



Reconciling the Noema Debate

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Abstract

One of the key concepts of Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is the noema. Husserl uses the concept to denote the aspect of what is intended in experience as it remains within the transcendental domain of inquiry after the phenomenological reduction. Despite such seeming simplicity, Husserl's discussion of the noema is ambiguous to the extent that it has sparked a wide-ranging debate in the secondary literature. The gist of the dispute concerns the question about the relation between the noema and the object: whether the noema is content, ontologically distinct from the object, or the object itself just considered differently in philosophical reflection. In this paper, I propose an interpretation that aims to reconcile two opposing positions of this debate (the so-called West and East Coast interpretations). The impetus for the reconciliation stems from the fact that both interpretations seem to be correct while they also suffer from their own shortcomings. I propose the reconciliation by applying a distinction Husserl makes between two areas of phenomenological investigation, neutralized pure phenomenology and non-neutralized phenomenology of reason. Having clarified the distinction between them, I suggest that both competing interpretations can be partially correct when reserved for the aspect of the noema in either of the two areas of phenomenological investigation. Finally, I show how this proposal could aid in resolving issues in the recent discussion concerning Husserl's noema and the internalism–externalism debate in philosophy of mind.

Keywords Edmund Husserl · Noema · Intentionality · Externalism · Internalism · Phenomenology · Epoché · Neutrality modification · Reduction

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1 Introduction

Few concepts have attracted as much scholarly attention in Husserl studies as the notion of the noema. Let alone the vast number of research articles on the topic, many book-length studies have been dedicated to the study of just this concept in Husserl's phenomenology (see Daniel 1992 for an extensive bibliography up until the early 1990's; more recently, see Zahavi 2017, pp. 82–108; Mazijk 2017; Moran 2015; Drummond 2015; Smith 2013, pp. 245–299; 2019; Beyer 2017). While the sheer amount of literature on the noema can be exhausting, the quantity is not surprising for at least two reasons. First, the noema is one of the key concepts of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, and any plausible understanding of Husserl's project must be in line with an interpretation of the noema. Second, Husserl's presentation of the noema is highly ambiguous, making it difficult to formulate a clear interpretation of the noema that aligns with a general understanding of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. In part due to these difficulties, an expansive debate about the noema has emerged in the past fifty years. Briefly put, Husserl's concept of the noema as well as his parallel concept of the noesis, both of which Husserl introduces in *Ideas I* (1913), are meant to designate two aspects of intentionality (that is, the referentiality or directedness of experience). On the one hand, intentional experience has its noetic (the "intending") aspect and, on the other, intentional experience has its noematic (the "intended") aspect. Even if my different experiences changed in their noetic aspect (I might first *perceive* a table, then *remember* the table, and then *judge* about the table), my experiences could remain unaltered in their noematic aspect (I could continue to intend *the same table* in all my differently intending experiences). While this rudimentary exposition sounds simple enough, Husserl's discussion of the noema is notoriously equivocal. Most crucially, Husserl seems to remain ambivalent with regard to the question whether there is an ontological distinction between the noema and the object. Not surprisingly, the crux of the noema debate concerns precisely this question.

In this paper, I propose an interpretation that aims to alleviate the dispute by reconciling two opposing interpretations of the noema. In the second section of the paper, I introduce Husserl's transcendental phenomenology by drawing specific attention to the noema and Husserl's two methodological concepts, the epoché and the neutrality modification, which are important for my interpretation of the noema. Next, in the third section, I evaluate the two noema interpretations both of which, I argue, capture something right about the noema, while both also suffer from their own shortcomings. I claim that the so-called West Coast interpretation (Føllesdal 1969; Smith and McIntyre 1982; Dreyfus 1982; Smith 2013), which insists that there is an ontological distinction between the noema and the object, is better supported by textual evidence when it comes to passages directly concerned with the noema. However, I also agree with the criticism that the West Coast interpretation falls short in the broader programmatic context of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Although the alternative so-called East Coast interpretation (Sokolowski 1987; 2000; Drummond 1990;

1992; 2003; 2015; Zahavi 2017, pp. 82–108), which denies an ontological distinction between the noema and the object, presents a noema interpretation that better fits Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology at large, I argue that it has its own set of difficulties. These difficulties pertain to integrating Husserl’s concept of sense or content with the interpretation. In the fourth section, I try to reconcile the two interpretations. I provide their reconciliation within a larger interpretative framework of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology because, as said, any interpretation of the noema requires a corresponding understanding of Husserl’s broader transcendental project. This framework concerns a distinction that Husserl makes by means of the neutrality modification between two areas of phenomenological investigation: neutralized pure phenomenology and non-neutralized phenomenology of reason. I apply Husserl’s distinction to reconcile the East and the West Coast interpretations of the noema. The distinction helps to explain how both interpretations can be correct because they denote two different aspects of the noema, respectively: the neutralized and the non-neutralized noema. In the fifth section of the paper, I further use this reconciling interpretation to solve an issue in the literature regarding Husserl’s relation to the internalism–externalism debate. The recent scholarship on Husserl’s relation to the internalism–externalism debate has not only largely engaged with but also renewed interest in the noema debate; yet I argue that there is an error in linking these two separate debates because, simply put, neither noema interpretation has any implications for the question whether Husserl is an internalist or an externalist. I suggest that the erroneous association might emanate from the failure to recognize the distinction between neutralized pure phenomenology and non-neutralized phenomenology of reason, the recognition of which could aid in the scholarly work in both interpretational disputes.

