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The Phenomenology of ChatGPT: A Semiotics

Abstract *This essay comprises a first phenomenological semiotics of ChatGPT; I analyze how we experience the language signs generated by that AI. This task is accomplished in two steps. First, I introduce a conceptual scaffolding for the project, by introducing core tenets of Husserl's semiotics. Second, I mold Husserl's theory to develop my phenomenology of the passive and active consciousness of the language signs composed by ChatGPT. On the one hand, by discussing temporality, I demonstrate that ChatGPT can passively demand me to understand its signs. On the other hand, I show that a conflict arises between active and passive consciousness when reading ChatGPT. While I actively know that there is no communicating subject, I still passively experience these signs as made by another. I argue that it is this conflict, which lends ChatGPT its 'magical' character. I conclude by showing how these observations can inform future regulation of AI models.*

1. Introduction

In November of 2022, OpenAI released the software program ChatGPT-3 (Generative Pre-trained Transformer). Besides emulating human dialogue in diverse ways, the program has also demonstrated its ability to create original music, fairy tales, student essays, test questions (and responses), poetry, and song lyrics. The open availability of ChatGPT-3 (and much less so, the

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launch of GPT-4 in March of 2023)[2] transformed many elements of our lives. Naturally, sociologists, psychologists, and other scholars have already executed important research concerning how this program can alter education (Hsu 2023; Pavlik 2023), medicine (King 2022; Williams 2021), and research (Kirmani 2023; Stokel-Walker 2022).

This essay approaches ChatGPT from a more philosophical perspective; I execute a phenomenological semiotics of ChatGPT. More precisely stated, I describe the distinct structures of consciousness, which obtain when I read a natural language text, which has been generated by ChatGPT. I examine how the natural language signs[3] made by ChatGPT uniquely appear to me as meaningful and as signifying.

As is critical to most philosophical projects, I do not perform this study independently from the history of philosophy. Instead, I develop this theory by working with and beyond the classical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. I introduce Husserl's semiotics and then apply or – perhaps more appropriately – mold his conclusions to account for the limit experience, which is the consciousness of the natural language signs made by ChatGPT.[4]

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[2]   OpenAI CEO Sam Altman stated that individuals are normally disappointed with GPT-4, because there is "nothing mind blowing in it".

[3]   For clarity, in this paper, I only examine the experience of reading the natural language signs produced by ChatGPT. I accordingly do not discuss the experience of reading formal languages, as they are made by ChatGPT, such as code, mathematics, or musical notation. A phenomenology of the latter experiences would comprise a different study. I also note here at the start that the conclusions of this essay can be applied to other AI chatbots similar to ChatGPT, such as Google's Bard (but not to any future AGI).

[4]   Concerning citations to Husserl's work, I first provide the pagination of the English translation where available, followed by a reference to the page numbers of the German Husserliana edition – the complete works project (ongoing) of Edmund Husserl, published by different Husserl Archives around the world. If no English translation is available, I only refer to the German Husserliana pagination.

To accomplish these goals, the following discussion is divided into four further sections. In section two, I introduce the core methods and concepts of phenomenological semiotics by

exploring Husserl's writings.[5] In section three and four, I execute my phenomenological analysis of ChatGPT, whereby I develop a broader phenomenology of our passive and active experiences of language signs. Finally, in section five, I draw from some of Husserl's other insights to demonstrate how this analysis can inform the future design and regulation of AI models. By doing so, I reveal that Husserl's semiotics is not anachronistic in the context of new technologies and that they can continue to contribute to a better understanding of these technologies today.

2. Husserl's Phenomenological Semiotics

This section explores Edmund Husserl's phenomenological semiotics in two steps. First, I provide a simple introduction to the method of phenomenological semiotics. Second, I discuss the results of Husserl's use of that method.

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[5] Methodologically, I reveal the foundational tenets of Husserl's semiotics by examining his observations from his 1901 First Logical Investigation (Husserl 1970/1984) and his 1913-1914 Revisions to his Sixth Logical Investigation (Husserl 2005. See also Byrne 2020c). Some Husserl scholars may be surprised at my choice to explore the latter work, because Husserl's semiotics from his First Logical Investigation has often been taken in the literature as his definitive and final theory of signs (De Palma 2008; Simons 1995; Urban 2010; Zhu 2013). In contrast to this typical interpretation – as I have shown elsewhere (Byrne 2020b, 2021b) – Husserl's most valuable and extensive examination of signs occurs in the 1913-1914 text. In that work, Husserl not only amends many of his earlier observations, but also examines entirely new kinds of signs. Additionally, I emphasize that Husserl's analyses from 1913/14 have even further importance, because they prefigure Husserl's mature writings on language from the 1920's and 30's. While Husserl does outline how we experience communication and communalization in the 1913/14 essays, those topics become central themes in his late writings, such as the *Crisis, Experience and Judgment,* and "Origins of Geometry" (Ruthrof 2012, 25; 2021, 61–76).

