The Process of Sense-Formation and Fixed Sense-Structures: * Key Intuitions in the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Marc Richir

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The Process of Sense-Formation and Fixed Sense-Structures: * Key Intuitions in the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Marc Richir

The article analyzes some key motives of both classical German phenomenology (focusing on Edmund Husserl) and contemporary French phenomenology (focusing on Marc Richir). The theme of sense-formation, a recurring thread throughout Husserl’s entire body of work, serves as a discussion starting point.

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*What is under consideration here is the pair of Husserl’s categories ‘sense-formation’ (Sinnbildung) /‘sense-structure’ (Sinngebilde). The original German term that is rendered here as ‘sense’ is ‘Sinn.’ Translating Sinn as ‘sense’ is more accurate than rendering it as ‘meaning.’ This allows distinguishing between two German terms ‘Sinn’ (sense) and ‘Bedeutung’ (meaning) and, even more important, clearly dissociates Husserl’s concept of Sinn from exclusively linguistic concerns. For a discussion on Husserl’s conception of Sinn and important issues of English translation of Husserl’s terminology in general see: L. Hardy, “The Translator’s Introduction,” Edmund Husserl, The Idea of Phenomenology: A Translation of Die Idee der Pha¨nomenologie. Husserliana II. (Dodrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1999), p. 12.—Ed.
A special emphasis is put on one of Husserl’s posthumously published texts from 1933, in which he distinguishes between the open process of sense-formation [Sinnbildung] and the closed sense-structures [Sinngebilde]. The “phenomenon” to which phenomenological philosophy refers here is not a “pre-given thing” yet, but rather the horizon in which its sense is shaped. This fundamental intuition is crucially important for the project of “nonstandard” phenomenology, which Richir is developing in the context of Francophone philosophy. Drawing equally from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of language, Richir refers to “the sense that creates itself.” In this way, he is continuing to develop one of the key intuitions of phenomenological philosophy, which Husserl establishes by distinguishing between the living process of sense-formation and the “fixed [static]” sense-structures.

Based on this fundamental distinction, phenomenological philosophy is described as one of the tools of modern humanities rather than a highly specialized philosophical doctrine closed into itself. The author demonstrates that the conceptual pair of Sinnbildung/Sinngebilde may be used for analyzing both philosophical works and literary texts.

**Keywords:** Husserl, Richir, senf-formation, sense-fixation, sense-structure, semantic sediment, primal instituting, semantic augmentation of perception, intermediate perception, pregiveness

[Our topic is] not some empty thesis about a rigid [semantic] block “the world,” . . . but the fluid life of consciousness.  

E. Husserl

At first glance, phenomenological philosophy gives the impression of an extremely specialized philosophical discipline, access to which is highly difficult for the unprepared reader. However, apart from issues of theory of knowledge, questions that are perhaps only interesting to specialists, the phenomenological approach also offers a specific set of key intuitions available to any interested reader. In this article I would like to disclose a number of these intuitions characteristic of the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and Marc Richir (1943–2015). We will focus more on the affective component of philosophical work, on the “nerve” that animates these authors’ philosophical projects, rather than their concepts or positions.

**Husserl’s six key concepts**

I will introduce only the minimum number of concepts that are important for phenomenological philosophy. These are: (1) “sense-formation”
(Sinnbildung), (2) “sense-fixation (Sinnstiftung),” (3) “sense-sedimentation” (Sinnsedimentierung), (4) “primal instituting” (Urstiftung), (5) “semantic augmentation of perception,” or “apperception” (Apperzeption), and (6) “pregivenness” (Vorgegebenheit). We can see that all these concepts refer to the concept of meaning.

Within phenomenological philosophy, sense is not limited to its linguistic value alone; this notion also refers to a more “silent,” pre-predicative experience. When referring to sense, a Husserlian phenomenologist is primarily relying on the establishment of some “surplus” (Überschuss) beyond “bare” or simple perception, a surplus through which something appears to us as this or that. This refers to a kind of “apperception” irreducible to sensation and stimulation, a semantic schema that formats perception. The concept of sense points to a horizon of accompanying experience, a network of intentional implications through which some being is constituted as a particular being. This “structure ‘as’” (Als-Struktur) is central here; it is what allows us to recognize, for example, this white sheet of paper as a white sheet of paper. This structure is considered defining for all sense-formation.

