Husserl’s definition of consciousness in terms of intentionality marks a revolutionary innovation in the history of modern philosophy. It solves a problem which, on the grounds of the traditional modern conception of consciousness, proved hopelessly enigmatic; to say the least, the problem in question is opened to promising theoretical treatment. Hence, it appears opportune to consider Husserl’s theory of intentionality historically, though, to be sure, the theory of intentionality must ultimately be judged on its own merits. Its validity can only depend upon its satisfactorily accounting for the fundamental structure of consciousness. Still, to present it historically brings forth its full significance in the most striking fashion.

To formulate the problem to which Husserl’s theory of intentionality provides an answer, at least an inchoate one, we sketch, to begin with, the general conception of consciousness which dominated modern philosophical thought since its beginning with Descartes. According to that general conception, which may be accurately termed the theory of Ideas, the only objects to which the mind or the conscious subject has direct and immediate access are its own mental states. Consciousness is conceived as a self-contained closed domain, a domain of interiority, completely severed from what may be called the domain of externality which, in turn, comprises whatever does not belong to the former domain. It is this separation between the domain of interiority and that of externality,
between the res cogitans and the res extensa, which defines the Cartesian dualism. In the domain of interiority, events and occurrences of diverse nature take place; this domain comprises multifarious contents and data. Notwithstanding the differences among them, all these contents, happenings, events, and occurrences are on a par, insofar as they pertain to the domain of interiority. Hence, their belonging to this domain qualifies them as subjective and defines their status as psychological facts. Among these psychological subjective occurrences are some which have or claim objective reference (that is to say, which refer, or claim to refer, to entities other than mental states), occurrences through which a stone, a house, a triangle, another human being, and the like present themselves. It is the class of such subjective occurrences, as distinguished by the mentioned reference or the referential claim, that have traditionally been denoted as Ideas. It cannot be stressed too emphatically that, on this view, Ideas, notwithstanding their distinctive feature, are and remain subjective occurrences, psychological events, or mental states, to commerce with which the mind or consciousness is forever confined, among which alone, so to speak, the conscious subject moves. At this point, the principle underlying the theory of Ideas can be expressed in the form in which it has repeatedly been stated in the course of modern philosophy: the only direct and immediate objects of our knowledge are our own Ideas.²

² The first to formulate this principle was, as far as I can see, Antoine Arnauld: “il est très vrai... que... ce sont nos idées que nous voyons immédiatement, et qui sont l’objet immédiat de notre pensée.” English translation: “it is most true... that it is our ideas that we see non-mediately, and that our ideas are the nonmediate object of our thought,” quoted by É. Bréhier, Histoire de la philosophie, II, p. 219; [the text cited has been corrected after collating it with Arnauld’s original wording in his Des vraies et fausses idées; cf. supra, “Husserl’s Theory of Intentionality in Historical Perspective,” p. [348] and n. 13.] Further formulations of the principle are found in J. Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book IV, Chapter 1, § 1 (ed. J. N. Yolton, II, p. 133): “Since the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, has no other immediate object but its own ideas, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident that our knowledge is only conversant about them”; D. Hume, Treatise, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, p. 67: “nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas”; I. Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft, A, pp. 98 f.: “Unsere Vorstellungen mögen entspringen, woher sie wollen, ... so gehören sie doch als Modifikationen des Gemüts zum inneren Sinn, und als solche sind alle unsere Erkenntnisse zuletzt doch der formalen