2 Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology and the Noema

In his preliminary remarks to the third chapter of the third section of *Ideas I*, where Husserl introduces the concept of the noema for the first time, Husserl writes: “One may, of course, use the term ‘phenomenology,’ without having apprehended the uniqueness of the transcendental attitude and actually made the purely phenomenological terrain one’s own. In that case one uses the term, but with no hold on what it designates” (1976a, p. 200/172).¹ What Husserl seems to be implying here, given the context of this claim, is that a proper understanding of transcendental phenomenology is necessary for a proper interpretation of the noema. To Zahavi, the noema is so tightly knit with Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology that any

¹ When it comes to Husserl’s texts, I refer to both the German edition published in the *Husserliana* series and the English translation (if available). The first page number before the slash refers to the *Husserliana* edition and the second after the slash refers to the English translation marked after the *Husserliana* edition in the list of references. In case no English translation is cited, the page number refers solely to the *Husserliana* edition, and the translation is my own.

noema interpretation “cannot stand on its own” and “must necessarily be integrated into a more general interpretation of Husserl’s transcendental philosophy” (Zahavi 2017, p. 93; see also Larrabee 1986, p. 213; Drummond 1990). Although the thesis concerning the inseparability of the noema from Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology has been contested (see e.g., Parsons 2001, p. 128), I take it that even such a separation must be based on a specific understanding of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology that allows their disjunction. While I agree in principle with the inseparability thesis, I argue that a specific understanding of transcendental phenomenology allows separating one aspect of the noema from one area of transcendental phenomenology to another. Before doing this in the subsequent sections, however, I begin by laying out the basics of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology and the noema.

Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology can be characterized as the study of the invariant features of experience. However, Husserl’s phenomenology is not just any investigation into the invariant features of experience. If it were, it would be hard to differentiate from some forms of empirical psychology, which Husserl is keen to keep at arm’s length (1976a, pp. 3–6/3–5). Husserl’s phenomenology should be understood, more specifically, as a precisely transcendental investigation into the invariant features of experience, that is, as an investigation that regards said features as structures of experience or as conditions of possibility for experience rather than as empirical properties of the human mind. Such structures include intentionality, temporality, subjectivity, embodiment, and intersubjectivity. Labeling these structures “transcendental” is calling attention to their constitutive contribution. By using the concept of constitution, Husserl is not trying to suggest that certain features of experience produced reality in any metaphysically idealist sense. Instead, Husserl is saying that in virtue of its transcendental structures, experience conditions the manifestation of reality, enabling one to experience reality as one does in the first place, as real and objective (see e.g., Zahavi 2003, p. 73; Ströker 1993, pp. 104–107).

In order to begin with such a transcendental project, Husserl introduces the method of the epoché. Husserl describes the epoché as “*a certain withholding of judgment*” (1976a, p. 64/54) that puts “*out of action the general thesis belonging to the essence of the natural attitude*” (1976a, p. 65/55). The natural attitude is the basic attitude in which I live, experience things, encounter others, and conduct scientific experiments. The general thesis of the natural attitude is the implicit assumption that everything I experience in the world (including myself, others, and spatio-temporal things) exist independently of my experience (Husserl 1976a, p. 62/53). Husserl writes that “I find the ‘reality’ (the word already says as much) *to be there in advance* and I also take [it] *as it affords itself to me, as being there*. No doubt or rejection of anything given in the natural world changes anything in *the natural attitude’s general thesis*.” (1976a, p. 61/52, translation modified.) Since the general thesis is the implicit assumption that reality is “there in advance,” one can think of the general thesis as naïve or common-sense realism, i.e., the view that objects of reality exist independently of one’s experience of them. Given these characterizations, one could define the epoché as the bracketing of the truth-value of the general thesis of the natural attitude. What this means is that in phenomenology I do not take a stand whether the general thesis is true or false. I disengage the implicit

feature that characterizes my experiences within the natural attitude. This does not mean that I deny or doubt the natural attitude. It simply means that I put the question concerning the truth-value of its general thesis out of consideration (Husserl 1976a, p. 65/55–56). In fact, it is crucial that the natural attitude is not rejected because the whole purpose of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is to study the natural way of experiencing the world. In his 1931 preface to *Ideas I*, for example, Husserl writes that the existence of the real world “is quite indubitable” and that the “sole task” of phenomenology “is to clarify the meaning of this world, the precise sense in which everyone accepts it, and with undeniable right, as really existing” (Husserl 2002, p. 21).

Transcendental phenomenology clarifies “the precise sense in which everyone accepts” the world as really existing independently of experience (that is, the general thesis of the natural attitude) by shifting attention to the constitution of the world as such, i.e., the conditioning of its manifestation as real. Transcendental phenomenology can do this after the epoché, which changes focus from the natural attitude to the transcendental attitude. The epoché uncovers the aforementioned “purely phenomenological terrain” of experience or consciousness² for transcendental-phenomenological investigation. In fact, Husserl calls the epoché “the gate of entry through which one must pass in order to be able to discover the new world of pure subjectivity” (1976b, p. 260/257).

One of the reasons why Husserl characterizes the transcendental dimension of experience, which the epoché reveals, as “pure” is that the domain of inquiry has been purified from the positional aspects of experience. In Husserlian phenomenology, positionality means the character of experience to posit its objects existentially as real. Husserl's analysis of positionality might be more nuanced than this, but, for the present purposes, one can think of positionality as an implicit commitment to the reality of the object that is experienced. When I, for example, perceive a tree, my perceptual experience already carries an implicit assumption that the tree is real. Although there are multiple senses of the term “purity” in Husserl's philosophy, I use the term in this paper to designate experiences purified from their positional aspects in the sense that the objects of those experiences are not posited as real.³

One way to clarify the nature of purity in this sense is to look at Husserl's concept of the neutrality modification. Husserl introduces it in a few paragraphs of

² It is worth noting at this point that Husserl tends to use the terms “experience” and “consciousness” quite interchangeably (see e.g., Husserl 1976a, p. 67/57). This is because, to Husserl, experience (in the sense of *Erlebnis*) is a much broader concept than for most philosophers in that experience covers everything from perceptions to feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and a priori intuitions (1976a, p. 59/50).

³ Another sense of “purity” is the purity of essences that is achieved by what is called the eidetic reduction in Husserlian phenomenology. Such purity can be achieved without the venture into transcendental phenomenology since, as Husserl maintains, the mere psychological description of experience can be concerned with the essential features of experience. All of Husserl's phenomenology is pure in the sense of the purity of essences (because all of Husserl's phenomenology is concerned with essences). However, only the transcendental dimension of Husserl's phenomenology is pure in the sense of the purity from the natural attitude. Furthermore, as I will argue later in this paper, some areas of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology are also pure in the sense of purity from positionality (neutralization), while others are not.

