Husserl’s phenomenology is sometimes contrasted to ontology. It is sometimes said that the epoché disengages our concern with being, and makes us turn instead toward the appearances of things, toward phenomena, toward subjectivity, and toward consciousness and its acts. In opposition to this opinion, I wish to claim that in Husserl’s philosophy there is a possibility of reviving something strikingly like the Platonic ontological theme of the one and the indeterminate dyad. In Husserl’s philosophy, I would propose to take the play of presence and absence as a simple and basic expression of the Platonic dyad, analogous perhaps to the large and small, or to motion and rest, or to the same and the other; and I would propose to take the identity which is constituted in the Husserlian absence and presence as an expression of the Platonic one. Instead of speaking of the play of presence and absence in Husserl, we might speak of the play of empty and filled intentions; and instead of talking about the one, we might speak of the synthesis, the recognition of identity, that occurs within the play of empty and filled awareness. Husserl’s epoché or reduction, far from isolating us from being, turns us to that slant on things in which we think explicitly about presence and absence and identity; far from making us careless about being, it makes us concerned with the occurrence of being we have always enjoyed but never made thematic.

I will survey a number of ways in which presence and absence are described in Husserl’s philosophy. Some of them appear in the Logical Investigations, Husserl’s first major philosophical work, and they provide the stimulus and motif that later develop into his full phenomenology. In the Investigations Husserl examines signs, images, words, and perceptions, and in each of these a special play of presence and absence takes place.

Consider first what Husserl calls indication signs (Anzeichen): a flag as a sign of a military unit, stars as the sign of a general,
a logo as the sign of a company. Such a sign is a physical object which we perceive, but upon perceiving it we do not rest with it; we go beyond or transcend it and mean something else, that which it indicates. We do not move beyond it by logical inference; the connection between sign and object is logically opaque. Rather, because of a convention that has been established, we intend the indicated while in the presence of the indicator.

There is a play of presence and absence in the experience of signs. While we intend the sign in a filled or saturated way, we emptily intend what it indicates; while we have the presence of the sign, we experience, we have, the absence of what it indicates. It is not just that the indicated is not there for us; it is meant as not there, as only indicated by the sign. And in this play of presence and absence, only one thing is meant, the object indicated, and there is always the possibility, in principle, of having the absent object later experienced directly in its own presence. But when this object comes to presence—when the general starts issuing commands, when we see the brigade in operation, when we run into the Ford Motor Company—it comes to presence as that which was once indicated. It does not lose this character of having been the object of a sign.

There is a tendency for us to take the duplex phenomenon of signs as something psychological or merely subjective. But signs do exist; being is such that it can be signed: it can either be meant through a sign, or it can be used as a sign; being can be the indicated or the indicating. It may be conventional that this sign indicates that object, but that there are signs is in the nature of things. Of course, being can be signed only when certain kinds of beings exist who can take things as signs, but this condition does not make signs unreal, nor does it turn them into something psychological. Being has the capacity to be signed.

A second case of the play of presence and absence is found in images: pictures, statues, echoes, shadows, and reflections of things. An image is different from a sign because it involves a resemblance that signs do not have to what they indicate. We can be said to perceive the object pictured; we can see what it looks like, or hear what it sounds like. We possess one of its aspects. A sign as such does not involve imitation.

But an image shares with a sign the character of being an object to be perceived. It is a thing in its own right: a piece of shaped marble, a colored canvas, a man imitating an animal or another person. When

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we perceive this object, however, we do not perceive it as simply 
continuous with the spatial, temporal, and causal context in which it 
is perceived; rather we take it as a picture or image of another being 
which is somewhere else; we do not deface Napoleon when we draw a 
moustache on his picture. Once again, it is in principle possible to go 
from the image to what is imaged in it, to perceive the object itself 
which we once saw in a photograph. But since seeing the picture 
was something like a perception, when we do see the original it en-
joys a familiarity that something merely indicated does not.