To begin with the first task, phenomenological semiotics can be defined as a particular application of the phenomenological method. As phenomenology is the investigation of the intentional relationship between experience and object, phenomenological semiotics is an analysis of the intentional relationship between my consciousness of the sign and of the sign itself (Bernet 1988, 3–4; Melle 1999, 169).

Concerning the study of consciousness, the phenomenologist investigates the subjective achievements or accomplishments through which the sign is revealed as having a certain meaning. I examine how I am not just conscious of physical scribbles on the page, but instead – via my subjective achievement – ensoul the words with a meaning, such that the words point beyond themselves (Sokolowski 2002, 173–174).[6] I study how, through my subjective activity, I experience more than what is given; I mean more than what I see.

Regarding the examination of the sign-object itself, the phenomenologist examines the sign precisely as it is experienced, that is, as it is disclosed by the subjective performance (Welton 1973, 261–264). I also emphasize from the start that phenomenological analyses are executed from the first-person perspective (Zahavi 2003, 59–63). I begin to execute a phenomenological semiotics by analyzing – from my first-person perspective – the intentional relationship between my consciousness and the sign,

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[6] Very simply stated, I can ensoul the word with a meaning or understand language signs, because a previous 'sedimentation' occurred between the word and its meaning. Via sedimentation, there is established an enduring associative link between certain scribbles on the page and the meaning (Byrne 2020a, 363, 2021a, 18–19). Peter Woelert elucidates sedimentation in more detail by writing that, "Sedimentation refers to a consolidating process of linguistic conceptualization, in the course of which the evident cognitive structures originally given in embodied sense-experience have certain 'persisting linguistic acquisitions' superimposed on them" (Woelert 2011, 119). Via sedimentation meaning becomes stabilized and communicable. As Johan Blomberg states, "sedimentation is the historical formation of stable meaning structures, that are received, manipulated and communicated further without any necessary link to how these forms originated" (Blomberg 2019, 85).

which I am conscious of.[7] It is for this reason that the following analysis of signs – and indeed all phenomenology proper – is written in the first-person singular.

These ideas held in mind, I now outline some principal results of Husserl's use of this method of phenomenological semiotics. I will not here get mired in all of Husserl's technical observations about signs (Byrne 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Instead, I discuss only those conclusions that are relevant to my subsequent study of ChatGPT. As section three and four are focused on describing the experiences of reading the natural language signs generated by ChatGPT, I concentrate the rest of this second section to discussing how Husserl describes the essential features of natural language signs (by comparing them to other non-linguistic signs). I specifically unpack Husserl's observations, that natural language signs are similar to non-linguistic signs in one way and that the former are distinct from the latter in two ways.

Linguistic signs and non-linguistic signs are similar in that they are both passive experiences. A passive experience is one where the ego is not actively involved, as the experience is instead organized by the mechanism of association. Husserl writes that, "Passivity in general is the realm of things that are bound together and melt into one another associatively, where all meaning that arises is put together passively" (Husserl 1970, 361/1976, 372). Dan Dahlstrom emphasizes the passive function of association, by writing that, it is "association that accounts for the 'immanent genesis'" of passive experience" (Dahlstrom 2007, 14). The experience of association is not something that I choose or will, but instead experience 'automatically', that is, passively (Husserl 2001, 39–44; Husserl 1975, 78/1939, 81–82; Steinbock 2004, 21–

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[7] The method of phenomenology – as so conceived – purposefully places limits on what can be studied. The structures of consciousness – looked at from a first-person point of view – are to be investigated. As such, when phenomenologically studying ChatGPT, I examine the structures of my consciousness that obtain when I am reading the text generated by this AI Chatbot. This essay therefore does not *directly* discuss the societal, cultural, or educational impacts of ChatGPT (see section five). Nor do I seek to outline the development and function of machine or natural language learning.

42). Passive association is in this regard a receptive experience; it is something that I endure or undergo (See Lotz 2022, 25–26).[8] As the experiences of linguistic and non-linguistic signs are passive, this means that I do not actively choose to take the sign as a sign for this or that particular object (Luo 2022, 320–323). Instead, I 'automatically' experience these signs as signs and my consciousness 'automatically' 'shifts' from the sign to the signified (see also note six). To further clarify the concept of a passive experience, it is worthwhile to contrast it to active experience (which always presupposes a passive synthesis). Active experiences are not necessarily acts of volition. Instead, active experience is defined as any (part of the) experience, where the ego is involved (Husserl 2001, 275–287; Husserl 1975, 78/1939, 82; Jacobs 2016, 187–188). For example, an experience is active whenever I am explicitly combining, separating, comparing, or distinguishing. Even in the case of perception, I am active when I apprehend the sensations, which have undergone passive association, to intend a transcendent perceptual object. I can also actively direct my attention to be focused on this or that (Jacobs 2016; Byrne 2022d). And I can actively synthesize distinct insights to arrive at new observations.