Ideas I where he emphasizes its significance by calling the neutrality modification a “supremely important” concept that deserves a “detailed consideration” (1976a, p. 247/213). The neutrality modification modifies experience by neutralizing its positional aspects or what Husserl sometimes calls “thetic characters” (1976a, pp. 247–248/213), i.e., features of experience that characterize or posit the object of experience as real (see 1976a, pp. 236–243/203–209). In the neutrality modification, Husserl writes, “[t]he character of positing has lost all force” (1976a, p. 248/214) and “[t]he neutralized positings (...) are essentially distinguished by the fact that their correlates contain nothing that can be posited, nothing actually predicable” (1976a, p. 249/214). Since the neutrality modification modifies the positionality of experience (i.e., the commitment to the reality of the object), it is quite natural to see a link between the neutrality modification and the epoché. Husserl recognizes just such a link when he writes about the many things in which the neutrality modification is included, among which he lists “putting-it-out-of-action” and “bracketing” (Husserl 1976a, p. 248/213), both of which are Husserl’s commonly used expressions for describing the epoché. Husserl even goes as far as saying that all the neutralized positings “have the modifying ‘brackets,’ closely related to those of [the epoché] which we said so much earlier and which are so important for preparing way to phenomenology” (1976a, p. 248/214, my square brackets). However, it is left open what exactly “closely related” means here. Some commentators have taken it to mean that “the phenomenological epoché is just one kind of neutrality modification” (Moran and Cohen 2012, p. 221) or that the neutrality modification is “the precondition for any kind of reflection” (Drummond 1990, p. 51). In this sense, the neutrality modification is a general category of critical reflection under which the epoché also belongs.

However, in this paper, I understand the “closely related” statement about the epoché and the neutrality modification differently. My intention is not to challenge previous readings of the neutrality modification; rather, I intend to suggest that Husserl’s phenomenology might have more senses of neutralization than the general sense involved in critical reflection. In fact, I think one of the challenges in associating neutralization with all forms of critical reflection is that some critical reflection can be concerned with questions of truth and veridicality, questions that Husserl clearly sets beyond the sphere of neutralized experience (1976a, p. 249/214). The other sense of neutralization that I wish to suggest here is the neutrality modification as a consequence of the epoché. Let me emphasize, since this is important for the interpretation I present in the fourth section, that neutralization in this specific sense is not a necessary consequence of the epoché: not all transcendental phenomenology under the epoché is committed to neutralized considerations. Although neutralization is involved in other things besides the epoché (e.g., imagination, logical reflection) since it, as Drummond correctly remarks, does “not necessarily involve a departure from the natural attitude” (Drummond 1990, p. 52), I would suggest that neutralization is also something that happens to experiences after the epoché. While it is true that the epoché is directed at a general implicit assumption characterizing experience rather than particular experiences, it seems evident that the epoché also has consequences for particular experiences. When I perform the epoché, I also end up tentatively neutralizing all my experiences under phenomenological scrutiny.

Those experiences no longer posit their objects as real, which means that they are neutralized. However, neutralization in this specific sense is not understood as the total neutralization of positionality but rather as a modification of positionality. It is not so that due to neutralization, experiences suddenly lost their positionality to the extent that one could not differentiate between them in terms of their thetic characters. The idea is rather that the characters have been modified, neutralized, “put in brackets,” so to speak. This neutralization of experience is what is meant by “purity” in one sense of the term and in the sense most important for this paper.⁴

Having reached such a level of purified experience, transcendental phenomenology then sets out to study the constitutive structures of pure experience that enable reality to manifest as real. This phase, following the entrance to the transcendental attitude by means of the epoché, is known as the phenomenological reduction. In a word, the reduction is “the thematization of the correlation between subjectivity and world” (Zahavi 2003, p. 46), which allows the investigation of constitution. The level of purity provides a twofold sense of generality to the phenomenological enterprise: the described structural features should remain constant irrespective of the ontological status of the world and they should apply to all forms of consciousness. One such structure is intentionality, the directedness of consciousness toward its objects, and transcendental phenomenology tries to unpack how intentionality conditions the manifestation of things. In his analysis of intentionality, Husserl recognizes that pure intentional experience has two essential aspects to it: a noetic or the intending aspect and a noematic or the intended aspect. With the help of these concepts of noesis and noema, Husserl tries to clarify the structure of intentional experience and thus the constitution of reality (how things are enabled to manifest as real). “The ‘transcendental’ reduction,” Husserl writes, “applies the epoché to reality; but what it retains from this application includes the noemas (...) and (...) the way that anything real is an object of consciousness” (1976a, p. 228/197, translation modified).

I will return to larger-scale issues of transcendental phenomenology in the fourth section, but for now, I shall focus on the noema in order to set the stage for the next section where I discuss the noema debate. Since Husserl’s discussion of the noema is ambiguous and there are numerous interpretations of the notion, it is useful to begin with an overall characterization of Husserl’s account. In the most general terms, Husserl has at least two strategies of describing the noema. First, Husserl describes the noema as the intended as such: “Each perception, for example, has its noema, at the lowest level, its perceptual sense, i.e., the *perceived as such*. (...) Judging, in turn, has the *judged as such*, the enjoying what is enjoyed as such, and so forth.” (1976a, p. 203/175.) Thus, the noema seems to be the object as it is intended. Second, however, Husserl describes the noema as sense (*Sinn*) and content (*Gehalt*,

⁴ This way of understanding the neutrality modification departs largely from common ways of understanding it (as the total neutralization of the positionality of particular experiences), but, as I emphasized above, this is not meant as a challenge to previous readings of the neutrality modification. Rather, I am trying to suggest that there is another kind of neutrality involved in Husserl’s phenomenology: the modification of positionality that occurs due to the epoché. Husserl does not necessarily use the concept of neutralization in this sense, but, as I will elaborate in the fourth section, this reading or reconstruction is one useful way of understanding Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology.

