

3. The Child's Memory of Perception.

Even if a child or adult always has access to an *Abschattung* through the enduring entity created by the hyletic flow, perhaps we may question the ability for the child to remember the perception as well as the adult can. This is an adequate objection to the thesis, because even if everyone experiences the object through similar perceptions, empirical evidence would seem to suggest that not everyone will recall the perception with the same clarity. A young child, after all, simply does not have the same amount of experiences in the world as an adult. Many times we take this to be the reason children take several attempts to learn something. Perhaps the child has simply not matured in their ability to recall the original perception of the object and is, therefore, deficient in memory.

From the original perception of an object to the reconstruction of the perception, the progression of a perceptual memory is a concern for Husserl. He indicates that many different objects exist within our horizon without being focused upon, in his words, 'passively'. When we pick any object, a red ball, out of the horizon we attend to it 'actively'.^{ix} Husserl writes that when one actively attends to objects in the present, one becomes "aware of them . . . as having been 'there' before [the] attending."^x This begins a very complex set of temporally referenced moments of awareness in which the continual active attendance of the red ball requires an active remembering of the red ball as having been there before each present attending.



Active remembering takes place when we recall an already past active perception that is realized as a new active moment. Husserl refers to this active remembering as being “conditioned as a *Weckung* (awakening) that goes from a present *Interesse* (interest) out toward a past similar object, already passively associated.”^{xi} This continues in a specific chain of retentions in which the active remembering forms a self-identity that is adumbrated (*Abschattung*) in successive retentions and retentions of retentions. This adumbration is given in a hyletic flow in which the ego’s intentionality, the intentional expression of the memory by the ego, gives appearances of the red ball in all successive retentions

According to Husserl, the ego’s intentionality, rather than its active remembering, is the necessary component of the memory of a perception.^{xii} In this respect, we may say that even for the most complex string of recalling, it is not the string or the memory itself that should be considered, but the adumbration given in the hyletic flow through which the ego’s intentionality becomes manifest. The child’s memory of a perception, no matter how difficult it is to recall, is always accessible through the ego’s intentionality. Husserl finds that it is not merely the ability to actively remember, but the ability to recall with intentionality which is critical. Therefore, the child’s memory of a perception, when compared with the adult’s memory of a perception, is not deficient as long as the ego’s intentionality remains.

4. Final Thoughts.

When considering Husserl’s theory of perception and its relation to children and adult’s perceptions, we find several reasons to support the similarity between the perceptions of children and the perceptions of adults. A bias against children’s perceptions, that they are raw, naive, impractical, and underdeveloped, does not stand when we examine children’s sensory perceptions, their perception of complexly constituted objects, and their memory of perception through a



Husserlian analysis. Husserl's theory of perception indicates that children are able to perceive just as adequately as adults perceive.

If perception is similar in children and adults, the work we do with children must reflect this fact. Understanding the similarity between the child's perception and the adult's perception is not only useful in combating the biases we have toward children, it is also useful in understanding the manner in which our actions reflect this bias.

Philosophically, an assumption that children are less adequate or underdeveloped will lead to problems with teaching and respecting children. In order to positively introduce the world to children as a teacher, it is critical not to undervalue the child's own contributions, insights, and problems. If children's perceptions about the world are understood to be just as adequate as an adult's perceptions, we will be able to learn from them in the classroom. In understanding that children and adult's have equally valid perceptions the classroom experience can be radically altered. By learning *with* children the need for frequent evaluation can be unstressed while the need for common dialogue and narrative can be stressed.

ⁱ Cairns, Dorian. *Conversations with Husserl and Fink*. Edited by The Husserl-Archives. first ed. Vol. 66, *Phaenomenologica*. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976.

ⁱⁱ *Conversations* 72

ⁱⁱⁱ *Conversations* 72

^{iv} Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy; General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Translated by F. Kersten. Edited by Bernet. 1998 ed. VII vols. Vol. II, *Edmund Husserl; Collected Works*. P.O. Box 3300 AA Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983. Reprint, 2. 36; Husserl often alludes to the fact that (Eidetic) 'seeing' in its purest form is, properly, the relationship of the object's "originally presentive intuition" and an individual's "judgments which are faithfully fitted" to the object. Eidetic seeing constitutes the pure relationship between the perception and the person who perceives. Husserl puts it in stronger language in Chapter two's Naturalistic Misinterpretations, "*Immediate seeing*", not merely sensuous, experiential seeing, but *seeing in the universal sense as an originally presentive consciousness of any kind whatever*, is the ultimate legitimizing source of all rational assertions." (Translation's italics)

^v *Conversations* 64; Husserl himself alludes to the prospect that both children and adults have similar perceptions. Before he is recorded saying, "The whole psychic life is determined by a tendency to evoke or constitute the enduring . . ." Husserl says, "The infant, like the adult, is impelled to evoke actively those kinaesthetic sequences which show themselves to bring about the endurance or recurrence of something valued . . ." Both groups seek to bring about the enduring and the whole physical life is determined to evoke enduring. For Husserl this enduring is critical in perception.



^{vi} *Conversations 78*; As Husserl writes, “We find that this perception has a ‘material’ side, the constitution in immanent time of a certain homogeneous flow within the wider flow of the ‘visual field’. This hyletic flow is of momentary data that are quantitatively alike and, in so far as simultaneous, ‘outside’ of each other. But as hyletic flow, it is not a unity but the basis for the constitution of an enduring entity”

^{vii} *Conversations 79*

^{viii} *Conversations 79*

^{ix} *Conversations 53*; the difference between activity and passivity is present on the level of perception. I am affected by certain things, they stimulate me, and I answer them with *active* attention. That which stays within the background, or those objects given as on the border (*horizonmassig*) of the active perception, make up the *passive* field.

^x *Conversations 53*

^{xi} *Conversations 54*

^{xii} *Conversations 54*; this is an insight gained from Cairns in relation to a question he asked Husserl. He asks, “whether one could find an activity in the constitution of the self-identity of a phase of inner time as ‘*abgeschattet*’ in a retention and a retention of the first retention.” Husserl gives an answer. Cairns offers his own summary of Husserl’s answer, “Apparently, the answer to my question is that intentionality, but not activity, is necessary to the constitution of identity.” I think Cairns’s answer goes well with Husserl’s philosophy though, since it is similar to the intentionality stressed in *Ideen I*.