Having identified this one similarity, I now discuss the first difference, which Husserl identifies, between language signs and non-linguistic signs. This first distinction concerns my awareness of the sign itself. During the experience of a non-linguistic sign, Husserl claims that I am conscious of the sign as an object; my awareness 'hits' and 'sticks' to the non-linguistic sign, before it passes over to the signified. To clarify this point, take the example

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[8] The most well-known example of passive synthesis via association is the organization of the sensorial fields. This passive consciousness comprises "the pregiven stratum of consciousness that comes before all active judging, willing and other active syntheses" (Cohen & Moran 2012, 236–237). Concerning how the sensorial fields are organized via association, Dahlstrom writes, "At this ground level of association that gives rise to these sensory fields, or better, at this ground level of genetic associative syntheses that constitute sensory fields … the ego does not explicitly identify the blends and contrast within and among these fields" (Dahlstrom 2007, 15. See also Biceaga 2010, 22–25).

of smoke as signifying a fire in the distance. Husserl claims that my perception of the smoke and my intending of the fire are two distinct consciousnesses, which have two distinct objects (Bernet 1988, 4–5). In fact, he asserts that there is an actual time difference between these two intentions. At T_1, I perceive the smoke and then, at point T_2, I intend the fire. He writes, "We are lead from the grasping of the sign, into a second consciousness, that is, of the signified state of affairs. The one consciousness is bound together with the other, and really in a temporal continuity, one follows after the other" (Husserl 2005, 124). Husserl elaborates on this transition – from the one consciousness to the other – by stating that the signifying occurs in a straightforward and undeviating manner, such that it has an arrow-like quality. Just as the arrow leaves the archer's bow and heads unswervingly to its target, so also does my consciousness shift directly from the smoke (sign) to the fire (signified). He writes, "From the sign there goes a straight arrow [ein gerader Pfeil] to the state of affairs" (Husserl 2005, 126).

Husserl claims that the first distinctive feature of language signs, in contrast to non-linguistic signs, is that I am not thematically conscious of the linguistic signs at all. Concerning language signs, Husserl writes, "Freely, I do not make the sensuous sign into an object" (Husserl 2005, 126). Of course, when I read, I must be intending the linguistic signs in some sense if I am to be able to become aware of the signified, but Husserl states that this intending of the words is not distinct or separate from the consciousness of the signified (Byrne 2021a, 25–28). The perception of the word is not a whole intention in and of itself, but is rather subsumed into or united with the intending of the signified state of affairs from the start. Husserl writes, "I grasp the word and I live in the meaning-consciousness; the word as a physical thing remains not outside of the consciousness of the meaning because the word and the meaning collapse into a unity" (Husserl 2005, 126).

These intentions are collapsed into a unity, because natural language signs only serve as the medium for me to become aware of the signified state of affairs. The words only operate as the

means for me to intend the signified. My consciousness does not 'hit' or get 'stuck' on the word, but instead effortlessly flows past or through the natural language sign to its signified. Bernet clarifies this instrumental function of the non-thematic language sign by writing, "This sensuous sign-phenomena has the property of catching one's interest, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the meaning to which it points. The experience of the sensuous sign-phenomena is a 'medium', an 'instrument', which opens access to the meaning" (Bernet 1988, 9). On the same page, Bernet further clarifies this point, writing, "The sign is a mere medium experienced not in an objective presentation which terminates in it, but rather in a medium-intention. What counts is the preservation of this function as a medium and not the physical existence of the sensuous sign" (Bernet 1988, 9).

Husserl unpacks this idea – that the sign is only an instrument for the intending of the signified – by again discussing the temporality of the signifying experience. Because the sign-intention is fused into the whole meaning-act, Husserl claims that the 'transition' from the linguistic sign to its state of affairs is not, correctly considered, a transition at all. Whereas, when I perceive other signs, I experience a linear movement from the sign to the signified, there is no true passage from the awareness of the language sign to another and distinct consciousness of the signified state of affairs. Instead, when I see or hear the words, I immediately pass through or beyond those linguistic signs to the signified. [9] According to Husserl, there is no temporal difference between my execution of these intentions (Husserl 2005, 126).

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[9] In some of his mature texts, Husserl terms this characteristic of language – that I pass immediately 'through' the language signs to the signified – the "seduction of language" (*Verfuhrüng der Sprache*. Husserl 1970, 362/1976, 372). When I see or hear language signs, I normally do not focus on the scribbles or the sounds, as the signs immediately instead 'seduce' me, that is, incite or 'pull' me to the signified. Naturally, it is still always possible for me to intend and inspect the scribbles and the sounds. Yet, this would require a great deal of effort to overcome the passive 'seduction' of language (to intend the signified). Instead, it is almost always the case that the meaning is automatically taken onboard naively or

In sum then, when natural language signs signify, they dematerialize. The natural language signs, which passively and immediately signify are transparent to me.

