

## Husserl on “possibility”

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My investigation into the nature of the modal concepts Husserl employs is motivated by the expectation that we may thereby be able to gain a deeper understanding of some of his crucial philosophical moves. The immediate stimulus for such an enquiry, however, was provided by Jaakko Hintikka's book *The Intentions of Intentionality* in which he attempts an interpretation of Husserl's notion of intentionality from the standpoint of possible world semantics.<sup>1</sup>

As the title of this paper indicates, my primary concern shall be the mode of possibility, and only secondarily the modes of actuality and necessity. As is well known, necessity may be defined in terms of negation and possibility:  $p$  is necessary if the negation of  $p$  is not possible.

### 1. Some texts

Let me begin by quoting a series of statements from Husserl, which would help us to appreciate not only the centrality of the concept of possibility in his thinking, but also the great variety of senses in which he uses this modal concept.

1. "... possibilities themselves are ideal objects. Possibilities can as little be found in the real world, as can numbers in general, or triangles in general."<sup>2</sup>
2. "Individual Being of every kind is, to speak generally, 'accidental'. It is so-and-so, but essentially it could be other than it is." (Hua III/1, 12)
3. "To each essence there corresponds a series of possible individuals as its factual instancings." (Hua III/1, 20)

4. "... 'the real world', as it is called, the correlate of our factual experience, then presents itself as a special case of various possible worlds and non-worlds, which, on their side, are no other than correlates of the essentially possible variations of the idea 'empirical consciousness'." (Hua III/1, 100)
5. "All actual experience refers beyond itself to possible experiences, which themselves again point to new possible experiences, and so *in infinitum*." (Hua III/1, 102)
6. "... *every actuality involves its potentialities*, which are not empty possibilities, but rather possibilities intentionally predelineated..."<sup>3</sup>
7. "Without such 'possibilities' 'I can always do so again' there would be for us no *fixed and abiding* being, no real and ideal world."<sup>4</sup>
8. "Nothing speaks for (the proposition) that the world is not, and everything for (the proposition) that the world is. But, what is important is that this perfect empirical certainty, this empirical indubitability, as empirical, still leaves open the possibility that the world nevertheless is not..." (Hua VIII, 54).
9. Transcendental subjectivity is "the universe of possible meanings".<sup>5</sup>

In these texts, we have heard Husserl tell us about pure possibilities; possibility of an individual fact's being otherwise; the possible instantiations of an essence; of possible worlds; of possible experiences; of potentialities; of the fundamental possibility indicated by the locution "I can always do so again"; of the possibility of the world's utter dissolution into nothing; and, finally, of the transcendental subjectivity as "the universe of possible meanings". What I will attempt, in the first place, is to bring an order – systematic as well as historical – into this great variety of locutions.

## 2. "Pure possibilities"

Pure possibilities, at their purest, i.e. as independent of any reference to real spatio-temporal being, pertain to species or essences. Only derivatively, would Husserl say that for every essence, there is a (pure) possibility of individual instances. The concept of pure possibility, as formulated in the *Logical Investigations*, comes closest to Leibniz's. Aron Gurwitsch interprets Leibniz's concept as follows:

Pure possibilities, according to Leibniz, are the objects of incomplete concepts, of concepts which figure in the rational and abstract sciences. Such concepts determine the objects to which they relate only in certain, but not in all respects. The object corresponding to a complete concept is fully determined by its concept, i.e. is fully individuated. The contrast is between 'Triangle' and 'The triangle drawn on the blackboard here before me', or between 'vague Adam' and 'possible Adam' (as a possible variant of Adam). The objects of such incomplete concepts are not capable of existing by themselves. The objects of complete concepts are capable of existing. The former are therefore pure possibilities. The adjective 'pure' serves a double purpose: it signifies not only independence of spatio-temporal positing, but also the fact that these objects are simply not capable of real existence. However, for Leibniz as well as for Husserl, these pure possibilities possess a sort of actuality that is specific to all abstract objects of their kind. In Husserl's terminology, they are ideal objects. As Leibniz insists, they are 'discovered'; the truths grounded in them are eternal and necessary truths. Leibniz proceeds, nevertheless, to ground their specific sort of actuality in the being of another actuality i.e. in God's intellect. Husserl does not, at least not immediately, make this move.<sup>6</sup>