As in the case of signs, images also involve a play of presence 
and absence. The formal structure of images is different from that of 
signs, and we have mentioned a few ways in which they differ. But 
the possibility of being an image or of being imaged is one of the pos-
sibilities that exist in being. It is one of the ways being discloses 
itself. Whereas Husserl says relatively little about pictures, Plato 
made much greater use of them in elaborating the truthfulness of 
things. The bottom half of the divided line, for example, which pro-
vides the most accessible distinctions that then lead us up the scale 
to dialectics, deals with things and their images; and the cave-dwellers 
have minds that do not appreciate this distinction but live amid images 
as contentedly as we might live with things.

A third play of presence and absence which Husserl describes 
in the *Logical Investigations* is that which involves words, meanings, 
and objects meant or named. In very complex ways, we are able not 
only to have an object as something perceived, but also as something 
that is named. We intend this same object when it is no longer 
present to us, when we express it in a name and sentence. The case 
of naming is taken by Husserl as the purest case of an empty intention 
which is fulfilled or saturated when we move from speech to 
actual possession of the object in perception. This play of presence 
and absence must be contrasted to indication signs and to pictures; 
words have a kind of being which has to be phonemically and gram-
matically achieved, and they express their objects by disclosing 
necessities and truths about them that are very different from what 
pictures and signs bring about. With words we move into the upper 
half of Plato's divided line. I cannot discuss here how Husserl 
explains the work of words; I only mention that this is another instance 
of presence and absence, and ultimately of the dyad itself, to be 
elaborated according to its own structure; in the duality at work in 
naming we again have one thing disclosed, for the object named is
meant both in presence and absence. And this ability to be named, to be expressed in speech, is not something that is only a psychological fact about humans, but a characterization of being itself. Exploration of it is ontology.

Even in the silent perception of an object, we have a play of presence and absence. When we perceive something we only perceive one part at a time but also appreciate the other parts that are not now perceived but remain perceivable. We always have only one of the slants we can have on an object, only one view of the cube is available at one time. But as the views are paraded, we continuously have one and the same object, the one in the repeated dyads, that continually asserts itself but never appears as one of the views it presents. Husserl later expands his description of the spatial presence of things and the layers of appearances through which we possess them: he distinguishes sides, profiles or slants, and aspects, and he relates these to our sensibility. In developing these descriptions, he says that the one-sided process of perception is not a matter of merely human psychology, as though human beings need to perceive this way, while a perfect intellect or an entity otherwise organized might have the object without such profiles and sides. Husserl insists that this sequential perception is due to the nature of the thing being perceived; material objects present only one side at a time, and an un-profiled material object would be a contradiction in terms, like a melody that takes no time to be heard. This description of what is perceived is a description of the necessity in things and in the way they manifest themselves.

II

We have discussed signs, pictures, words, and percepts as different cases of the play of presence and absence. I would like to interrupt our catalogue of Husserlian themes to speak for a moment about Plato. As Gadamer has shown in several papers, but especially in his “Platons ungeschriebene Dialektik,” the theme of the dyad is found in works from all periods of Plato’s development.\(^1\) It is

\(^1\) Naming and other related issues are discussed in a book which I am now completing on language, truth, and philosophy.

ontological possibilities in phenomenology

formulated in the *Hippias Maior* (300–303), where Socrates points out the difference between the number two and other notions, like the ideas of being noble or being golden or wounded or young, which are ordinary universals. When two individuals are found to be red, for example, each individual is red in itself as well as being red with the other; being a pair does not establish nor does it affect their being red. But when two things are taken together simply as a pair, they become something—namely two or a pair—which they are not when taken separately. Something new arises in them only when they are taken together, and certain new attributes belong to them only as a pair, for example, being even in number. But the two individuals can in fact be taken together; there are two's in being, even though their way of being is different from that of the attributes that appear in individuals. Their kind of reality is that which is enjoyed by relations, combinations, synthesis, and order, all of which appear most fully in thinking and speech. Being, for Plato, involves such duality as something that cannot be eliminated; it is no less necessary than the unity or the one that appears through it. This *arithmos*-structure, as both Gadamer and Jacob Klein call it, these varied combinations of different kinds of units into new wholes which are not reducible to their units, pervades both being and speech, and makes truth possible. The number two and all the other paired structures are participations in the indeterminate dyad, and the unities constituted in them are participations in the one.