The second and more important difference between language signs and other signs concerns communication. Husserl concludes that when we experience (hear or read)[10] language signs, we experience them as originating in communication – whereas this is not the case for (most) non-linguistic signs. I experience language signs as signs that are created by another subject and I experience them as signs, which an other subject has created for the purpose of communicating to me. In contrast, I often do not experience non-linguistic signs as created by another subject or, if I do, I do not experience them as formulated for the sake of communication. Husserl writes that "[language] signs are understood in the sense, that their meaning is to be understood as communication (that is, as the meaning of a communicator)" (Husserl 2005, 80).[11]

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indiscriminately, because I immediately pass through the words to the meaning. In part, it is for this reason that when we hear some vile political rhetoric, we feel violated, because we are 'seduced' to think these thoughts as well. While I cannot fully explain this doctrine of the 'seduction of language' here, I refer the reader to Horst Ruthrof's excellent analysis in Ruthrof 2021, 68.

[10] Of course, Husserl distinguishes between, on the one hand, the *visual* experiences of writing and reading and, on the other hand, the *auditory* experiences of speaking and listening. Yet, he does not think that this distinction is absolute. For example, Husserl writes "Generally, I 'translate', what is written … into spoken language. … the acoustic words sediment themselves over the written ones and primarily carry the comprehension. (Husserl 2005, 114. From Ruthrof 2021, 82). Thus, for Husserl reading always entails what Ruthrop calls "the reconstruction of voice" as a necessary step in grasping meaning (Ruthrop 2021, 96). This important conclusion should be kept in mind throughout this essay.

[11] With this conclusion – which is first found in Husserl's 1913/14 essays – Husserl is modifying important tenets of his early 1901 semiotics concerning both the passive reception of language (listening, reading) and the active use of language (speaking, reading). In 1901 – regarding the passive reception of signs – Husserl concludes that I *can* hear or read signs in

Husserl does not merely state that language signs are experienced as communicative, but also phenomenologically clarifies how we experience them as such. He discloses that we are conscious of language signs as communicative, because those signs have two traits; they come with a 'demand' (die Zumutung) and a 'should' (das Sollen). In what follows, I discuss Husserl's descriptions of how the demand and the should mark language as

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communicative contexts. Expressive language signs *can* perform a communicative function, but they are not necessarily or essentially communicative. In fact, in 1901, Husserl was not particularly interested in studying the expressive language signs in their communicative function, but rather focused his analysis on the meanings (the meaning-giving acts) that ensouls the signs, which can occur in isolation (Husserl 1970, 189–191/1986, 39–43; Byrne 2020a, 365; Sokolowski 1988, 176–179). In 1913/14, in contrast, Husserl – as we see – asserts that when I read or listen to language signs, I experience them as essentially communicative, and he seeks to study this communicative component. Regarding the active employment of signs, in 1901, Husserl believed that I can first form a meaning – which I want to communicate – and then find the right words to express that meaning (Husserl 2005, 103–105, 411–412; Bernet 1988, 15). There is a chronological and logical anteriority of the meaning. As such, when I speak to myself, I do not experience these signs as communication, because the meaning was already intended by me. Husserl's 1913 conclusions about active use of language do partially align with his 1901 observations. Husserl still holds onto the priority and anteriority of meaning, such that he also maintains that speaking to oneself does not comprise a communicative use of language signs. But – and here is an important point – he does recognize that the active use of language signs is not complete unless these signs can also be experienced passively; for a language sign to be a language sign it must have the same meaning when I speak it as when I hear it. With this conclusion, Bernet writes that, "Husserl admits that genuine signifying must allow for both recognition and intersubjective communication … this entails a priority of passive signifying insofar as every active signifying which has the form of speech or writing presupposes that one already understands the meaningful sign one uses … Coming from Husserl, this is indeed a remarkable claim. Neither the Logical Investigations nor most of what has been written about Husserl's philosophy of language ever since has prepared us for what looks like a hermeneutical turn in Husserl's work" (Bernet 1988, 15–16. See also Plotka 2018).

communicative – as this will introduce important tools for executing the phenomenology of ChatGPT.

Husserl looks first at how I experience the 'demand'. The demand, is at least initially, a demand that some other person – an interlocutor – places on me (Luo 2022, 321). When my interlocutor speaks to me, I experience her as placing a demand on me to understand the meaning of her language signs. Husserl claims that I can experience this demand in the case where I am spatially in the same place as my interlocutor. When the other speaks, I experience her as one who is composing those signs and also as one who – being there with me – is demanding me to understand those language signs (Husserl 2005, 72). When my interlocutor presents those signs before me with communicative intent, I also experience her as demanding me to take those signs as language signs and to become aware of their meaning. In other words, when my interlocutor speaks to me, I do not perceive her as a noise-machine, which is simply producing different guttural sounds. I instead experience her as a subject, who is thinking and articulating her meant ideas. I see her as an existing fellow subject in the world who is attempting to communicate with me. To be highlighted is that I experience the demand passively. It is not something I take over in an active and purposeful manner. Rather, I am 'called' to listen and understand. The demand is something I undergo or receive.