The ideal objects that are pure possibilities, then, are what Husserl calls "dependent essences" or "*abstracta*" (Hua III/1, 35). Thus, "red circle" refers to a dependent essence, it cannot be by itself. Any individual red circle has more determinations than merely being red and being a circle. That a pure possibility according to Husserl is an *abstractum* or a dependent essence is borne out by the facts that necessary truths on his view are about pure possibilities, and that, in the third Logical Investigation, he defines synthetic necessary truths in terms of dependent objects.

If 'A' and 'B' designate two dependent essences, to say that 'AB' designates a pure possibility is none other than saying that there *is* a compound essence AB. There is such an essence and hence such a pure possibility, if its component essences, A and B, are consistent. If A is a simple essence, then it is consistent with itself, and therefore a pure possibility. Husserl rightly insists that whether two essences are compatible or not, depends upon what whole, or what sort of unification,

is under consideration. A and B, then, may be compatible in relation to a whole W (and not compatible in relation to a whole  $W^1$ ). The same holds good of incompatibility. What then is a pure possibility is not mere AB, but  $W(AB)$ .

Further, the idea of compatibility that is being used for our present purpose, needs to be *independent* of the formal-logical notion of “freedom from contradiction”. For the logical forms themselves are abstract essences, and compound logical forms, if consistent, are pure possibilities; and we are seeking for a notion of pure possibility, of which, “logical possibility” is a species. At this stage, therefore, Husserl gives an account of “compatibility” in terms of “fulfilling sense”. A compound meaning is consistent if the act intending it has a fulfilling sense, i.e. if the partial intuitions of the component meanings can be combined into a total intuition. When no such unified intuition is possible, the components are incompatible. When the meaning is consistent, the essence/species referred to has “ideal existence”, i.e. *is* a pure possibility.<sup>7</sup>

There are two features in this thesis to which I wish to draw attention at this point. In the first place, in the domain of essences, possibility, i.e. pure possibility, amounts to (ideal) *actuality*. To be possible is to be actual. The two modes coincide.<sup>8</sup> It appears that such a coincidence does not hold good of the real world of individuals and facts, where, although the actual is also possible, all that is possible is not actual. About this intermodal relationship in the domain of real being, I will speak later. For the present, the coincidence of modes in the domain of essences is significant. The very being of essences is the being of a possibility. I have recalled earlier that Leibniz grounded this “actuality” of pure possibilities in the intellect of God. We shall ask later on, if Husserl needs such a resource.

The other thing to be noted is that the explanation of (pure) possibility in terms of intuitability appears to be tantamount to reducing the objectivity of the former to what is a subjective notion. It would seem that what can or cannot be intuited depends as much on the object under consideration as on the subject who is trying to intuit. If it be said that “intuitability” for Husserl is an objective notion, then we are back with a new pure (objective) possibility, “ $W(AB)$  with respect to a unity of intuition I”, and the being of this pure possibility, i.e. of I, ( $W(AB)$ ) would need explication in terms of *its* intuitability. There is thus an incipient infinite regress on our hands.

### 3. “Real possibilities”

(a) An independent essence or *concretum*, which completely determines its object, is the essence of an individual. As Gurwitsch tells us, Leibniz considered complete concepts alone as having objects that are capable of real existence. In Husserl’s words, an independent essence or *concretum* is the essence of an individual that is capable of real existence (Hua III/1, 35). Thus, whereas an abstractum is only a pure possibility, a *concretum* has real possibility. The individual whose essence it is may as well have been a really actual individual. Whereas this essence, the *concretum*, has ideal actuality, the individual it determines is a possible individual that may or may not be a real existent. What is possible in this sense (of real possibility) then, is not the essence, the *concretum*, but the individual it determines. A variation in phantasy of a real individual (or of my own ego) would result in an individual which could have been real. Socrates six feet tall and without a snub nose but with a straight one, would be such an individual with real possibility; he is capable of existing. This is what Husserl often calls phantasy-possibility. When therefore he says, as in the second of the quoted texts, “Individual Being of every kind ... could be other than it is”, he means: Take any individual reality, imagine variations in its *concretum*, i.e. in its essential properties – properties which make him *this* individual – and you come up with another individual which very well might have been real.