The themes we have been exploring in Husserl have the same character as Plato's pair or number two, and are equally expressions of the dyad. The sign and what is signed are, when taken together, different from what they are when taken separately. As sign and as indicated, they are what they are only when taken with one another. The picture and the pictured, the object and its name, the thing perceived and its profile, are all what they are only as taken together in their appropriate pair. Even the object indicated by a sign is what it is only by being paired off against the sign. The original which is imaged has, in turn, a sense of objectivity which it acquires only by being paired off specifically against a picture; something named and articulated by sentences has a sense of being real which it acquires by being contrasted specifically to words; and finally something perceived has a sense of objectivity which it acquires in contrast to the slants we have on it when we perceive it. It is not the case that we have a sheer object impervious to all these ways of being paired off, an object finished in itself which then enters into
its twinning with signs, pictures, names, and profiles; rather the object is objective only by being coupled in these various ways, and in other ways as well. To be an object is to be an intersection of many such pairs. Moreover, the four pairs we have mentioned, those involving signs, pictures, words, and profiles, are not simply four species arranged under a common genus; each of them, as well as each of the other pairs that call for exploration, is radically different from the rest. The play of presence and absence, as well as the dyad expressed in it and through all these couples, is not a genus but a form which is only analogously realized in all such cases.

When we simply enjoy the presence of things without reflecting philosophically on how it comes about, we overlook all these pairs. We move through signs and pictures and names and slants, and grasp the object mirrored in all of them. We forget that the object comes to us only in such couples. We think that signs, for example, are only provisional, or subjective and psychological. But signs and all the other elements of disclosure do exist, and being exercises its truthfulness in them. Husserl's epoché and transcendental reduction, as he develops it in his later philosophy, are devices to make us look at being as having the capacity to be signed, and as having other capacities allied with this one. The reduction is supposed to help us consider the world in such a way that signs can exist and be at work in it. In accepting the reality of signs, we also accept both the intentionality of consciousness and the truthfulness of things.

III

Let us now return to our catalogue of Husserlian themes. We will expand the catalogue in three directions. First, we will simply add more cases of the play of presence and absence to those we have mentioned. Second, we will move into the most elementary kinds of presence and absence in inner time-consciousness. Third, we will show how philosophy enjoys the play of presence and absence in a new way, and how this play is the dominant theme of philosophy.

There are many ways in which the play of presence and absence functions besides working in signs, pictures, words, and percepts. As Husserl shows in his later analyses of consciousness, the presence of other minds introduces a whole network of new kinds of absence. For example, the sensibility undergone by another person is present to me as some part ingredient with it may be never pass this respect the cube, which can just like that reality of other own object, I appreciate fact be seen by object being seen to me as absent move to the view he saw, but we time. These issues are out in great depth which things are fullness. One a the coordination of objectivity of s:

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3 For example, of Language (The Language Apohai 1972).
to me as something like my own, but one that can never become an ingredient part of my sensibility, no matter how delicate my sympathy with it may be; it always maintains an irreducible absence, and can never pass into the presence which my sensibility has for me. In this respect the psychic life of another is not like the other side of a cube, which can always, in principle, be brought to a direct intuition just like that which I have of the side which is facing me now. The reality of other persons introduces a level of complexity even to my own perception of spatial objects, for while I see this profile of the object, I appreciate that the other profiles which I do not see may in fact be seen by someone else, and throughout all this there is one object being seen by everyone. The other side therefore is available to me as absent to me but present to someone else. I then can move to the viewpoint from which he sees it and see the same profile he saw, but we could not have the same slant at exactly the same time. These implications of presence and absence can be worked out in great detail and provide the manifold, the repeated pairs, in which things are constituted and in which they exercise their truthfulness. One area which obviously calls for analysis, for example, is the coordination of kinesthesia and motion of the perceiver with the objectivity of space and of things in space.