Phenomenological experiences tells us that this structure of sense can be grasped at different registers: we can view one and the same thing as “a being in the world” or as “just a phenomenon.” The latter semantic scheme is broader than the first established sense-formation, since it includes the features of uncertainty and openness in the sense itself.

From the phenomenological standpoint we see certain defined processes: (1) “formation of sense,” (2) “fixation of sense,” and (3) “sedimentation of sense.” Within these processes other events or elements take place, such as (4) “primal instituting,” (5) “apperception,” and (6) “pregivenness.” So “formation of sense” occurs by means of primal instituting, apperception is a feature of “fixation of sense,” and pregivenness is an event within the process of “precipitation of sense.”

From a natural (everyday and scientific) standpoint we see only the results of these processes and events; we take them for granted in themselves. The task of phenomenology is to look within these processes of sense-formation, processes whose results largely includes us, ourselves.

(1) The formation of sense

Let us take an easy example: I know that I can see the city of Moscow through the windows of my office. I see only a grey sky, apartment blocks, and cars passing by, but I know this is “the city of Moscow.” I do not need to leave the building to verify that this is “our nation’s capital,” but even if I were to step
out into the street, I would not see any kind of “Moscow” other than automobiles, block housing, and greyness in the background. Yet I am sure that I am in this city, and not in any other. So what is this “city of Moscow,” then? It is a semantic augmentation that I add to my perception of the automobiles, buildings, and grey sky: “Moscow traffic,” “Moscow bedroom community,” and “Moscow sky.” If I did not know that I was located in this city, I would say that it was simply “the noise of cars,” “apartment buildings,” and “greyness.” Moscow is not a thing and not a quality of any kinds of things, but the steady result of formation and fixation of sense.

We can also see that the situation with “buildings,” things that seem to be more defined, is no better: what makes this conglomeration of concrete blocks a “home”? First of all, that is the sense that residents and passersby invest in it. Without them, it would not be a home, nor even a concrete structure, since “home,” “concrete,” and “structure” are also sense-formations. Even if we tried, we would not find “raw” things not yet formed by sense (since “raw” and “thing” are already loaded with sense.) I know that I am in “Moscow”; I know that the concrete structures are “homes,” and that one could (and should) live in them. Eliminate all the “Muscovites,” “visitors to the capital,” and any sense-conferring instances for a moment: we would have only an undefined something before us. But there would not even be a “before us,” since there would be no “we,” either.

(2) The fixation of sense

Sense is formed, fixated, and accumulated: “we” encounter “things,” come to know them, and find them already finished and formed. However, “we ourselves” do not constitute any kind of special exception: “we” discover “ourselves,” we know that “we” are “we” and, moreover, always were “ourselves” (as we remember “ourselves”). “We see the windows of the building opposite”: outside of sense-conferring there is neither “we,” nor “windows,” nor “building”; moreover, there is no kind of “opposite.” We don’t have the means to name whatever is left after eliminating all sense, since any name goes through sense-conferring. I was not the one who came up with “Moscow buildings,” nor did you come up with “the windows of the building opposite”; these are stable and generally accepted semantic unities. They were shaped and their sense was settled; they began to be used without further thought as something taken for granted.

Both Husserl and Richir proceed from the need to transition from this kind of “closed” or “closed off” sense-formation (geschlossene Sinngebilde) to the process of formation of sense, which has no need for solidification or fixation into something taken for granted. I am referring to
the transition from “finished” sense to the process of sense-formation. Husserl describes the life of consciousness as a stream of “sense-formations” in which events of “fixation of sense” and its oncoming process of “sedimenting sense” take place.