There is a slight ambiguity here, generating a problem of great concern for many contemporary philosophers, which Husserl does not appear to have taken note of. There are two senses in which one says “A might have been other than what it is”. In one sense, “A might possibly have had some property or properties different from what it in fact has, and would still have remained A”. In another sense, the possibility of A’s being otherwise would have been so radical that we would not any longer say of this possible individual that it is A, we would rather say it is some other individual. But, in both cases, we are dealing with possible individuals – possible in this first, and broadest sense of “real possibility”. The problem then is: what imagined variations of A are those which are compatible with our saying that they are still variations of A? How radical the variations have to be, so that we would rather say it is not A any longer? Thus the possibility of A being other than what it is, when radicalized, is the possibility of A’s ceasing to be A, i.e. the possi-

bility of A's ceasing to *be*. These are all *real* possibilities in the broadest sense, as contrasted with the 'pure possibility' which is none other than the ideal existence of abstract or concrete essence themselves. I will call this '*real*<sub>1</sub> possibility.'

(b) The third text quoted presents a somewhat different problem. "To each essence there correspond a series of possible individuals as its factual instancing ...." Consider an abstractum such as "philosopher". This dependent essence cannot be by itself, the philosopher has to be a human, then a Greek, an Indian or an American, and so on and so forth, till we have one of many possible *concreta* or independent essences. Each such independent essence would determine an individual, which is a possible individual: it can be, or could have been, real. To each abstract essence, then, there correspond many possible individuals inasmuch as each abstract essence is a component of many different *concreta*. The nexus of *abstracta* constituting a *concretum* is not necessarily so; here, as noted earlier, ideal existence is nothing but compatibility with respect to a certain whole.

What about a *concretum* which is an independent essence but also an eidetic singularity? Should we say that to each *concretum* there corresponds a series of *possible* individuals as its factual instancings? There are, so it seems to me, two ways of understanding the notion of *concretum*, such that under one formulation, the question has to be answered in the negative, under another in the affirmative. An affirmative answer requires that the same *concretum* could be the essence of more than one individual, that, e.g., Socrates and a variant of Socrates (with a minimal variation, of course) have the same essence. Husserl does not seem to have had this in his mind. To my mind, Husserl so understood "concretum" that it is the essence of one and only one individual. If this is the case, then, the thesis that an essence may have many possible individual instances does not hold good of an independent eidetic singularity. It is true of abstract essences alone.

(c) I have called the possibility of an individual as determined by a *concretum* "*real*<sub>1</sub> possibility", but this does not appear to be the standard usage amongst philosophers including Husserl. I called it "*real*<sub>1</sub> possibility", only to contrast it with the pure possibilities which, being dependent essences, do not even determine an object as completely as is needed for that object to be able to have real existence. When Leib-

niz held that the world of possibles as the sum of all those things that are capable of existing is wider than those that really do exist, he had this concept of possibility in mind. However, according to the standard, i.e. more common philosophical usage, "real possibility" carves out, from within the Leibnizian domain of possibilities, a subset which however is still larger than the real, actual world. Only the principle by which this subset, that is a proper subset of the Leibnizian domain and yet includes within it the real world as a proper subset, is carved out is different in different philosophers.

Leibniz already has a principle of restraint on the wide domain of possible individuals: every individual must belong to a definite world, i.e. a domain of individual substances whose unity rests on a fundamental concept specific to that world. Each such world is a compossible system, only one such is the real world. The concept of real possibility, then, that is more restricted than the one expounded earlier is the concept of compossibility of really possible individuals in one world.