My experience of the demand of the other alters my experience of the language signs themselves. I passively experience the signs, which the other has produced, as possessing a 'should' (Husserl 2005, 85–86; Melle 1999, 177). The word now manifests itself to me as something that I ought to or 'should' take as a sign for the signified. Husserl writes that, "Each communicative speech, each piece of writing, and further, every kind of speech, possesses this should" (Husserl 2005, 97). Because the other has placed a demand on me to understand the signs, I passively experience the signs themselves as carrying a normative imperative to understand them.

Husserl develops his insights about the demand and the should in an interesting and important way, when he turns to analyze

examples where I am confronted with language signs, where I am not in the spatial presence of the other. Because no other is there with me, it would seem that no one could place a demand on me. For example, when I first open the pages of a book, Husserl asserts that, because the author, who composed her book to communicate with others, is not spatially there with me, she cannot demand me to understand her written words. Yet, if I did not experience any demand, it appears that I would not experience the scribbles on the page as communicative language signs, which I should understand. Simply, I would not experience these scribbles as words.

Husserl asserts that I am yet still able to experience those scribbles as communicative language signs, which I should understand, because a trace of the demand remains within the sign itself. This trace is the result of a certain habituation. During my previous communicative interactions with other subjects, when those other subjects spoke to me, they demanded me to understand their words. I always experienced spoken words as accompanied by the 'personal' demands of other subjects. Because I have encountered word signs as accompanied by these personal demands throughout my life, I have become passively accustomed or habituated to the fact that I am always demanded to understand linguistic signs. According to Husserl, over the course of time, by means of this passive habituation, the personal demands of the other subjects to understand their signs transfuses or percolates into the linguistic signs themselves. As a result, when the signs appear before me on the page, even if no subject is there to demand that I understand them, I still experience these written signs as something that I am demanded to understand. This demand, which I passively experience, does not arise from nowhere or no one, but rather comes from the signs themselves: I experience the signs as demanding me to understand them (Husserl 2005, 97–98). In other words, via the habituation, the signs have become endowed with the capacity to be experienced as demanding (See note eight. Bernet 1988, 17; Byrne 2021a, 26). Husserl calls this demand, the 'impersonal' demand, because it comes from no subject, but rather from the sign itself. Husserl writes,

"The habitual sign is a carrier of a practical demand, and truly an impersonal demand, which is no longer the conscious realization of previous willing. Instead of me demanding myself or someone else demanding me, it is the sign that so demands me … (Husserl 2005, 86). As Husserl writes here – even though I do experience these linguistic signs as communication – I do not experience any other subject behind those words as demanding me to understand those words. I have no experience of an existing fellow subject in the world who is demanding me to understand this communication, as it is instead the words that perform this demanding function.[12]

Once I experience the signs as demanding me to understand them (just as is the case when another demands me to understand their signs), I passively experience the signs with a 'should'; I see the signs as something I should take as communicative language signs. The sign is, in this case, performing both functions, as it demands me and appears to me as something I should understand.

These observations about the impersonal demand and should are what allow Husserl to conclude that language signs are unique in this second way; namely, that language signs are always passively experienced as the means of communication. I passively experience language signs as something I am demanded to understand as communication and as something I should take as communication – and this is the case regardless of whether any other subject is there demanding me or not.

3. ChatGPT: Passive Consciousness

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[12] This higher level of intersubjectivity, which is taking place via written signs, is not being framed as impersonal by Husserl in a reductive way – on the contrary. As Husserl would later write in the "Origin of Geometry", it is through written signs that "communication becomes virtual" and "through this, the communalization of humanity is lifted to a new level" because "it is always possible that they [the written signs] be intersubjectively experienceable in common" (Husserl 1970, 360–361/1976, 371).

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF CHATGPT

In this section and the following section four, I leverage the above analysis of Husserl's semiotics, when investigating the passive and then active consciousness of the natural language signs generated by ChatGPT. The studies of both sections are executed in two steps. First, I simply attempt to apply Husserl's observations to account for the passive and active consciousness of reading the natural language signs made by ChatGPT. When seeking to apply Husserl's insights, it is however revealed that his phenomenological semiotics (which was composed more than 100 years ago!) is limited and cannot fully clarify the distinct structures of consciousness that obtain when reading the signs from ChatGPT. I accordingly – second – mold and extend Husserl's insights to present a more comprehensive phenomenological semiotics, which can account for the experience of this limit phenomenon. Because I am working with and beyond Husserl, the semiotics I present here is not entirely original, but is instead a transformation of Husserl's observations to describe reading the natural language signs from ChatGPT.

