A Peculiar Home: A Phenomenology of Place

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A Peculiar Home: A Phenomenology of Place

There are places where individuals may feel more ‘at home’ in than others. Home is often this place for people; both meaningful and familiar, with a sense of belonging. Often, there are other places that make, or have made, one feel uncomfortable or alienated: like a turn down an unfamiliar dark street or waiting in an airport terminal line. Then, there are places that may just feel indifferent; neither comfortable nor alienating, somewhat unimportant: like driving down the road to a frequent grocer. A subject experiences places and objects in context: in relation to intersectional modes of meaning, familiarity, or alienation among many other factors. Different objects and places give off different ‘vibes’; we know this and perceive this. Sometimes, in English, we even say that places or particular objects composing, or existing in, those places ‘speak to us’ or ‘move us’ in one way or another. What is meant by those phrases and how can objects seemingly interact with subjects to the extent where they can influence subjects?

Husserl’s phenomenology provides grounds for investigating how individuals constitute the experience of an object and how an object can affect an individual’s experience and corresponding structures of consciousness. In the course of this essay, I use Husserl’s phenomenology to address how objects affect an individual’s structures of consciousness, how the Ego-ray regard can turn towards new experiences, and by what means objects themselves can affect the turning of the Ego's regard. The investigation focuses on how objects affect structures of consciousness to lay the groundwork to explore the changing of the Ego’s regard and how objects can affect that change. The scope of this essay could extend through the range of Husserl’s work, but will be limited to distinct cases and examples within Husserlian phenomenology.

The investigation begins with some general and specific questions. Generally, I ask: How does Husserlian phenomenology help us understand how material objects, and their contextual environment, become meaningful? Or, how does phenomenology account for how objects present as significant or
insignificant in our experience make us feel either ‘at home’ or ‘alien’ in an environment? Specifically, I ask: how can, and by what means, objects themselves affect structures of consciousness? How can the material world be affected so that valuable, meaningful experiences and judgments of belonging, instead of alienation, be prioritized in noetic-noematic strata for diverse persons? I intend to explore the how of this affection instead of the what regarding its material content.

I argue that Husserlian phenomenology can help us understand how material objects, and their contextual environment, become meaningful through a correlational account of judgement and value-noema. Further, I claim that objects themselves affect structures of consciousness by pulling the regard of subjects according to particular constructions of the noetic-noematic strata. For the sake of this investigation, I postulate that the noema of valuable experiences of belonging are prioritized over meaninglessness and alienation and that objects can possibly affect these experiences. The objective is to give an account for how objects, and their contextual environment, affect how we engage with them and how that engagement affects us. This account can be employed to create more hospitable objects and places. Please note that this research won’t tell us what particular objects should be in places to make a more hospital environment, but it will tell us how we can use phenomenology to help make objects and places become more helpful to the holistic well-being of persons.

The resources to answer these inquiries are found within Husserl’s account of noetic and noematic constitution, the noematic correlate, inner-time consciousness, the consequential layers of embodiment as established by Dr. Rodemeyer, and Husserl’s account of embodiment. These resources will be utilized within a frame to analyze the constitution of objects as they would exist on a limited scale of intentional correlation. Utilizing a scale for this analysis is not meant to be reductive of complex experience but instead should serve as a basic tool to begin illuminating a few means by which objects can impact our structures of consciousness. The investigation of the scale and its consequential examples will lead to nascent implications in Husserl’s conception of time, embodiment, and noematic constitution. The scale will be explained later in this essay.

1 (Ideas I 92-95; Analysis of Passive Synthesis; Ideas II 18, 26)
To start, I would briefly like to mention what phenomenology is. Phenomenology is a philosophical methodology founded by Edmund Husserl and it is concerned with the phenomena that arises from the experience of being in the world from a user's point of view. It investigates meanings and how meanings are made. A phenomenology of place tries to understand how places, and the objects in them, are interpreted by and through consciousness. It allows us to investigate the subjective and intersubjective experience of objects, particularly public objects, and places. A ‘place’ can be a country, city, or city square. ‘Objects’ will refer to public objects and systems like a transportation system, a river, or a bench.

Husserl claims that there is always something toward which consciousness is directed. Thus, we have to examine the experience of that consciousness perceiving the outside world. There are two fundamental attitudes of consciousness: the natural and the phenomenological attitude. The natural attitude is our everyday experience of the world. This is the acting out of your beliefs, wishes, fears, thoughts etc. For example, this is the unreflective experience of your morning rituals. The phenomenological attitude is the reflective experience of the world we where observe our beliefs, wishes, fears, thoughts and how we make meaning. It’s like a metacognition where you slow your life down and observe yourself as if you’re watching a movie. For example, this can start with the statement “I am at a crosswalk”. For Husserl, every human shares the same structures of consciousness though the content within those structures can vary wildly. So, though many people may see the crosswalk, our experiences of perceiving that crosswalk can vary drastically. Hence, phenomenology is particularly well-endowed to help validate the subjective experiences of the marginalized in society.