It must be emphasized that Husserl never explicitly rejected the Leibnizian thesis. On the contrary, there is every indication that he never ceased to be fascinated by it. In *Ideen* III, we find the following statement: "It is actually the case, as the old rationalists held, that an infinite plurality of possibilities precede actuality" (Hua V, 56). In § 60 of the *Cartesian Meditations*, an attempt is made to give sense to the Leibnizian thesis. "Naturally Leibniz is right", Husserl writes, "when he says that infinitely many monads and groups of monads are conceivable but that it does not follow that all these possibilities are compossible; and, again, when he says that infinitely many worlds might have been "created", but not two or more at once, since they are impossible."<sup>9</sup> I will return to his way of making sense of Leibniz in a later context. For the present, still maintaining the ontological naivety which has characterized this discussion until now, we may say that Husserl did believe in the Leibnizian thesis about many compossible worlds of which the actual is one. What we still have to find out is, what he meant by "compossibility"?

The infinitely large and chaotic domain of really<sub>1</sub> possible individuals has now been ordered into infinitely many unitary systems of them, the many compossible worlds, each of which is *really* possible in a more restricted and proper sense. For this latter sense, I will use 'real<sub>2</sub>' and its derivatives. What now is the relation of the one actual world to these many *really*<sub>2</sub> possible worlds? The well-known Leib-

nizian strategy is not available to Husserl. A phenomenological philosophy cannot tell a story of creation, it cannot have any account of *how* and *why* the only actual world, the one which is ours, could, from amongst a plethora of competitors, come to acquire the status of actuality. It will, however, introduce a way of dealing with this question according to which one asks about the origin of *sense* rather than the origin of things, and in which the philosopher ceases to speak merely “blindly” of “creation” and such things, and instead clarifies meanings with intuitive insight. Again, I will postpone considering this till later in this essay.

(d) A further restriction on real possibility is now in order. Given our real world as it is structured by its laws and general *types* of things and events belonging to it, one may speak of various possibilities with regard to those things and events, consistent with those typifications and laws. In other words, we are thinking of possible variants of this real world such that the general typifications and/or laws obtaining in this world are preserved in those variants. These variants do not exhaust all compossible worlds, but – needless to say – each such variant is a compossible world. It may be said, this real world, the one which is ours, contains these possibilities inasmuch as these possibilities are not just any of the real possibilities, but only those which are consistent with the laws of this world. Let us call these physical possibilities without claiming that this world of ours is all physical in nature. Saying that the real world *contains* such or in fact any sort of possibilities has been denied by Nicolai Hartmann. Drawing upon a Megarian concept of possibility, Hartmann has given a powerful defence of the position that just as in the ideal world of essences possibility and actuality coincide, so also in the real world, what is possible is actual and what is not actual is not possible.<sup>10</sup> I have elsewhere examined this position and found it unacceptable and so will not stop to consider it now.<sup>11</sup> This certainly is not Husserl’s position. For Husserl, the real actual world is shot through with possibilities of various kinds. He will not be averse to the notion of ‘physical possibility’ that I have introduced. On the contrary, much that he says seems to imply such a notion.



#### 4. Husserl's phenomenological approach

There are, in the history of Western thought, three broad conceptions of possibility, each allowing for a wide range of variation in formulation. These are: The Aristotelian concept of potentiality, the Leibnizian concept of pure possibility, and the Kantian critical theory of the modalities. The first makes possibility qua potentiality a stage in the development of the actual. The second makes the actual a selection out of the many possibles. For the Kantian critical theory, the three modalities – possibility, actuality and necessity – do not pertain to different stages in the development of an object, nor do they pertain to less and less inclusive regions of being (so that more is possible than is actual and more is actual than is necessary). They in fact are not determinations of the object itself, they concern only *how* the object, together with all its determinations, is related to the understanding, to empirical judgment and to reason.<sup>12</sup>

Although the picture outlined in this paper up to this point makes Husserl seem somewhat of a Leibnizian, that impression needs to be supplemented by bringing out the Aristotelian and the Kantian elements in his thoughts about the modalities. For the Aristotelian strain, consider the sixth text quoted by me: “every actuality involves its potentialities, which are not empty possibilities, but rather possibilities intentionally pre-delineated...”. The Kantian strain is nowhere more clearly to be discerned than in the distinction between *Sinn* and *Satz* in § 133 of the *Ideen* I, wherein the modalities are said to concern the modes of positing and not the objective *Sinn*. However, each of these components of Husserl's thoughts on possibility, and on modalities in general, undergoes transformations in accordance with his phenomenological method of philosophising. And to this transformation, I shall now turn.