First, I directly employ Husserl's description concerning the passive consciousness of signs here in section three. Specifically, I seek to apply his conclusion, that there are two defining features of language signs. As outlined, Husserl concluded that the first defining feature of language signs is that they are transparent. I passively and immediately go through the signs – without making them into an object – to the signified and meant. This conclusion can be simply and directly applied to the experience of the language signs made by ChatGPT. The generated signs, which appear as language signs, are also passively experienced as transparent. I passively cross right through ChatGPT's language signs to the signified state of affairs. The signs on the screen are transparent to me during this experience; they are dematerialized (Compare Rose 2011, 520–526; Rowsell 2014). The language signs do not become objects proper, but are instead the Mittel for my consciousness of the meant.

The second defining feature of language signs, which Husserl identified, is that they are passively experienced as

communication. This insight astonishingly also applies to the experience of the language signs generated by ChatGPT. I also passively experience the language signs made by ChatGPT as communication. When reading these language signs, I do not take them as merely random scribbles on the screen, but as something designed for correspondence with me. This is the case precisely because – as Husserl rightly claimed – I passively experience all language signs with a demand and a should. Because of habituation, all natural language signs are endowed with the demand, such that the language signs produced by ChatGPT also come with this demand to understand them. It is the passively experienced demand and should that stamp these signs from ChatGPT – and indeed any language sign – as communication.

While Husserl's descriptions of the demand can be employed to – in part – rightly describe our experience of the language signs from ChatGPT, his phenomenology of the demand and communication is still limited. As I show in what follows, it is because his observations concerning the demand are at least partially inaccurate in two ways, he cannot fully phenomenologically account for the demand of the language signs from ChatGPT.

Simply stated, Husserl's first misstep is that he asserts that there are only two mutually exclusive ways to passively experience the demand. He states that when I am in the spatial presence of the other, I experience the demand of that other. I only experience a personal demand. I experience another subject behind the words as demanding me to understand them. Alternatively, if I am not spatially with the other, the words demand me to understand them. I am then only conscious of the impersonal demand of the signs (Husserl 2005, 85–90.).[13] I do not experience another subject behind the words demanding me to understand them.

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[13] For impersonal demands, my past experiences with the absent writer (for example, where the absent writer is a friend of mine) can still inform my understanding of the meaning of the language signs. Specifically, the sedimented meanings that have accrued via my past communication with that particular friend, can provide a meaningful context within which I read the text, which impersonally demands me to understand it.

To demonstrate why this view is inaccurate, it is prudent to look at the straightforward example of receiving a letter. On the one hand, the language signs of the letter do indeed impersonally demand me to understand them. When I look at the scribbles on the page, as a result of habituation, these scribbles directly oblige me to grasp them. On the other hand, my own phenomenological analyses reveal that when I am reading a letter, I also experience the personal demand of the letter writer. When reading the letter, even though I am (normally) not in the spatial presence of the letter writer, I still passively experience her personal demand upon me. I do not just feel the impersonal demand of the words, but also passively experience the demand of the author – this other subject – to read and understand what she has written. The fact that letters begin with a direct address and appeal to the recipient (Dear, Geehrte, Chère, and so on), speaks to this fact. This example of reading a letter can show that the personal and impersonal demands are not – as Husserl claimed – mutually exclusive. Instead, they can be experienced together; they sit on a continuum. On the one side of the continuum, I may at times experience the personal demand more strongly, as when I read a note left on my office door or listen to a recent voice recording from a friend. On the other side, I can experience a more dominant impersonal demand, for example, when I read one of Husserl's manuscripts that he composed in the early 1900's or when I see a text advertisement on a billboard for some banal product.

The reason why Husserl makes this first misstep is directly tied to the second partial mistake of his analysis. He is incorrectly guided to conclude that the personal and impersonal demands are mutually exclusive, because he only considers whether the author is spatially present. He focuses solely on the spatial dimension of the experience. Either I am spatially with or not spatially with my interlocutor, where this respectively corresponds to either being personally or impersonally demanded. In contrast, I argue that a proper semiotics of language signs also considers the issue of temporality. While this point can also be demonstrated by again investigating the experience of reading a letter, it is more evident when phenomenologically describing electronic

text messaging. When I execute my own phenomenological analyses (the reader can join me in this) of such an experience, it can become clear that a brief temporal duration between messages can so-to-speak promote the personal 'presence' of the other, although naturally not the spatial presence. When the other rapidly responds to my communicative language with (what I experience as) her communicative language, I do experience her as personally demanding me to understand her language signs. I experience her as a subject behind those words, who is demanding me to understand the meaning of those words. The speed of the response fosters my experience of her personal demand, that I will understand what she has written (and perhaps reply). As personal and impersonal demands sit on a continuum, the rapidity of the response may shift my experience of the demand more to the personal side of the continuum, while significant delays may promote the impersonal demand (while still not removing the personal demand).[14]