There are a few phenomenological terms that must be explained before proceeding. The transcendent object is a material object in the world, like a crosswalk. The noematic core holds the elements of what make’s an object ‘that object’. For example, it’s what make the crosswalk ‘a’ crosswalk for you and me. Noesis is the meaning making and sensory flow of an experience; the acts of thinking, wishing, feeling, desiring etc. For example, let’s say there is an unsighted man at the crosswalk. He only perceives some light and dark shades which is the crossing of cars. He thinks once the dark shades stop - he should be good to cross. He’s had past negative experiences at the crosswalk so he notices anxious
thoughts. As the only individual in a car-based city, he feels alienated from his community. Noesis is the actions \textit{perceiving} and \textit{thinking} and \textit{feeling} about the crosswalk.

\textit{Noematic correlates} are the acts that are directed towards various thoughts, feelings and perceptions that imbue the crosswalk with meaning. For the crosswalk experience, it is the grey color of the dark shades. It is anxiety. Correlates can be presented to consciousness in different ways; so depending on how an object is presented, different noematic correlates can be constituted. Initially, the presence of the crosswalk was evident to the man because he hears an increased noise in vehicles to his front and side. If the crosswalk had bumps in the concrete before the street and the crossing sign spoke the signs aloud (‘stop/cross’), the crosswalk would also become evident. In both cases, the crosswalk is the same but in the first case the man had to rely on the correlate of light and dark shades to cross and in the second case the man relied on the correlate of spoken meaning through the crosswalk recording and the sensation of the bumps on the ground. The latter correlates probably are a more reliable determiner of the dangers of the crosswalk than the unsighted man’s limited sight.

The noetic-noematic strata is the combinatory layers of all of the noesis and noematic correlates affiliated with an experience is called the noetic-noematic strata. Each person has a unique strata like they have unique subjective experience, but some elements of the strata will be shared intersubjectively. The strata is also woven into the unique history of a particular body and person. This can include our embodiment and personal and collective past and present.

Using these tools, we can investigate how a public objects affect a group. Then, we can reorient objects to bestow a sense of belonging and significance. We can do this by investigating how a population group experiences their noematic constitution, or their intersubjective experiences. The \textit{content} of such an investigation would be communicated by that population group themselves through dialogue and interviews among other ways. The phenomenological \textit{form} of that investigation is given here. For anyone, there are many layers to the experience of a crosswalk and the other objects that surround our daily doings. Our experience of an object, or the crosswalk, is limited by the noematic correlates ‘attached’ onto the noematic core. They tint perception to consider something as fearful, or not fearful, welcoming, or not welcoming. We can shift our focus of these correlates. For example, the man notices the sound of
the intersection first, and then pays attention to the moving light and dark shades that he presumes are cars.

The regard, the attention, of consciousness shifts according to the noematic content that calls out to us. For the man, the encounters with the safer crosswalk eventually replace his prior noematic correlate of anxiety with a greater sense of safety. This shift of attention to the new noematic correlate of safety may allow the man to feel more welcome to cross the street and access other parts of town. The prior negative correlates, or associations are diminished and new positive noematic correlates are affiliated with the accessibility of his city, generally. The noetic-noematic strata for the man perceiving the crosswalk changed over time. The strata could have temporarily changed a bit in the experience of the initial crosswalk should a friend happen to cross the street the same time as the unsighted man and help him safely navigate. This too would have allowed for the correlate of safety and accessibility to have increased for the man - albeit temporarily.

In both cases the crosswalk crossing had different meanings that were dependent on noematic correlation of judgment and value - in one case he felt alien and what was significant was his anxiety of crossing, in the other case, he felt a bit more familiar with his surroundings and the increased sense of safety and autonomy became more significant. Meanwhile, another person crossing the street is experiencing the same crosswalk but he doesn’t foreground any negative correlates related to the crosswalk. Experiences of a similar object, place, or person can vary to different subjects. One individual may foreground a noematic correlate while another backgrounds that same correlate. Thus, depending on the individual or a groups association, different noemas are experienced or developed.

To help identify the experiential range of noematic correlates, I’ve created a scale to plot someone’s self-described experience in terms of how something either makes them feel more ‘at home’ or more alien or appears as significant or insignificant. The scale isn’t meant to be totalizing, but a tool.
Looking at the chart, note that the ranges are particular to my project. The Noematic-Judgement range of familiarity/belonging and alienation is tied to judging things as certain or likely or doubtful and uncertain. For example, the certainty that you know how to interact with an object in a particular way; if you’re not from a given culture, then one might experience doubt with how to use a particular thing. Or, for example, home familiarity may be different than public familiarity. The Noematic-Value range of significance and insignificance of mental attention regards to how much you foreground something or background something as irrelevant in the mind. This is the range of liking, disliking, of valuing in any sense. In experience, judgment and value are mixed. For example, we may highly value something that is judged as something of belonging (i.e. a community celebration).