If a spatial metaphor be permitted, then I should say that the account given in this section is *from above*. We started with pure possibilities, and then descended through narrowing spheres, and corresponding concepts, of possibility to the real actual world which is ours, and then to the possibilities belonging to it, or *contained in it*. This scheme is ontological.

Phenomenology by the very nature of its enterprise *cannot* follow this route. If its concern is with *senses* and not with *things*, and if senses

are constituted in, and need to be clarified with reference to, consciousness, then phenomenology has to begin, taking up the same spatial metaphor, *from below*. But we shall soon find that the words “above” and “below” are misleading, not for the obvious reason that they are spatial metaphors but for more important philosophical reasons.

I have to begin with my consciousness, and clarify the ‘origin’ of the basic modal concepts and various patterns of intermodal relationships. The distinction between the ontological and the phenomenological approaches is thus stated by Husserl in a text, important for my present purpose, thus:

“... dass der Ontologe die Idee der Natur als eine Art ideale Wirklichkeit nimmt, dass er sich auf den Boden dieser Idee stellt, um sie nach ihren Eigentümlichkeiten zu erforschen; ... während der Transzendentalphänomenologe nicht in einem seienden idealen Raum sein Thema hat, sondern in der Idee eines Bewusstseins überhaupt.... Er fällt kein geometrisches Urteil, sondern Urteile über all die transzendentalen Möglichkeiten, auf denen selbst die Möglichkeit geometrischer Urteile und geometrisch wahrer Urteile beruht.” (Hua XI, 222)

It is at this point that I need to dispose of an objection that is likely to arise. If, as a transcendental phenomenologist, Husserl’s interest is in how the senses “possible” and “actual” originate in the domain of transcendental subjectivity, then why was the Leibnizian account so far given at all necessary? Is it the case that the idea of pure possibility, and of the many compossible worlds, and all that, is a vestige of that essentialism which Husserl, as he became more and more of a transcendental phenomenologist, gradually gave up? In the later writings, he talked more of “open possibilities” and “motivated possibilities” than of “pure possibilities” as ideal objects. Now, how essentialism is related to transcendental phenomenology is a larger issue on which I will not comment in this paper. But it will suffice for my present purpose to insist on the following:

It is a well-known thesis of transcendental phenomenology that constitution analysis shall begin with the constituted sense as its guiding principle. The ontological account of possibility was meant as providing us with a picture of the senses “possibility” and “actuality” *as they stand fully constituted*. Ontology represents the constituted achieve-

ments considered apart from their constitutive origin. Phenomenology has to overcome this naivety. To overcome a naivety is not to reject an error, it is to comprehend that naivety qua naivety. Transcendental phenomenological account of the modalities has to do this, but in doing so it cannot help identifying the constituted meanings themselves.

An account of “possibility” in accordance with the plan of a constitutive phenomenology has to recognise the following main stages:

(a) In simple perception, a thing, the thing perceived, is bodily there before me. It is there before me with a certain primitive certainty. We do not say, it is “really” there, or “actually” there. It is simply there. The objective sense (*gegenständlicher Sinn*) component of the noema and the modality of being (*Seinsmodus*) are not yet distinguished. This is the original, unmodified certainty.<sup>13</sup>