Inhalt). For example, Husserl writes that “the noematic correlate (...) here means ‘sense’ (in a very expanded meaning)” (1976a, p. 203/175) and explicitly identifies intentional content with the noema (see Husserl 2020, p. 2n2, 447). In a famous example concerning the perception of a tree, Husserl describes the noema in a way that seems to utilize both of these descriptive strategies:

The tree simply, the thing in nature, is nothing less than this *perceived-tree as such* that belongs, as the sense of the perception, to the perception and does so inseparably. The tree itself can burn up, dissolve into its chemical elements, and so forth. The sense, however, – the sense of this perception, something necessarily inherent to its essence – cannot burn up; it has no chemical elements, no forces, no real properties. (Husserl 1976a, pp. 205/176–177.)

The rather casual employment of both strategies (“this *perceived-tree as such*” and “sense”) exemplifies that there is no clear distinction between them for Husserl. Although they have sparked a far-reaching debate about the noema, they do not seem to be, at least for Husserl himself, mutually exclusive. However, before engaging with these interpretational questions of the noema, I want to describe the structure of the noema that it bears regardless of which interpretation holds true. The structure of the noema plays an integral role in the debate because it is in this structure that both interpretations claim to find evidence for their view of the relation between the object and the noema.

The structure of the noema can be described as consisting of three layers. First, on the lowest layer, there is the determinable X, which Husserl calls “this pure point of unity, this *noematic ‘object simply’*” (1976a, p. 303/260). The determinable X can be thought of as a bare particular, a central objective something that is “*in abstraction from all predicates*” (Husserl 1976a, p. 302/260). It is important to bear in mind, however, that the determinable X is not a bare particular in any metaphysical sense. The determinable X is an abstraction, an objective core in experience. It is an abstraction because I never experience an X without any predicates; I rather always experience the X *as* something. Nevertheless, Husserl maintains, in order for me to experience something as something, there needs to be something: “No ‘sense’ without the ‘something’” (1976a, p. 303/261).

Husserl elaborates on this as-structure of experience in the second layer of the noematic structure. It is “the ‘*object in terms of how it is determined*’ –including the respective indeterminacies that ‘remain open’ and are co-meant in this mode” which Husserl also calls the noematic “sense” (1976a, p. 303/260). The noematic sense is the X *as* something, i.e., it encompasses the determinable X by wrapping descriptions around the X. These descriptions, or predicates, include not only descriptions such as “redness” and “roundness” but also what might be called object-descriptions, which pertain to “the ‘*kind of object meant*’ [or intended: *vermeint*], *precisely as it is meant*” (e.g., “object,” “state of affairs,” “thing” etc.), as well as what might be called mode-descriptions, which pertain to “the way one is conscious of it” (e.g., “perceived,” “remembered,” “given” etc.) (1976a, p. 300/258). However, noematic sense encompasses more than just all descriptions one has in mind upon intending the object of experience. Therefore, Husserl’s notion of noematic sense is broader than, say, traditional notions of content or modes of presentation because noematic

sense also contains, as Husserl remarks in the quote above, “indeterminacies that remain open and are co-meant.” These indeterminacies are best grasped with the help of Husserl’s concept of the horizon. The horizon is a network of different experiences, their objects, and the surrounding environments of those objects. When looking at my laptop, I only immediately perceive the front side of my laptop, but my perception is accompanied by a horizon that also contains what is not immediately perceived, i.e., the backside of my laptop and other objects in my vicinity (Husserl 1976a, p. 57/49). When I move around in my office, the horizon unfolds as other profiles of the laptop become immediately given to me. I take it that the indeterminacies included in the noematic sense are these horizontal aspects of experience. Husserl’s incorporation of the horizon into the noematic sense thus emphasizes that noematic sense is not exhausted by what is immediately given.

Finally, there is the third layer of the noematic structure, that of fullness. Husserl writes that “what has distinguished itself as ‘sense’ in our analysis of one example does not exhaust the full noema” (1976a, p. 206/178). The noematic sense does not yet encompass everything that belongs to the noema, namely, thethetic characters (which posit the objects of experience as real). The characters are contained only in the full noema. For example, on the level of fullness, my veridical perceptual experience of the table in front of me has (1) an objective core which (2) is described in a determinate way (as a table, as solid, as brown, as an object, as perceived etc.), including several indeterminacies in the horizon, and which (3) is posited as real. These are the three layers of the structure of the noema.

3 Two Interpretations of the Noema

The foregoing analysis of the noematic structure better uncovers what is meant by the “noema,” but the analysis leaves many important questions hanging. Most decisively, there are two interrelated questions: what exactly is the noema and what is the relation between the noema and the object? In this section, I evaluate two opposing answers to these questions.

Beginning with Føllesdal’s (1969) article on the affinities between Husserl’s noema and Frege’s Sinn, the noema debate has now lasted for over half a century. Despite the abundance of different interpretations of this key concept in Husserlian phenomenology, it has become something of a standard practice to present the dispute in terms of a dichotomy between two schools of thought.⁵ There is the West Coast interpretation, on the one hand, which argues that the noema, as a broadening

⁵ While some other interpretations are worthy of mention (e.g., Gurwitsch 1964; 1992), I think the most philosophically interesting problem when it comes to the noema (its relation to the object) is best captured by the opposition between the West and the East Coast interpretations. However, it was common to draw a somewhat similar distinction between the Gurwitschian and the Fregean interpretations of the noema before the East Coast interpretation gained more traction in the 1990’s (see Mohanty 1982, pp. 69–72; Dreyfus 1982, pp. 97–98; Drummond and Embree 1992, pp. 4–6). For broader classifications of different noema interpretations, see Smith and Smith (1995, pp. 22–27; see also Smith 2013, pp. 290–297).

of the Fregean Sinn to non-linguistic acts, is meaning or content that mediates a relation between the intentional act and its object. On the other hand, there is the East Coast interpretation, which argues that the noema is not content but the object just considered differently in philosophical reflection. The most important difference between these two interpretations concerns the question whether there is an ontological distinction between the noema and the object. Where the West Coast interpretation draws an ontological distinction between the noema and the object, the East Coast interpretation denies such a distinction. According to the latter, the noema and the object differ merely in terms of reflection. The noema is the object considered in the transcendental attitude: it is, so to speak, the purified (or the bracketed) object.