(3) Semantic sediment

For all these insufficient metaphors (the conventional metaphor “stream,” the geological metaphor “sediment”), we can understand that the founder of phenomenology is pointing primarily to different phases of the same process, phases characterized by different degrees of mobility and plasticity. How should we understand “precipitation of sense” or “sense deposited in the sediment”? Above all, it means the accumulation of semantic schema that are ready to use, and the constant transformation of what was originally acquired into a certain habitual possession. For example, we may discuss geometric shapes, but we are not reproducing the experience of the first geometrician or his assessment of their properties. An ideal shape is something that has no relationship to our experience; it is simply a historically inherited concept, and we do not animate its own sense-conferring. Or maybe in primary school they teach us to count with sticks without explaining that there is no such thing as a “number” in the world (that a number is not a thing), and we confidently count the sticks, closing ourselves off from an understanding of what counting is.

“Sense deposited in the sediment” can affect sense being lived through; it can invade it. If we are asked to depict the number five, we draw five dots or the number five, not concerned about the impossibility of completing that task. We provide a substitution and perceive it as something taken for granted. Often the thing we want to say comes out as something else that speaks through us: a finished, habitually applied semantic schema (for example, a digit as the representative of a number).

(4) Primal instituting

Every apperception has its source, its primal instituting. Primal instituting is understood as the genetically first givenness of the object.

Let us suppose that I am seeing a suspension railway for the first time. I have already encountered other public transportation in my experience; I understand what a tram, or rather funicular, is, and now for the first time I am encountering a suspended monorail tram moving toward me.
I distinguish the carriage and the rails, only the rails are above, and the carriage below. People tell me, “This is the Schwebebahn,” and I start to understand that it is supposed to be like that. I read about this strange form of transportation in a German-language textbook, purchase a postcard depicting how they took an elephant onto the overhead tram and what happened to it, and finally, overcoming my dizziness, I decide to ride it myself. So sense is assembled; I now understand what a Schwebebahn is. Based on this reestablished sense-formation I will continue to understand what it means to distinguish between a suspended tram and other forms of transportation. The event of my encounter with this phenomenon will be the basis of my understanding.

The only issue is that I never see the suspended tram in all its manifold parts and perspectives; rather, I finish building each isolated perception according to a primally instituted (urgestifete) and reestablished (nachgestifete) schema. I never have “pure” or “bare” perception of the suspended tram; I am always dealing with a certain apperception.

(5) Apperception

One of the programmatic theses of Husserl’s phenomenology goes like this: “external perception is a constant pretension to accomplish something that by its very nature it is not in a position to accomplish,” namely, to give us a completed thing that firmly exists in reality (let alone an actually existing world, or us ourselves). It is here that semantic augmentation plays its role: it convinces us that we have achieved what we wanted but were not in a position to achieve, namely, that we have obtained, through perception, some identified, completed, pregiven things that, in their completeness, exist in reality.

Apperception is primarily a “surplus” in relation to the “raw” givenness of sense impressions. This surplus comprises something thought up, something implied; it is not simply sensed (perceived) but apperceived, added to “the load.” This kind of apperception is a universal law for the formation of experience. Semantic augmentation plays the key role in the constitution of finished objects: through apperception (Apperzeption, Adperzeption) we complete construction of the horizon of adumbrations or shadings into a “finished” object. It takes direct part in the constitution of the identical sense of an object, of the self-identical being as such. Ultimately, apperception is what gives existential significance to sense-formation; it posits something as an existing thing. To the “directly given” that is posited, it bears the anticipated horizon, which in a real sense is never fully given, so everything pretends to exist in reality as finished and
self-identical, based on an apperceptive “promise” or presumption that is never realized.

Apperception refers to a primal instituting of sense, or at least it should. However, we are inclined to think of the “promise” of perception as something fulfilled, to treat things as finished, perfected, and pregiven. That is, we “compress” the whole manifold history of our experience and do this with the help of a tacitly implied thesis: “as an actuality, ‘the’ world is always [already] there.” It is this quality of “always and already being there in actuality” attributed to things that confers the pregivenness of the world.

(6) Pregivenness

The next strongly programmatic thesis in Husserl’s phenomenology goes like this: “the given can be only pregiven,” that is, there is no givenness without pregivenness. Let us expand on this thesis.