(b) This original certainty may be interrupted by some disharmonious course of experience. What was given originally as a human being may subsequently be given as a shadow or then again as a human figure. In such a case, the thing begins to appear questionable, doubtful, disputable. The two conflicting characterisations, “a human being” and “a shadow,” come to have the same mode of being “questionable”. The intentions implicit in the original perceptual apprehension are obstructed. I vacillate between the apprehensions: “a human being” and “a shadow”. Thus already at the level of pre-predicative experience, we have a modalisation of the original belief: the two alternatives before me are “problematical possibilities”, “questionable possibilities” or “presumptive possibilities”.<sup>14</sup> In an important sense, this is the origin, in pre-predicative experience, of the concept of possibility. As Husserl writes: “Wo immer ein Bewusstsein den Modus Gewissheit verloren hat und in Ungewissheit übergegangen ist, ist auch die Rede von Möglichkeiten” (Hua XI, 39). If in the original perception, “Objective *Sinn*” and “mode of being” are not separated, it is in the transition to conflict and disharmony, that they become separated. In fact, by the title “mere objective *Sinn*” something is designated, which was not there beforehand in simple perception (Hua XI, 229). The consciousness of this distinction is a new experience.

When the rupture and the disharmony are overcome, and one of the presumptive possibilities is confirmed and the other rejected, there is the confirmatory “yes” (or, “no”), which is again a modalisation of the

original certainty: “It is indeed, in fact, really so.” The original unmodified “being” acquires the character of “really, so” (Hua XI, 230).<sup>15</sup>

(c) Within pre-predicative experience there is room for the origin of yet another concept of possibility. Every perception takes place within a horizon of familiarity. This horizon, both internal and external, gives rise to expectations, which constitute possibilities that are not mere phantasy-possibilities, but are rather supported by the original positional consciousness of validity (Hua VIII, 148). What is intentionally pre-delineated in the horizon of a perception is not possible but certain. This pre-delineation itself – that, e.g., the other, unseen side of the perceived physical object has some colour, some tactile quality – is, as Husserl characterises it at one place, an “unbestimmt allgemeine” (Hua XI, 40). But this generality has an extension of free variability. What falls within it has an “open possibility”. On the basis of the present perception, nothing counts in favour or against. All open possibilities are equally possible. It is obviously otherwise with the presumptive possibilities, where not only each alternative is specifically intended, but something counts in favour of one as against another.

(d) Or, consider a thing that is there before me in perception. Just as this *fact* of perception may be “transformed”, in phantasy, into a *possible* perception, so also may its object. In fact, just as every intentional experience is permeated with potentialities which give rise to open possibilities, so also the entire sphere of consciousness is characterised by the difference between actuality and phantasy. Every actual consciousness can be “transformed” into an as-if consciousness and every actual object into an as-if object. These possible perceptions, possible imaginings – as well as possible objects – may provide the basis for bringing to intuitive givenness the pure eidos ‘perception’, the pure eidos ‘imagination’, as well as the pure eidos ‘object’, whose ideal extensions are made up of all appropriate possible perceptions, imaginings, objects.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that this as-if transformation can only be purely *theoretically* motivated. These as-if possibilities as well as the *eide* whose ideal extensions consist in such possibilities are often called by Husserl, certainly in the later writings, ‘pure possibilities’ understood as pure imaginables. Phantasy, as an imaginative act, is constitutive of such possibilities.

(e) We have now followed a whole series of forms of consciousness in which different forms of possibilities are given. By virtue of the fact that consciousness can always objectify any of its achievements, “It is possible that ...” may be objectified as “the possibility of...”, whereby an objectivity of a higher order is constituted out of the appropriate modalised forms of consciousness and their objects.

Earlier I had remarked that all the three major concepts of possibility – the Leibnizian, the Aristotelian and the Kantian – are to be found in Husserl. It is time now briefly to indicate in what precise form each of these is to be found.

The Leibnizian concept is on the surface of a large part of the exposition in the first part of this paper. The concept of pure possibilities, and of many compossible worlds of which ours is one – all these are admittedly appropriated by Husserl, without no doubt the Leibnizian theodicy and the concept of God’s intellect as the original home of those possibilities. Only one compossible world, Husserl agrees, is actual. In § 60 of the *Cartesian Meditations*, there is an attempt to interpret this thesis. There cannot be two communities of egos, there can exist only one such community. Any two such communities cannot be absolutely isolated. If two such are imagined by me, then, as the “constitutive primal monad relative to them”, they are in communion through me. Like two possible variants of my ego, two closed worlds are impossible. The major departure from Leibniz lies in this that pure possibilities, instead of belonging to God’s intellect, are constituted in the life of transcendental subjectivity. The idea of ‘compossibility’ receives an appropriate interpretation within transcendental phenomenology: a world relates to a monadological intersubjectivity, and every monadological intersubjectivity is oriented around one primal monad, my ego. It can also be yours.