The noema debate, which reached a height toward the end of the 20th century, has come to a standstill as both schools have ascertained themselves of their correctness with little-to-no dialogue between the two surviving to present day. Consider, for example, Andrea Staiti writing, in an introduction to a commentary on Husserl's *Ideas I*, that the West Coast interpretation has “proved fundamentally incorrect as an interpretation of Husserl,” remaining a mere historical curiosity that helped “revive the philosophical debate on *Ideen*” and elicit “a variety of responses by more specialized Husserlian scholars” (Staiti 2015, p. 3). Meanwhile the advocates of the West Coast school continue to publish work based on their interpretation of the noema (Beyer 2017; Smith 2013). Despite such settlement into different schools of thought and overall waning interest in the noema debate at the turn of the century, scholarly attention on the noema has been resuscitated to an extent by a growing interest from Husserl scholars in the internalism–externalism debate in philosophy of mind. This interest originates in part from internalist Husserl interpretations by non-Husserlian philosophers (Keller 1999; Dreyfus and Hall 1982; Carman 2003) that have received responses from Husserl scholars (Beyer 2000; 2013; 2017; Murchadha 2003; 2008; Zahavi 2004; 2008; 2017; Smith 2008; Crowell 2008; 2013; Man-To 2014). Many of these contributions address the noema, which is understandable because one of the main branches of the internalism–externalism debate concerns mental content. Internalists and externalists disagree whether mental content is narrow (i.e., only determined by internal factors to the subject) or wide (i.e., also determined by external factors). Even if the noema was not identical to mental content, it would be necessary to employ Husserl's notion in case one wanted to understand Husserl's position within such a contemporary debate. When it comes to the specific analysis of mental states, the noema is the concept in Husserl that involves something that either is or encompasses mental content (namely, the noematic sense). I shall return to the question concerning internalism and externalism in the fifth section after having presented the noema debate and proposed my reconciliation.

The West Coast interpretation is the view that “[t]he noema is an intensional entity, a generalization of the notion of meaning” (Føllesdal 1969, p. 681). This statement is not only supported by Husserl's tendency to identify noema and sense in *Ideas I* but also, as Føllesdal correctly points out, textual evidence from *Ideas III*. There Husserl writes that “the noema in general is, however, nothing further than the generalization of the idea of meaning to the total area of the acts” (1952, p. 89/76, translation modified). In a text from around the same period, Husserl also writes that “[e]very consciousness has its what, its content,

its noema” (Husserl 2020, p. 447). Smith and McIntyre write that the noema is the object’s “*abstract content*” (1982, p. xv) that “embodies the ‘way’ in which the object of an experience is presented or intended in the experience” (1982, p. xv–xvi). “The basic tenet of Husserl’s theory,” they claim, “is that the intentionality of any act is due to there being associated with the act an entity he calls its ‘intentional content’, or ‘noema’” (Smith and McIntyre 1982, p. 87). Although the noema is here identified with content, it is important to bear in mind that this content is the full noema (i.e., noematic sense and thethetic characters), which then has its own content (i.e., noematic sense). Textual evidence for these interpretational claims concerning the relation between noema, sense or content, and object mainly stem from the first chapter of the fourth section of *Ideas I*. There Husserl writes that “[t]he noema in itself has a relation to an object and, to be sure, via the noema’s own ‘sense’” (1976a, p. 296/255), “[e]ach noema has a ‘content,’ namely, its ‘sense,’ and refers through the sense to ‘its’ *object*” (1976a, p. 297/256), and “each intentional experience has a noema and, in it, a sense through which it refers to an object” (1976a, p. 310/267).

Although the West Coast reading is backed up by such textual evidence, opponents see it as an improper interpretation of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. For one, it has been argued that the West Coast interpretation turns Husserl’s account of intentionality into a form of representationalism in which one never reaches the real object of perception but an image or an ideal object in the middle (see e.g., Zahavi 2017, p. 80; Crowell 2013, p. 44; Sokolowski 2000, p. 194; Larrabee 1986, p. 223). This argument is not without justification. Dreyfus and Hall, for example, write that Husserl is “the first to have a general theory of the role of mental representations in the philosophy of language and mind” (Dreyfus and Hall 1982, p. 2). Carman, in turn, writes that for Husserl “the internal content of a mental state” enables “an awareness of external objects” (Carman 2003, p. 31). The point of the criticism is that if the West Coast interpretation turned Husserl’s account of intentionality into representationalism, then the plausibility of the interpretation would be undermined because Husserl is explicit in his rejection of representationalism. “[I]f we attempt in this way to separate the actual object (in the case of outer perception, the perceived thing of nature) and the intentional object, inserting the latter in a real [*reell*] way as ‘immanent’ to the perception, immanent to the experience,” Husserl argues, “then we land into the difficulty that now *two* realities are supposed to stand opposite one another, while only *one* is at hand and possible” (1976a, p. 207/179). However, it is not evident that the West Coast interpretation is necessarily committed to the type of representationalism that Husserl opposes, and D.W. Smith denies that the reading entailed such representationalism:

To characterize the Sinn of an act of consciousness as “mediating” the act’s intention of the object does not mean that the Sinn is an intermediary entity that “represents” the ultimate object of consciousness, making the noema a semantic veil of appearance. Rather, the Sinn captures the *way* the object is intended, a mode-of-presentation that is *shareable* with other acts and in that sense an *ideal* “sense” of the object so intended. What is intended is

the *object itself* (“simpliciter”), and *in virtue of* the Sinn entertained in the act the experience is directed toward the object in a particular way. (Smith 2019, p. 289.)

The gist of Smith’s response is that the claim that the noema is the content in virtue of which the object is intended does not entail the further claim that the noema is an intermediary representational entity. Although this seems correct to the extent that the West Coast interpretation is not committed to postulating a mental representation between a perceptual experience and the object of the experience, for example, Smith’s attempt might not satisfy those who wish to highlight Husserl’s anti-representationalism. By maintaining that there is a representational element in the noema (sense or the mode of presentation) and claiming that “the object and the Sinn are numerically distinct entities” (Smith 2019, p. 289), Smith seems to be moving the issue of representationalism elsewhere. However, I do not think that representationalism is the decisive factor between the two competing interpretations. There is a difference between the outdated representationalism that Husserl criticizes and the more nuanced claim that experience represents objects since experience intends objects as something. It seems that this is the only type of representationalism to which the West Coast interpretation is necessarily committed, and such representationalism seems to be something that the East Coast interpretation cannot entirely dismiss either, as I will argue in the fifth section.