The point of where an object sits on this scale for a particular person or group can vary. For example, I can find an object highly significant one day and not the next. This research aims to focus on the points in the scale that are made consistent among an affected population group. For example, a point would focus on how many veterans with PTSD struggle with high traffic areas with no clear access to an exit or vacant spot. These noematic points for a group are discovered through long-term conversations with the population group. Through those conversations, a phenomenological analysis can disclose shared noetic (acts) and noematic (content) of particular public objects. The analysis will disclose what aspects
of said objects or places need to be changed in order for that population to not have such negative repetitive experiences. How that object can be changed to foster more positive experiences can be determined through more conversations and phenomenological analysis to disclose the groups positive and productive noesis and noema with that object that can be foregrounded to establish further positive group experiences for the future.

An example of alienation in judgement-noema and high significance on the value-noema scale might be the experience of an unsighted person on a road for cars, to which they don’t belong because they don’t drive, and to which has high significance because for that individual it is the sole transportation route to food, work, and community.

Now that we’ve investigated how noematic correlates intersect with a particular object, let’s turn to the objects. The design of objects can affect structures of consciousness by pulling the attention of subjects to focus on particular noetic-noematic strata. For an object is always experienced from some visual perspective, from some cultural judgement, and with some sense of significance or insignificance. This background influences how we interpret some thing. These strata variations lead us to prefer to focus on certain layers of noematic correlates over others. Objects have an affective pull to both mind and body that arise from the object itself through color, sound, etc., or through individual or cultural meaning. Some objects are designed to show preferences of how others interpret experiences or they are designed to prioritize certain correlates in the strata. An object’s mode of givenness is not an ungrounded stream of content, giving off its use, color, material, and history in equal ways, but is instead content that is grounded in a hierarchical manner of being, acting, and thinking.

Change an object; you change the experience of that object. For example, a bench in disrepair with seating space bars might generally be experienced by others as unwelcoming, dirty, and unsafe to many people. Maybe the bench is painted a bright and friendly color and though it may still be dirty and unsafe, is perceived as more welcoming to sit on. Previously the bench with division seats prioritized a certain sized body and bodily separation from others. Should the spacing bars be removed, one has prioritized social proximity and diminished the fear of boundaries with the Other. In this experience, the strata surrounding the experience of the bench changed for many people because the bench itself changed and caused people to perceive it differently. Changes to the strata are generally an addition or subtraction
to the noesis or noema in that strata. Changes to the architecture of the strata can come from ourselves (enjoying new layers of wine or new stories on a painting) or it can be caused by objects, like the bench, which are altered so as to cause consciousness to prioritize certain correlates over others.

The new bench prioritized social interactions and a sense of energy and welcoming (from the vibrant color and lack of seat bars). As a result, the body may feel less burdened as it waits for the bus on the bench. For the body and mind are situated and conditioned by their world context and the affective ‘pull’ of an object pull equally on body and mind. The sensing of the body via “its affective and kinesthetic structure motivate and condition the appearing of objects”. A material object can call out to my attention and direction of consciousness just as much as it calls out the fixation and direction of my body. For example, a lower water fountain communicates that it is accessible for person in the wheelchair which leads them to use it, quench their thirst, and reinvest in their sense of autonomy. Now, this person has a new positive correlate of belonging in a physical sense associated with that park. To add, the modes of givenness of an object are maintained through repetitive experiences. Take for example, a refugee in their resettled community may feel generally alienated, but they see a statue in their neighborhood that communicates values of friendliness according to their originary culture then upon having the regular experience of passing by and being reminded that friendliness, they may feel a bit more welcome in the everyday of their new environment and the prior experience of alienation could loose saliency. A prior belief in local hostility to foreigners may be decreased and a belief of a sense of welcoming, increased.

To conclude, material objects seem to be able to affect structures of consciousness. Thus, noemas like a judgement-noema of alienation can be altered and mitigated, to some limited degree, by the presence of some material object. Through changes in an object that take an individual or group’s content variances of structures of consciousness in to account — changes that acknowledge and represent variances of value-judgment-noeses-noema — more diversely hospitable environments can be created. Attention to a new belief characteristic, catalyzed through a material medium, can influence other beliefs and belief characteristics. We can learn, heal, grow, and overcome and we can rely on the thoughtful

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2 (23 Al Saji) More could be discussed on sensings beyond this paper.

3 Example: I must hold a hot tea kettle in a particular way.
creation and reevaluation of objects in our community to serve as catalysts. This analysis can be employed on behalf of persons who are frequently alienated by the built-environment like migrants, refugees, veterans, caretakers, gender and racial marginalizations, the dis-abled, and psychosomatic variations.

I am not sure as to what these objects or environments would look like, but I have laid a groundwork as a means of assessing, through Husserl’s phenomenology, how objects and their contexts can affect structures of consciousness. This account provides a direction to further investigate how the material world can be affected so that valuable, meaningful experiences and judgments of belonging, instead of alienation, can be prioritized in noetic-noematic strata for all persons.
Works Cited


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