The Kantian thesis is partially retained, but also, in part, abandoned. Of all the Kantian categories, it is the categories of modality which do not constitute the object in the strict sense. Once the object is there, the modalities are concerned with “how the object, together with all its determinations, is related to understanding and its empirical employment, to empirical judgment, and to reason in its application to experience.”<sup>17</sup> For Husserl also, the predicates “actual” and “possible” do not determine the object. “A is actual” and “A is possible” are not determinative propositions.<sup>18</sup> The former means, for example, “I do not imagine A”, the latter “A is imaginable”. The “modes of being” are

correlates of thetic act qualities. They must be distinguished, even if not separable, from the objective *Sinn*. The Kantian position is modified, in so far as Husserl separates ‘actuality’ from ‘existence’, and further in so far as the peculiar Kantian concept of forms of understanding is not there in Husserl. Furthermore, Husserl continues to hold the Leibnizian thesis that more is possible than is actual, a thesis Kant explicitly rejects.<sup>19</sup>

The Aristotelian concept of potency is appropriated into the thesis that the actual is constituted by pre-delineated potentialities and that full actuality as the correlate of perfect evidence is *progressively* achieved by gradual fulfilment of these potentialities. And yet this has nothing of the correlative Aristotelian concepts of matter and form. Furthermore, actuality is not the mere end state of the process, but at every stage actuality and potentiality seem to interpenetrate.

##### 5. “Practical possibility”

Underlying this widely ramified theory of possibility, there is, for Husserl, one most fundamental, and from the point of view of constitutive phenomenology, primitive possibility-consciousness – the practical possibility symbolized by the expression “I can”. The distinction between logical possibility and practical possibility is formulated in *Ideen* II thus: Both are derived from neutrality modification, the former from neutrality modification of intuitive representation (into the mode of as-if non-actuality), the latter from neutrality modification of acting into a quasi-acting. “What I can, am able to, that of which I know myself as capable, ... that is a practical possibility. I can ‘decide’ only from amongst practical possibilities; only a practical possibility can be the theme of my will” (Hua IV, 258ff). Note that the last ‘can’ is a theoretical ‘can’.

It seems to me that in this account of the distinction the symmetry is misleading. If “transforming” an actuality into an as-if object generates (one sort of) logical possibility, there is an “I can”-consciousness which is not yet a neutralised consciousness of “I can”, which is rather involved in, and an implicate of, some modes of acting. It is this original “I can”-consciousness, and not the one “represented” in a phantasy-modification of acting (as in “I can move my hand” said on the basis of mere representation *of* an action), which is in my view the primal

source of practical possibility. Of course, like all modalities, this also may be reflectively thematised and objectified.

Once this point is grasped, we can understand the empty horizons belonging to any experience as “practical horizon” indicating a “system of possibilities for practical intervention”. One may even understand the pre-delineated possibilities of fulfilment as practical possibilities (Hua VII, 275). As a matter of fact, one may want to assimilate all doxic-logical possibilities to the practical “I can phantasise” (Hua IX, 205). *The primacy of the practical* receives a still stronger support from the following consideration: since positing any object, real or ideal, implies the possibility – egological as well as inter-subjective – of reiterating certain confirmatory and evidence-producing processes (such as possible perceptions in the sense of perceptions I *would have* were I to walk around the object), “without such ‘possibilities’ there would be for us no *fixed and abiding* being, no real and no ideal world”.<sup>20</sup> This especially holds good of the pure possibilities. They are ideal objects, their being beyond time consists in being correlates of “free produceability and reproduceability at all times”.<sup>21</sup>