Besides the accusation of representationalism, there is broader criticism concerning a programmatic issue with the West Coast interpretation. Although the interpretation is not necessarily committed to the claim that there is an intermediary mental image between experience and object, it is committed to the claim that Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology introduces new entities (such as the noema) because the interpretation upholds an ontological distinction between the noema and the object. The commitment arises from a specific reading of the epoché and/or the reduction as a semantic ascent to “the special realm of entities revealed by the transcendental phenomenological reduction” (Dreyfus and Hall 1982, p. 1; for a similar reading, see Smith 2013, pp. 232–233). This raises suspicions for some because the kernel of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology seems to lie in the idea of a shift of attitude in which nothing new is gained in terms of ontology but in which there rather occurs a reflective change of focus from objects to their givenness. Even though the epoché has been performed, Husserl writes that “yet everything remains, so to speak, as it was before” (1976a, p. 204/176). If there are no “two realities” standing opposite one another but “only one [reality] is at hand and possible” (1976a, pp. 207–208/179, my square brackets), then it seems plausible to assume that the noema does not belong to some “other reality” either but rather exemplifies another attitude toward the one and only reality at hand. Husserl also writes that phenomenology relates to all kinds of phenomena (including physical phenomena of material things and psychical phenomena of mental states) but “in a completely different attitude” by means of which “every sense of phenomenon that we encounter in sciences long familiar to us is modified in a specific way” (1976a, p. 3/3). While the epoché turns the world into a “phenomenon” (Husserl 1976b, pp. 79/77–78, 177/174), Husserl emphasizes that this does not mean juxtaposing “the

existing world and the human world-representation,” but putting out of play “every interest in the actuality or nonactuality of the world” (1976b, pp. 182/178–179). To some, it seems most plausible to read passages like these as saying that the phenomena investigated by phenomenology are no different from those investigated by the sciences or encountered in everyday life except for a reflective shift of attitude toward the phenomena. Thus, to proponents of the East Coast interpretation like Drummond, the West Coast interpretation misunderstands the very nature of Husserl’s phenomenology that does not disclose “new entities (...) as mediating our relation to objects” (Drummond 2015, p. 262). Rather the epoché and the reduction shift “the attitude in which we consider the objects of our experience such that we focus on them precisely as objects of our experience having a certain significance for us” (Drummond 2015, p. 262; see also 1990, pp. 112–113).

In this sense, the East Coast interpretation seems much more promising than the West Coast interpretation because its reading of the noema as the purified object (in the sense of purified from the natural attitude) correctly aligns with the overarching nature of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. If the epoché merely changes the attitude in which I experience the world, it makes sense that the noema, as belonging to the transcendental domain of inquiry, is not an extraordinary entity but an ordinary entity considered extraordinarily in the transcendental attitude. Therefore, one might now reasonably then wonder why one should not just abandon the West Coast interpretation for this reason alone and advocate the East Coast interpretation if it is more in line with Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology in general. The motivation for seeking reconciliation rather than rejection in this case rises from certain shortcomings of the East Coast interpretation and the partial correctness of the West Coast interpretation. Although the shortcomings of the former concern the difficulties of incorporating some passages of *Ideas I*, where Husserl discusses the relations between noema, content or sense, and object, the shortcomings exemplify a deeper issue with regard to integrating content or sense, whose presence in Husserl’s account of intentionality is undeniable, into the East Coast interpretation of the noema.

When it comes to problems in the East Coast interpretation, a lot of attention has been put on the passage of *Ideas I* concerning the tree that can burn and the noematic sense that cannot burn. Ascribing different properties to the object that is intended (the tree can burn up) and the noematic sense (it cannot burn up) has been seen as evidence that Husserl wedges an ontological distinction between the noema and the object (see. e.g., Føllesdal 1969, p. 684; Smith 2013, pp. 164, 234–235, 254–255). The East Coast response is to claim that this difference in ascription does not entail an ontological distinction. “We predicate ontological categories of the intended object; we predicate logical or phenomenological predicates to the object considered within the phenomenological reflection as perceived,” but, Drummond writes, “[i]n both instances, however, we refer to one and the same object” (2015, p. 263; see also 1990, p. 116). The noema, as the object considered within the transcendental attitude, cannot burn because it is not a physical thing. For one, the noema can be recollected a long time after the perceptual experience of the object in question (Zahavi 2017, p. 91; see also Drummond 1990, p. 116). The result is that, in the case of a perception of a tree, the noema is both identical with the physical tree and the

noema is not physical itself. There is an identity between them, but also a level of difference. It is crucial for the East Coast interpretation to maintain some difference between the noema and the object because, despite their ontological identity, there is a reflective distinction between them. They are “ontologically identical” but “not perfectly coincident” (Drummond 1992, p. 104; see also 1990, pp. 183–186).

There seems to be a problem with this reading. In admitting an ontological identity between two different things (the object in the natural attitude and the noema as the object in the transcendental attitude), the East Coast interpretation violates a philosophical principle known as Leibniz’s Law, according to which two things are identical if and only if they have the same properties. The principle entails that two identical things are not separate things at all but one thing. Therefore, Leibniz’s Law entails that there cannot be separate things that have all their properties in common. If the tree can burn up but the noema cannot, then they do not have the same properties (e.g., the dispositional property to burn up) and thus they are not identical, according to the principle. At its heart, this seems to be the reaction from the West Coast to the East Coast reading. D.W. Smith writes that “it is infelicitous to say two things are identical (‘somehow’)—phenomenology does not require that we revise number theory so that $2 = 1$ ” (Smith 2013, p. 295). There is the option for the East Coast interpretation to respond by saying that Leibniz’s Law applies to metaphysics, not to transcendental phenomenology, but, as far as I know, such a response remains to be developed. The success of a possible response like this depends on whether one accepts that identity statements such as “the noema and the object are ontologically identical” can be made outside the sphere of metaphysics, eluding principles like Leibniz’s Law. I will return to this issue in the next section.