Suppose I want to say something about what is directly given to me in experience—this twilight, this noise from the highway, these lights passing by—I talk about what has already been given to me in the experience of earlier “twilight,” “noise,” “motorway,” and “lights.” Each “givenness” refers to a series of pregivennesses: the concepts, forms, and standpoints that have been laid down. Nothing is given to me directly: even our much-discussed given sensations pass through semantic development and schematization before they become available to us.

Something appears to us in a pregiven way thanks to an already instituted apperception. From Husserl’s viewpoint, each semantic augmentation through which we receive something as pregiven has its own source. He considers “primal instituting” this source, that is, the situation in which some sense-formation, which later be replicated and reproduced in our experience, is assembled.

The interconnection of sense’s characteristics

Allow me to summarize Husserl’s 1933 working manuscript (B II 7), which establishes the interconnection of these characteristics of sense we have described.

Every thing is given through apperception (through what is not directly given, but implied). Additionally, every givenness is surrounded by pregivenness; it indicates a primal instituting of one or another sense-formation that, once established, begins to mark our experience. Apperception is loaded with references to pregivenness due to the fact
that it is mentally added as a semantic horizon, anticipated, and implied. These references are not arbitrary: they are pregiven and prescribed. We are dealing with “finished,” perfected things with existence in the world, since we have already mentally added and anticipated that which we were not given directly: self-identical, exhaustively constituted things. We can unwind the chain of implications and “mental additions” and thus come closer to the semantic source of some object that we are thinking of as one and the same being.

This is the kind of analysis of sense as “unwinding,” as an unfurling of implications, that Husserl has in mind when he discusses the reduction of consciousness to the sphere of transcendental life. This does not at all mean introspection, much less ascension to some spiritual instance embodied in the world. By no means is transcendental life pregiven; it does not precede our understanding of ourselves as people in the world. It is not a finished, one and the same being within the world, and it does not possess any pregiven existential sense. We are dealing with things in the world as a result of some “closed sense-formation.” The issue is that transcendental being or transcendental life that Husserl is attempting to indicate is not a pregiven being, nor yet an accomplished meaning-formation.10

How, then, should we understand the process of shaping sense, which itself possesses no pregiven existential sense? Can we say that this process exists? What does being that is not pregiven as an existing thing signify? In this manuscript Husserl does not answer these questions, but it at least becomes clear how the German phenomenologist saw the process for shaping sense: for him, it definitely involves a process of fixation or “solidification,” a transition from the life of consciousness to a pregiven, completed being, a fixation of established sense in the form of finished apperception.

This fundamental intuition is crucially important for the project of “nonstandard” phenomenology, which Marc Richir is developing in the context of francophone philosophy. He is continuing the development of one of the key intuitions of phenomenological philosophy as determined by Husserl in differentiating between a living process of forming sense and a “rigid” sense-formation. Therefore, I propose that we turn to a parallel consideration of those models of primal instituting and apperception that Husserl and Richir propose.

A model for primal instituting and the role of apperception

Let us look more closely at how Edmund Husserl and Marc Richir use their model for primal instituting. This will allow us to clarify their phenomenological approaches.
In his last datable manuscript (1937) Husserl formulates a distinction between primal instituting in its actual or absolute sense (eigentliche, absolute Urstiftung) and instituting that is subsequent in relation to the primal (nachkommende, relative Urstiftung). In the first case we are dealing with a situation where sense undergoes formation and initial instituting; in the second, with traditional, “inherited” semantic formation, which takes on a new form based on some other initial, primal instituting. That is, from Husserl’s point of view, there are semantic establishments that continue some already constituted tradition, but they themselves do not fully rely on independent experience; rather, they correlate themselves with some semantic tradition: there may be some gap or distance between the mediated or supposed primal instituting and the phenomenological source. The phenomenologist’s task is “archeological,” searching for and disclosing the primal instituting in its actual sense, the pure semantic source.