These phenomenological insights about the temporal 'presence' of my conversation partner can be employed to more properly clarify how I passively encounter the language signs of ChatGPT as communicative. Simply, when text messaging with ChatGPT, I passively experience the language signs as communication, because of the impersonal and personal demand accompanying these signs. On the one hand, because there is no conversation partner spatially present with me when I am messaging with ChatGPT, I naturally passively experience the impersonal demand of the language signs. On the other hand, because ChatGPT is able to respond in a temporally rapid manner, I also

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[14] It is worth mentioning that when I am reading these signs from ChatGPT, the personal and impersonal demands install the language signs with a should. In alignment with Husserl's conclusions, it can be said that, via a demand, I passively experience ChatGPT's signs as something that I should take as communicative language signs for a signified and meant state of affairs.

passively experience a personal demand to understand the meaning of these language signs.[15]

It is this latter conclusion that is important here. To say that I experience a personal demand when reading the language signs from ChatGPT is to say that I experience some other person, some other subject demanding me to understand the meaning of those signs. I passively see these language signs as composed by an existing fellow subject in the world who is demanding me to understand these communicative signs. This subject – which I passively experience as communicating and as demanding – is ChatGPT. I passively experience ChatGPT as a subject in the world, who is demanding me to understand the ideas that it is articulating to me in attempted communication. To reiterate: I passively experience ChatGPT as a subject, who is communicating with me and demanding me to understand its signs.

4. ChatGPT: Active Consciousness

Passive consciousness is only one part of any whole experience. If this essay is to accurately capture the experience of the language signs from ChatGPT, I must also execute a phenomenological semiotics of my active consciousness of those signs. Methodologically, as was the case in section three, I again first briefly discuss how Husserl's semiotics can be employed to describe my active reading of the text generated by ChatGPT. I then pinpoint the limitations of Husserl's analysis, before extending and

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[15] This essay was first written just after ChatGPT was released, when ChatGPT would respond at much the same rate as another person. At the time of revisions (October 2023), ChatGPT generates language signs at a rate much faster than any human can type. Rather than disprove the insight – that temporality plays a part in determining whether a demand is more personal or impersonal – this change further corroborates my point. The temporal factor – here the extreme speed of the response – reveals to me that the text is generated by a machine, such that I do experience a more impersonal demand. This, however, does *not* remove the personal demand of these language signs wholesale. Nor does it change the fact that all language signs are experienced as communication, which I am demanded to understand.

molding Husserl's insights to properly account for the active moment of my experience of reading the generated linguistic signs.

Most of Husserl's insights about the ways that I can actively engage with a text via reading or listening are relatively straightforward. He discusses how, when reading, I may actively focus (and continue to actively focus) my attention on the state of affairs signified by the words (Husserl 2005, 179–180; Bégout 2007, 27–28). I can also actively synthesize the ideas of the text (Husserl 2005, 390–391; Lohmar 2002) or actively accept or reject an argument present in the text (Husserl 2005, 287–293, 335–336). These insights naturally can be directly applied to the experience of reading the language signs from ChatGPT. When reading the text generated by ChatGPT, I can also actively focus on it, synthesize its insights, or actively consider its veracity.

There is, however, one peculiar element of this active experience, which creates complications that Husserl could not have anticipated. Almost all subjects who read a text by ChatGPT, are actively aware that they are reading something generated by an AI, which is not another subject in the world. I am actively conscious of the fact that ChatGPT is not a subject that is composing signs in an attempt to communicate with me. I know that ChatGPT is not demanding me to understand its signs. And I know that ChatGPT does not itself disclose the world, but is rather just another object in it.

From this active knowledge, a conflict emerges. My active awareness that no other subject is demanding me to understand it clashes with my passive experience (of the personal demand) that another subject is demanding me to understand its meaning. I know that no one is demanding me to understand the signs, but still have the passive experience that another is demanding me to understand the signs. There is thus a direct opposition between my active and passive consciousness.

The consciousness of this disagreement is analogous to another illuminating experience of conflict. The famous Müller-Lyer visual illusion comprises two equal line segments, where one line has arrow 'heads' at its ends, while the other has arrow 'tails'. Even though the lines are of equal length, the shift in the

'fins' of the lines makes one appear longer than the other. Critically, in this case, even when I obtain active knowledge of the lines' true metric, this (normally) does not change how I passively experience the objects. Even when another subject helps me to actively learn that the lines are of equal length, the passive experience of the lines as having dissimilar lengths is not overcome. The passively experienced illusion is intractable to the active awareness of the truth.

