THE LOGIC OF PARTS AND WHOLES
IN HUSSERL'S INVESTIGATIONS*

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In his preface to the second edition of the Prolegomena Husserl makes the following remark about the Third of his Logical Investigations, which is entitled, "Toward a Theory of Wholes and Parts." "I have the impression that this Investigation was all too little read. It helped me a great deal, and indeed it is an essential presupposition for full understanding of the Investigations that follow it." 1 Neglect of this Investigation could indeed prove disastrous to understanding Husserl's thought; although it seems to treat merely questions of logic and method and says nothing about subjectivity, it provides a formal structure that reappears at many strategic places in the Investigations and in Husserl's later work. It serves as the skeleton for Husserl's more elaborate philosophical doctrines about subjectivity and its world.

The logic of parts and wholes functions most visibly in what Husserl will later call his "noematic" analysis: The descriptions of the structure of objects constituted in consciousness. The senses that blend noematically to structure given regions of reality are taken to be "parts" of a "whole." The necessary rules that govern such blends are possible because parts and wholes in general can be blended in certain ways. Thus the necessary, a priori "evidence" that certain noematic structures manifest is based upon formal rules that govern the relationships of parts and wholes in general.


1 Halle, 1928, p. xv. We will refer henceforth to the first edition: Logische Untersuchungen, Halle, Vol. 1, 1900; vol. 2, 1901. We will give the number of the Investigation in roman numerals, followed by the chapter number: III # 10 means Investigation III, chapter 10. We will give chapter numbers instead of page numbers in order to make reference to the second edition possible. Usually the chapters are short enough so that such reference is sufficient; where further precision is needed, the page number of the first edition will be given. References will be given directly to the body of our text.
The logic of parts and wholes

Noematic analysis studies how the logic of parts and wholes is realized in various regions of reality.

Part-whole logic is also operative in Husserl’s description of subjectivity. His complex analyses of intentional acts, for instance, are simply applications of part-whole relationships to intentionality. The analysis of acts into quality, material and sensory components in the Investigations, and their analysis into noeses, hyletic data and noemas in the Ideas, are instances of the use of parts and wholes. The Third Investigation thus “helped a great deal” by serving as the formal rule guiding Husserl’s phenomenological analyses.

Even more basically, the doctrine of parts and wholes at least partially justifies his philosophical language. In the Prolegomena, Husserl says that the first task facing phenomenology as a nascent science is the elaboration of precise concepts and terms, the articulation of a vocabulary proper to his philosophy (67). Husserl’s terms are introduced by making philosophical distinctions and, as we have already anticipated, the distinctions are made according to the pattern of part-whole structures. Thus the very meaningfulness of what he says depends on the legitimacy of part-whole logic. Another justification of Husserl’s philosophical speech is given in the transcendental epoché, but this is a dimension different from the formal one treated in Investigation III. And even after the reduction is carried out, the formal structure of parts and wholes still remains operative in forming phenomenological concepts.

1. The logic of parts and wholes

Husserl uses parts and wholes in Investigation II as a weapon against the theory of abstraction proposed by Berkeley and Hume (II #36, #39, #40-42). Only in Investigation III are they treated for their own sake, however. Husserl begins this Investigation with a very general distinction, that between simple objects and complex objects. Simple objects are those which have no parts, complex those with parts. Complex objects are wholes with parts. No definition of parts and wholes can be given, nor can the relation between them be established or clarified by any more primitive terminology. Parts and wholes are primitive and irreducible terms as long as they are taken in an undifferentiated, general way.

The distinction that is pivotal for the logic of parts and wholes follows immediately. Husserl distinguishes between two types of parts: moments and pieces.