The various structures in speech provide a theater in which the play of presence and absence occurs on many levels. Most fundamentally, there is the continuous sound which is the basis for all subsequent structure. This phonic element must take time, and involves the contrast between the sound parts that are now active and present, and the parts that have gone by or are yet to come as parts of the present elocution. A variation on this public sound is the level of silent and individual speech where the objective spatial element can be removed, but even such speech cannot avoid the contrasts of presence and absence in psychic time. On the level next to phonics we have the structures of phonemes. Roman Jakobson has shown that phonemes are defined by making selections in a group of binary possibilities, like vocal/non-vocal, oral/nasal, and the like. The phoneme is a presence which is defined by the absence of the other.

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pole of the binary possibility. Jakobson, although he uses Husserl's doctrine of parts and wholes in his linguistic studies, does not cite Husserl's theory of presence and absence in his theory of phonemes, but the application of this doctrine is obvious. Beyond phonemes we have the structures of grammar and the presence-absence contrasts of noun and verb, verb and adverb, state of affairs as articulated and as nominalized, and so on. All these structures develop genetically in very intricate designs of presence and absence. And finally, beyond grammar we have the proposition, which is achieved as present in sentences but is not reducible to them; that is, the proposition is absent in contrast to sentential presences.

The perception of things, the structures of language and speech, other minds, signs, expressions, pictures, all are achievements of presence and absence in various ways. Memory is still another field: here we have an object given to us which is no longer perceived but only remembered. It is therefore absent in contrast to the presence of perception. However the object's pastness becomes given to us in a way which is not available in perception, so the absence of the perceived object becomes the presence of the object's pastness, its temporal character of having been perceived earlier. Remembering, according to Husserl, also involves recalling myself as perceiving the object in question; it involves a present performance of reliving an earlier perception in a new, memorial kind of way. This is the medium in which the remembered object is given to me again, but now as past. Thus the memorial presence and absence of the object is played off against the remembered presence and absence of my earlier perception of the object.\(^4\)

In these rich descriptions of how things appear, how a particular identity occurs in its dyads of presence and absence, we have some achievements that are founded on others. Phonemes for instance are founded on phones or sounds, and the experience of other minds is founded on an experience of their bodies. Some plays of presence and absence are foundations for others. Are there any foundations which are final and terminal, the basis for all the rest that we experience? Husserl claims that the structures and syntheses of what he calls inner

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\(^4\) Beginning with the subject of memory, Iso Kern has examined the structure of representation or reflexivity in a highly original work, *Idee und Methode der Philosophie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1975). Both in its general argument and in its detailed analyses, this is one of the most provocative and rewarding books that have appeared in the phenomenological tradition.

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\(^5\) See my work (Evanston: North
time-consciousness are the ground for everything else, and they are not in turn based on anything prior to them. In this domain we have the most elementary play of difference and sameness, presence and absence.

What happens in inner time-consciousness, and where does it happen? Husserl says that we perceive objects on the basis of our sensibility. Objects affect us, and in these affections we have aspects of the object and ultimately the objects themselves made manifest. But we are also, implicitly, aware of our own sensibility and our own acts, even as we know and think about objects other than ourselves. When things appear, we also co-appear. Husserl claims that this awareness of our own sensibility and acts is carried out in a domain more intimate or more interior than sensibility and intentional acts. In this domain there is a process going on in which a differentiation and synthesis takes place which is more elementary than sensibility itself. A kind of process takes place that is more elementary than psychic time, and, obviously, more basic than the objective time of clock and calendar. It is more rudimentary than remembering, which is made possible by inner time-consciousness.

This is where it happens, but what is it that happens here? The awareness of what is now elapses into a retention of what was just now, as a new presence comes into view. At any stage in this process we are aware not only of what is now, but also of what has just left as now. This elapsed now has become absent; but its very absence is present to us, so we have a direct and elementary intuition here of the just-past. We have a direct and elementary intuition of otherness in its most primitive form. This process of othering and gathering is the most primitive thing that happens in the play of appearances, the play of presence and absence.