All of this in mind, it is clear that reading ChatGPT is similar to this experience of an obstinate illusion. The generation of these language signs resembles a surprising and intractable mirage. I actively know that no one is behind the words, demanding me to understand them, but yet, still somehow passively am conscious of those as communication from another subject, who is demanding me to understand them. The passive artifice cannot be removed by the active knowledge. Conflict persists as a chimera.

Further phenomenological data speaks to this fact. Most individuals, when first interacting with ChatGPT, do not just see it as another powerful technology. Rather, there is a certain amazement that arises when first chatting with the AI. I am astonished and filled with wonder at the text, which I experience as being given to me by another, but know is not. The machine appears as a phantom. I passively experience what seems to be an interlocutor demanding me, while also knowing that it is only smoke and mirrors that I am engaging with. Just as Hamlet, we feel ourselves fooled by this ghost; "May be a devil, and the devil hath power/ T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,/ Out of my weakness and my melancholy/—As he is very potent with such spirits/ Abuses me to damn me" (Shakespeare, Hamlet 2.2, 587–591).[16]

5. Conclusion

To conclude, I draw from one of Husserl's other insights to gesture at how this study can inform the future design and regulation of AI. In doing so, I reveal that Husserl's semiotics are not

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[16] The play continues, "I'll have grounds/ More relative than this. The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (Shakespeare, Hamlet 2.2, 591–593).

anachronistic in the context of new technologies and that they can continue to contribute to a better understanding of them today.

As just outlined in the previous section, despite my active awareness of the fact that ChatGPT is an AI model, I still passively experience ChatGPT's language signs as having a personal demand. And I thereby still passively experience ChatGPT as another subject in the world who is communicating with me and demanding me to understand its signs. I am always partially passively experiencing ChatGPT as another subject. Moreover, I discussed how this passive experience is largely intractable to my active knowledge that ChatGPT is an AI. Even in the most extreme cases – where ChatGPT directly 'tells' me that it is a machine – I still do passively experience its text as communication from another subject.

An important ramification of these observations is uncovered when another one of Husserl's insights is introduced. As I have discussed elsewhere, Husserl rightly saw that any time I believe that I am communicating with a fellow subject, I – from the start — passively experience the 'other subject' as sincere (Husserl 1970, 322–325/1984, 737–747). I passively experience the other communicating subject as someone who is sincerely expressing to me how the world actually is, that is, they are telling me about the world as it presents itself to them. In passively 'assuming' sincerity, I not only assume that the other is not attempting to deceive me, but also assume that the other is beholden to the norm of truth. I passively take the other as one who wants to tell the truth and thus does their due diligence before stating anything to me.

This passive 'assumption' of sincerity could be easily manipulated. One could program a future AI, which is similar to ChatGPT, to express political or social ideas, where any person interacting with that AI would – at least initially – take the AI as acting in good faith, that is, as stating what they actually believe or as expressing how the world actually is. Even if a future AI regulatory body would require a qualifying label to be present on any AI Chatbot website – which would inform individuals that they are interacting with an AI – this would not counteract the

passive element of the experience. I would still passively experience this Chatbot as an 'other subject', who is being sincere with me.

Surprisingly, it is not even necessary to imagine such perverse uses of AI, which capitalize upon this assumed sincerity of communication, because such examples already exist. These do not concern social or political issues, but instead romance and sexuality. For one case, the so-called 'social media influencer' and model Caryn Marjorie used over 2,000 hours of her videos to create an AI, which communicates with others via text chat online, for the price of one dollar per minute (Florio 2023). On the one hand, those who pay this price for 'conversation' are consenting adults who are actively aware of the fact that they are only interacting with an AI. On the other hand, this use of AI certainly appears to be – at least in part – predatory, which exploits or capitalizes upon the passive assumption of sincerity. While actively aware that they are not talking to a beautiful model, many still passively feel that they have a strong connection to Marjorie (Florio 2023). During an interview in May of 2023, Marjorie stated that the AI was earning over 71,000 USD per week and that if growth continued at pace, she could make over five million USD per month (Florio 2023). Another similar example, is that of the company "Replika", which used ChatGPT to construct an AI, which was initially meant to serve as a friend, but is now advertised and functions as a sexual partner (Cole 2023). As of October 2023, Replika is valued at 26 to 39 million USD.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the enduring relevance of Husserl's semiotics in the context of emerging AI technologies. The passive experience of AI as another subject, characterized by an assumed sincerity, has significant implications for the design and regulation of AI systems. It highlights the potential for manipulative uses of AI, where individuals may unknowingly engage with AI in a manner that capitalizes on their assumption of sincerity. As real-world examples illustrate, such manipulations are not mere conjecture but are already prevalent in various domains, including social interactions and even intimate relationships. These findings underscore the imperative for careful

consideration of the ethical and regulatory dimensions of AI, as technology continues to advance and shape our interactions in profound ways. Husserl's insights, despite their age, remain invaluable in fostering a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between humans and AI in our contemporary world.

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