Regardless of what one thinks about the prospects of the East Coast interpretation when it comes to the much-discussed passage concerning the tree that can burn up, I think the aforementioned passages in which Husserl makes claims about the referential relations between noema, sense or content, and object are at least equally difficult for the East Coast interpretation. In these passages, which I quote here again, Husserl writes that “[t]he noema in itself has a relation to an object and, to be sure, via the noema’s own ‘sense’” (1976a, p. 296/255), “[e]ach noema has a ‘content,’ namely, its ‘sense,’ and refers through the sense to ‘its’ *object*” (1976a, p. 297/256), and “each intentional experience has a noema and, in it, a sense through which it refers to an object” (1976a, p. 310/267). In these passages, Husserl seems to be affirming not only an ontological distinction between the noema and the object but also a referential relation between the noema and the object through the noematic sense. The distinction seems to be affirmed because the referential relation seems to require that the relata of the relation are ontologically distinct. It does not make sense to speak of a relation between one thing by using three different terms for that thing.

The East Coast response is to deny that these passages entailed claims of ontological distinction and extrinsic reference from the noema to the object. Where the West Coast interpretation reads the relation between noema and object as one mediated by sense, the East Coast interpretation reads the relation as one between an identity (the object) and a manifold, which is the horizon or a system of noemas (Drummond 1990, pp. 143, 151, 171). The determinable X provides “a principle of

identity” (Drummond 2015, p. 265) and thus secures “the identity of the intended object in a manifold of differing appearances” (Drummond 2015, p. 266). Thus “we can say that the object is an identity in a manifold of noemata” (Drummond 1992, p. 107). Since a manifold of noemas can be the noema for a stream of experience, the object can be said to be in the noema. To Drummond, the further claim that the noema refers to the object through its sense is simply equivalent with the claim that the object is in the noema:

Husserl can characterize the noema as both (1) that *in* which we find the identical object itself and (2) that *through* which the act intends an object. The language of “through” does not posit an instrumental entity ontologically distinct from the intended object. The noema is not a mediating entity that takes us through *and beyond* the sense to the object. We instead go “through” the noematic sense by penetrating it and finding its “innermost moment,” the objective something to which the act is directed (Drummond 2015, p. 265; see also Drummond 2003, p. 72; Drummond 1990, pp. 136–137).

The upshot of Drummond’s reading seems to be that in these passages Husserl is talking about some kind of intrinsic reference between different components of the noema rather than extrinsic reference between the noema and the object. “Reference,” Drummond writes, “goes *through* the noematic sense of a particular phase of consciousness to the ‘identical’ *within* it by virtue of its horizontal connections with the manifold of noemata presenting one and the same object. It is in this way that the object is presented both *in* and *through* the (noematic) sense.” (Drummond 2015, p. 269.) The idea seems to be the following. Since experiences of the same object not only have each their own noemas but also a whole shared noema (a system of noemas), there is an intrinsic reference going from the whole shared noema (the manifold or the system of noemas) through these particular noemas (the phases of the manifold) to the identical objective something (the object). Consider, as an example, that I first see the front side of my laptop, then its right side, then its backside, and finally its left side before returning to my original position where I see its front side. All these phases of one stream of perceptual experience have their particular noemas but they are also connected by their whole noema, which refers to the object through these noematic phases.

Although I think Drummond’s reading is a plausible reading of Husserl to the extent that Husserl does discuss such processes of synthetization between different phases of an experiential stream (see e.g., Husserl 1976a, pp. 272–273/235), I do not find Drummond’s reading plausible as an interpretation of the passages in question concerning noema, sense or content, and object. It does not make sense to me that in these passages Husserl would just talk about the intrinsic relations between different components of the noema. While it is clear that Husserl is discussing the relation between the full noema and the noematic sense, it is equally clear that Husserl is talking about the relation between the noema and the object through the noematic sense. I see no reason why Husserl would use the term “object” in these passages if he did not denote by “object” something other than the full noema or some of its components. Drummond’s interpretation fails to explain why Husserl repeatedly uses the term “object” rather than, say, “the determinable X” or “sense” if Husserl’s

intention were indeed to describe nothing but the referential relations within the noematic structure.

The difficulties the East Coast interpretation faces with these passages come back to the problematics of the reading of the passage concerning the tree that can burn up: the noema is said to be both identical and not identical (i.e., not “perfectly coincident”) with the object. Similarly, the East Coast response to the passages concerning the referential relations ends up dissolving the differences between the object and various components of the noema, all of which “are the same differently considered” (Drummond 1990, p. 113). It is my view that in these passages Husserl is talking about the object as a separate thing, though it is still constituted, i.e., enabled to manifest as real, and thus in correlation with experience. Given that the West Coast interpretation does not face these specific problems, there is a good reason not to completely reject the West Coast interpretation despite its own shortcomings in terms of not concurring with Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology at large, which is, conversely, something the East Coast interpretation does much better.

4 A Reconciling Interpretation

It is clear that the two interpretations of the noema are fundamentally different in terms of how they regard the noema and its relation to the object. The reason for the divergence between the two interpretations, I believe, stems largely from their contrasting points of departure. Where the West Coast begins with the assumption that the noema is a concept that Husserl uses in his theory of intentionality and then reads the concept as content that explains intentional relations, the East Coast begins with the assumption that the noema is a methodological device that Husserl uses in transcendental-phenomenological descriptions rather than in any specific theory. This discrepancy of starting points often leads the two schools of thought to talk past each other: one discusses Husserl’s theory of intentionality, while the other discusses the very nature of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. Due to these differences in basic assumptions and resulting views, it is not surprising that, as far as I know, no one has tried to combine the two opposing interpretations.⁶ Nevertheless, the fact that both interpretations seem to be partially correct despite their shortcomings provides the impetus for the attempt at reconciliation between the two. It is my view that neither noema interpretation can stand on its own but must rather be complemented by the other. The attempt may sound perplexing at first because the

⁶ Although there have been attempts to reconcile the West Coast interpretation with Gurwitsch’s interpretation (Larrabee 1986; see also Mohanty 1982, pp. 69–80; Welton 1983; for a criticism of such interpretations, see Drummond 1990, pp. 191–196, 201n16), these attempts are not concerned with reconciling two interpretations that seem to be incompatible in terms of their ontological commitments. This is because there is no larger disagreement about Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology between the interpretations. Such attempts are rather concerned with providing an account that takes one interpretation for the noema in one kind of experience (the West Coast interpretation for the noema of judgment) and the other interpretation for the noema in another kind of experience (Gurwitsch’s interpretation for the noema of perception).

interpretations seem to be utterly incompatible. However, the reconciliation is enabled once the difference in starting points is resolved by locating each interpretation within a specific area of phenomenological investigation. My proposal is based on the suggestion that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology branches into two areas of phenomenological investigation: neutralized pure phenomenology and non-neutralized phenomenology of reason, and the two interpretations are both partially correct in either of these areas, respectively.