I cannot go into the subtle details of these textures of inner time-consciousness; I wish simply to make some statements about them. They are also cases of presence, absence, and identity; they are also participations in the dyad and the one which is constituted in it. And they are also ontological. They are not a kind of super-psychology, a move into something even more private than our own feelings and thoughts. Rather, at this level Husserl moves into an area that undercut the distinction between the subjective and the objective. What happens in this area makes both the subjective and

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the objective possible. This is the most elementary stream of presencings, and only by analogy is it called a temporal stream. These structures and occurrences seep through everything that is manifest on the more complex levels of objects and awareness. And if the structures of signs and pictures are ontological, this differentiation in the stream of presencings, this differentiation in inner time-consciousness, is ontological too. It is the most elementary stream of presences and absences, and it is the dyad in its most primitive expression.

Plato says in the Timaeus (37) that the soul is composed of being, the same, and the different, and that it responds to sameness and difference in the things it encounters. If this is so, then sameness, difference, and being are prior to the soul and prior to things; in Husserl's way of saying this, the exercise of presence and absence and identity or being does not arise first in speech, nor in acts or feelings, nor in fully constituted things like houses or mountains, nor in signs or images; rather presence, absence, and being come about and are assertible as more elementary than any of these ways in which they are realized. All such things like signs, words, houses, trees, and feelings could not be if there were not a play of presence, absence, and identity. In other words, nothing could be if presence, absence, and identity were not at rest and in motion. It is unfortunate that Husserl calls the most basic occurrence of presence and absence a matter of inner time-consciousness, because it is neither inner nor outer but prior to both.

Let us now turn to the question of what philosophy is. When we turn from things and begin to analyze the intentions in which we have things, do we somehow lose the world and abandon being? Not at all. Instead of being concerned with the objects that are available to us in the play of presences and absences, we become concerned with this play itself, and of course also with the objects established in it. The turn to philosophy is not an abandonment of the world but an examination of its work of presencing.

Does philosophy itself work in a special play of presences and absences? It does: the play of presence and absence itself becomes present to philosophical reflection. But what philosophical absence can be contrasted to this philosophical presence? Hasn't the play of presence and absence always been with us? How can absence not be a sensation, but doing something once made then that is why it is never away from us. But the is reflective and the other participates, that because of its present to itself, the absence of presence philosophy truly tioned life.

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presence and absence always been with us as we know things in the world? How can we say it has somehow been absent? It has indeed always been with us, but it has also always been overlooked. Its absence is not a spatial distance, or an obliterated desire or a forgotten perception, but the absence of something that is always with us but never made thematic, something so familiar that we do not see it. That is why it is hard to name the themes philosophy studies: we are never away from them, and so cannot easily take any distance from them. But the shift from being implicit and overlooked to being made reflective and thematic is a move from absence to presence and is another participation in the indeterminate dyad. It follows, incidentally, that because philosophy makes the play of presence and absence present to itself, it alone can understand the absence, the implicitness, the being overlooked, the obscurity, that characterizes the play of presence and absence in non-philosophical experience. Only philosophy truly understands doxa or the darkness of the unquestioned life.

Philosophy therefore is also concerned with the objects of the sciences, the arts, and ordinary experience, but it is concerned with them in a mediated way. We enjoy such objects through the ordinary play of presence and absence. Because philosophy examines this ordinary play of presence and absence and the things constituted in it, philosophy has these same things through the further play of its own philosophical presents and absences. One play is heaped upon another, but the same object shines through both.

IV

Philosophy can be considered as the investigation of being truthful. The phrase "being truthful" is ambiguous, and fortunately so. On one hand it means the responsibility of the receiver of presences and absences to know what is true and to say what is on his mind. Philosophy explores our obligation to be truthful and the way we achieve this. But without much violence to language, "being truthful" also refers to beings which manifest themselves to us and so become engaged in truth. Being is what can be known, being is truthful. If we wish to propose a revival of ontology, then "being truthful" is the English phrase in which to express it, since in two words, "being" and "true," it translates the Greek terms on and logos which are the name of our endeavor.

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