However, there is something dissatisfying in subsuming all acts that generate possibilities under the concept of practical possibility. It is true that whether it is pure possibility in the strictest sense, or pure possibility in the sense of an imagined variation of an actuality, or as-if transformation of an actuality, or open possibilities pre-delineated in the horizon of a perceptual experience, or motivated possibilities arising out of obstruction of perceptual intentions – in every case, we have an “I can”-form of consciousness at the source of the constitution of the modality. But it is also arguable that not all “I can” is “practical” in the strict sense. Practical in the paradigmatic sense for Husserl is, of course, the kinaesthetic consciousness “I can move myself”. Only in a much less appropriate sense, one can characterise “I can imagine” as practical. This is not to dispute the contention, well formulated by Landgrebe, that possibilities, in their original manner, are what can take place precisely because I bring them about, that the root of our consciousness of possibility is in the “*Vermöglichkeiten*” of our dispositional capacities.<sup>22</sup> What I am disputing is that all these *Vermöglichkeiten* are bound up with the awareness “I can move myself” or its like. The latter may be the most primitive awareness of possibility on which the distinction between the actual and the possible is founded, but there would appear to be higher forms of “I can”-consciousness which are not tied to

corporeality in the manner kinaesthesia is. We are still unclear, for example, as to how “I can imagine” is related to “I can move”. It is possible to subsume the theoretical “I can” under the practical by speaking of “theoretical practice”, and Husserl sometimes does this. But in doing so we end up by extending the meaning of “practical” in a manner that is surely not illegitimate, but possibly not enlightening. A paradigmatic example of the theoretical “I can” is the constitution of the possibility of the world’s dissolving into nothingness. This is not a motivated possibility for which anything in experience speaks. There is no real possibility of its non-being. I cannot imagine it. Yet there is an open possibility that this harmonious unitary structure of world-experience dissolves itself (Hua VIII, 45-55). *This* open possibility – note that this is a different sense of “openness” than that in which the potentialities pre-delineated in the horizon of a perceptual experience are open – is not constituted by a practical “I can”, but entirely by a theoretical “I can conceive of it”.

To sum up: we have followed two movements, in opposed directions, one from above, i.e. from abstract pure possibilities to the actual, and the other from below, i.e. from the actual to the possibles of different degrees of remoteness. The former is the path of ontology, the latter the path of phenomenology. The latter movement requires the appropriate constitutive acts of consciousness. But underlying the actual performance of those acts is the dispositional “I can” consciousness which, I have insisted, is of two radically different sorts: practical and theoretical. Each may subsequently be objectified, yielding possibilities as entities.

#### NOTES

1. Compare my “Intentionality and Possible World: Husserl and Hintikka,” in H.L. Dreyfus, ed., *Husserl, Intentionality and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1982), pp. 233-251.
2. E. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Finlay (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), p. 345. Hereafter cited as *LI*.
3. E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. D. Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), § 19. Hereafter cited as *CM*.
4. *CM*, § 27.
5. E. Husserl, *Paris Lectures*, trans. P. Koestenbaum (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p. 33.
6. A. Gurwitsch, *Leibniz: Philosophie des Panlogismus* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974). The English translation is mine.



7. *LJ* II, pp. 751-753.
8. This coincidence of modes has been emphasised by Nicolai Hartmann in his *Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1949).
9. *CM*, § 60.
10. Nicolai Hartmann, op.cit.
11. Compare my "Remarks on Nicolai Hartmann's Modal Doctrine," *Kant Studien* 54 (1963), pp. 181-187. Reprinted in *Phenomenology and Ontology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970).
12. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 219 = B 266.
13. E. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, trans. J.S. Churchill and K. Ameriks (Evanston: Northwestern Press, 1973), p. 100. Hereafter cited as *EJ*.
14. *EJ*, p. 95.
15. Cf. *EJ*, p. 100.
16. *CM*, §§ 25 and 34.
17. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 219 = B 266.
18. *EJ*, §§ 75-76.
19. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 230-1 = B 282-4.
20. *CM*, § 27.
21. *CM*, § 55.
22. L. Landgrebe, "The Phenomenological Concept of Experience," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 34 (1973), esp. p. 10.