We should note that we find another distinction between the two fundamental situations in the work of Husserl’s closest student and assistant, Eugen Fink (1905–1975): a case where sense-formation refers to primal instituting available for disclosure (entholllbare Urstiftung), which means classical phenomena of the Husserlian type, and a case where primal instituting underlies some region of experience or another that cannot be disclosed (unentholllbare Urstiftung) and where the question of primal instituting is even senseless. This kind of model of primal instituting inaccessible to disclosure fundamentally alters the relationship between apperception and establishment of sense, since it introduces the idea of semantic augmentation whose connection to an original experience cannot be traced.

Marc Richir in turn introduces a model that continues the course of thought launched by Husserl and Fink. According to his approach, we are often dealing with “symbolic establishments” alongside the classical primal institutings; moreover, they even dominate the sphere of cultural phenomena. Richir defines symbolic establishments as “Stiftung without Urstiftung, that is, without a phenomenological source.” For him as for Fink, there are establishments that cannot in principle be traced back to a primal instituting. For Fink this is more of an argument for abandoning the search for a semantic source of apperception of the world (Urstiftung der Weltapperzeption), for simply considering the world a necessary horizon of experience; he is inclined toward abandoning the original goals of genetic phenomenology and building a cosmology. Richir also proposes incorporating the idea of a gap between establishment and its semantic source into the sphere of phenomenological problems. He proposes that we examine establishment with no relation to primal instituting, that is, lacking
a phenomenological source; thus, he proposes to thematize a wide range of manifold forms of apperception. In this case, phenomenology’s task is to verify critically the apperception given us in everyday life and in the life of science for the purpose of its connection to the primal semantic instituting.

If we pose the question of the relationship between initial establishment and apperception, we can see that each of these versions of the phenomenological project is determined by the specific features of the interconnection between initial establishment and apperception. For example, Husserl aims at constructing a genetic phenomenology of the key features of apperception (Selbstapperzeption and Weltapperzeption); Fink regards the world as an inevitable (unhintergehbar) horizon of experience and constructs a cosmology; Richir, in turn, proposes to outline a possible phenomenology of symbolic establishments and the role they play in human culture.

Let us look more closely at Richir’s project; we will less on concepts or theory presented in his extensive body of texts and more on the phenomenological intuitions we consider key. For the French phenomenologist, these are the motif of fixation of sense without primal establishment (Stiftung sens Urstiftung) and the idea of an intermediate apperception (entre-aperception).

**Richir’s two key intuitions**

**Reestablishment of sense without primal instituting**

In his work during the 1990s, Richir proposed restructuring phenomenology through phenomenological language and critical theory of culture. This project was based equally on Husserl’s phenomenology and the on the phenomenology of language of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), whose lead Richir follows in discussing “sense shaping itself.” Merleau-Ponty attempted to describe the process of establishing a “symbolic matrix,” a set of cultural distinctions that structuralists would call a symbolic order. He believed that linguistic structures were not only a repository of fixed sense: from his perspective, language in development takes part in the genesis of a being. Richir takes up the idea of self-creating sense in its relation to symbolic establishments.

With that, Richir proposes describing a situation where we are dealing with the fixation of sense without the primal instituting of sense: when we operate with concepts that do not refer us to any kind of experience we have had, when we are following along with stable tabs or references that freely
circulate in the field of culture. Richir indicates that culture largely operates this way, with its “symbolic establishments.”

Here we may recall La Rochefoucauld’s classic aphorism taken up by Lacan: “There are people who would never fall in love if they hadn’t heard of it.” Many fixated sense-formations represent social constructs that do not refer us to any kind of initial experience.

In order to transition from fixed sense-formations to the process of shaping sense, we have to develop some method for deconstructing finished apperceptions (stable semantic augmentations of perception). This is where the next key intuition of Richir’s phenomenology comes into play.

**Intermediate apperception**

Richir also thematizes a very specific phenomenon: intermediate apperception (*entre-aperception*). In attempting to grasp sense in the process of becoming, not yet fixed or stabilized through a steady apperception, the French phenomenologist discusses unsteady or wavering sense. This is a measure of spoken language not yet solidified into uttered speech; this is sense that does not yet possess an identical “selfness” (*ipse*), so nothing is self-evident. Here there is no kind of one and the same “self,” neither a self-identical sense-positing subjectivity, nor a self-identical sense. This is the kind of “wild” or “raw” being that Merleau-Ponty discussed, and it reveals a proximity to Husserl’s “open process of formation of sense.” Richir is attempting to determine, through intuition, the disclosure of self-evident sense-formations, emphasizing “intermediateness,” or the “dotted-ness” characteristic of *entre-aperception*.

In closing, I would like to offer an example of applying Husserl’s and Richir’s key intuitions, since the conceptual pair *Sinnbildung/Sinnebilde* can be applied not only in philosophical texts, but also in the analysis of artistic works. Let us examine a fragment from the rough draft of Robert Musil’s novel *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*):

A person’s soul is an insubstantial mass... when it touches solid surfaces, it precipitates onto them and becomes denser. We discuss “habits.” But something inside us resists calling honor or virtue habits, and yet they are too. So our sensual attitudes are only semi-solid. If we dug deeper, we would find something quite uncertain in them. It often seems the opposite, as if they were something solidified already... Houses, an insubstantial mass, a sediment on the surfaces encountered. If there are no special relationships, each impulse deforms a person. First becoming himself through expression, a person forms himself in society’s forms. Violence is committed on him and so he acquires a
surface. He is shaped by the repercussions of what he has created. If you removed this effect, something indefinite, shapeless, would remain. The walls of the streets radiate ideology.²¹

Musil offers us a seeing similar to phenomenology’s; his idea is to show that we have no fixed essence (just as seemingly “accomplished,” “finished” things have none). Our so-called “character” can solidify into habits or standpoints, but we acquire no definitive shape from this. We are taught to be someone (“exemplary family man,” “responsible citizen,” “true patriot”), but these are only surfaces onto which our supposed qualities precipitate. We become someone specific (“ourselves”) when we project our own sense-formations on ourselves (head of the household; citizen, patriot). Moreover, we are taught how to project them correctly. These semantic schema solidify in the form of social institutions (for example, in the form of family, private property, or government). The very architecture of our cities accumulates these ideologemes (we begin discussing “new construction in the capital’s exclusive neighborhood”).

It is enough to “break open” these solidified sense-formations to find ourselves indefinite and shapeless. Here we can go further than Musil and say that “soul” and “person” are also not self-evident for us, just as what it means to be a “citizen” or “patriot” is not self-explanatory. These solidified sense-formations are in motion, and we are attempting to appeal to some primal experience that once stood behind them.

A situation involving the incomprehensibility of obvious, broken semantic patterns, a situation familiar to us both from everyday practice and from artistic texts (we should recall the acceptance of estrangement in literature), can serve as a starting point for the phenomenological transition from ready-made sense-structure to an open process of sense-formation.²² In their philosophical projects, Edmund Husserl and Marc Richir choose this very strategy. Husserl suggested we consider transcendental life as being that is not pregiven as an existing thing, and as sense located in the process of becoming. Ultimately the real object of phenomenological research is this sense in development, not some mythical transcendental subject. Richir, in turn, suggests focusing a Husserlian lens on analysis of the symbolic establishments of culture. This refers not to active constitution or sense-positing, but to the motion (and solidification) of sense that creates itself.

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in this article, particularly transcriptions of the A VII 12, B I 14, and B II 7 manuscripts.

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Notes


6. Husserl, Die Lebenswelt, p. 11.


10. For more on this topic see E. Husserl, Manuscript B II 7, p. 157a.


12. E. Fink, VI. Cartesianische Meditation. Texte aus dem Nachlass Eugen Finks, mit Anmerkungen und Beilagen aus dem Nachlass Edmund Husserls,


21. This fragment is translated from Russian. The German original text is to find in: R. Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Book II. Aus dem Nachlaß, ed. A. Frise’ (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2010), pp. 1815; 1932.

22. We can see similar motifs in the work of Eugen Fink and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.