Phenomenology of reason is the topic of the last three chapters of the final section of Husserl's *Ideas I* titled "Reason and Reality" ("Vernunft und Wirklichkeit"). It is the section where Husserl makes the claims about the referential relations between noema, sense or content, and object. Any attempt to understand these claims thus ought to look at their broader context in the phenomenology of reason. In a word, phenomenology of reason is Husserl's version of Kant's critique of reason. Unlike Kant, Husserl does not see reason as a special faculty of cognition that is associated with inference but rather as "a kind of intuitive discernment" (Dahlstrom 2015, p. 273) to be associated with "demonstrating" (*ausweisen*) that characterizes most experiences (Husserl 1976a, p. 314/270; see also Ströker 1993, pp. 104–108). When I see that something is as I thought it to be, something is demonstrated to me. Even this simple level of fulfillment, as Husserl calls it, is a form of rationality. The purpose of phenomenology of reason is to describe and analyze the presence of rationality in different experiences; for example, how coherence, confirmation, and corroboration function in perceptual experience, which Husserl calls "the first, basic form of rational consciousness" (1976a, p. 314/270; see Dahlstrom 2015).

Having distinguished between experiences where I see something "in an ordinary way" (e.g., perceptual experience) and experiences where I do not (e.g., memory, imagination) in his phenomenology of reason, Husserl makes the remark that "[t]hese distinctions have no bearing on the pure sense or posit" (1976a, p. 314/271). The pure sense or pure posit is a noema or a noematic sense without (or with neutralized)thetic characters. One could thus call it a neutralized noema. When dealing with neutralized experience, the distinction between ordinary and non-ordinary loses its significance. In phenomenology of reason, however, these distinctions are relevant. Husserl writes that these distinctions concern "*the manner in which the mere sense or posit – which, as a mere abstractum in the concrete instantiation of the noema of consciousness, demands additional inherent aspects to supplement it – is filled out or not*" (1976a, p. 315/271). Here, Husserl is saying that the noematic sense demands additional aspects (thethetic characters) in order to be fulfilled or not. In this case, it would be a full non-neutralized noema. Moreover, Husserl says that the distinction between ordinary and non-ordinary concerns the way in which this noema is filled or not. This process of fulfillment is what phenomenology of reason studies. Considerations in phenomenology of reason do not concern noematic components of neutralized experience but rather the fulfillment of the noema of non-neutralized experience. Likewise, the latter is of no concern for what one might call neutralized pure phenomenology. Husserl himself never uses the term "neutralized pure phenomenology," and his term "pure phenomenology" is equivalent with the term "transcendental phenomenology." However, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology does involve investigations of neutralized experience, and

I call the area that includes these investigations neutralized pure phenomenology. Husserl is perhaps clearest in distinguishing phenomenology of reason from this area when he discusses the neutrality modification in an earlier chapter of *Ideas I*:

That there is an incomparable peculiarity of consciousness actually at hand here is obvious from the way that the *authentic*, non-neutralized noeses, in keeping with their *essence*, are subject to “*reason’s jurisdiction*,” while *the question of reason and unreason makes no sense for the neutralized noeses*. Something similar holds, correlatively, for the *noemas*. Thus, everything characterized noematically as being (i.e., as certain), as possible, presumable, questionable, null, and so forth can be “validly” or “invalidly” so characterized, it can “truly” be the case, it can be possible, it can be nothing, and so forth. (Husserl 1976a, p. 249/214.)

I take Husserl to say two important things here. First, Husserl says that “the question of reason and unreason,” which encompasses questions of justification and truth, is senseless for neutralized intentional experiences. Second, Husserl says that these questions do make sense for non-neutralized intentional experiences which are under “reason’s jurisdiction.” The way I understand Husserl’s second claim is that for an experience to be “under reason’s jurisdiction” means that one is able to reflect on the veridicality of the experience. Consider, for further textual support, a passage from *Cartesian Meditations* (1931) where Husserl describes a transition from purely phenomenological investigations to questions of reason and unreason. “It has not mattered up to now,” Husserl writes “whether the objects in question were truly existent or non-existent,” emphasizing that such questions “are not perchance excluded from the field of inquiry by abstaining from decision about the being or non-being of the world (and, consequently, of other already-given objectivities)” (Husserl 1973, p. 91/56). “On the contrary,” Husserl continues, “under the broadly understood titles, *reason and unreason*, as correlative titles for being and non-being, they are an all-embracing theme for phenomenology” (Husserl 1973, p. 91/56). That such questions of existence can enter phenomenology should not come as a total surprise given Husserl’s insistence, mentioned above, that the existence of the real world is indubitable and that the purpose of transcendental phenomenology is to investigate the sense of that world. Husserl also writes that “the transcendental epoché is not to be misunderstood in the respect that the being of the world should remain out of question” (Husserl 1959, p. 465). Therefore, in phenomenology of reason, one can ponder whether the noema of an experience, no longer a neutralized “pure sense” but rather a full non-neutralized noema, is fulfilled by the object.

In order for these claims to make sense, one must grasp phenomenology of reason as dealing with non-neutralized experiences (experiences with full noemas), meaning that phenomenology of reason exemplifies an area of phenomenology where neutralization has not been effectuated. This might sound precarious because phenomenology of reason is still within an attitude where the epoché has been performed and I have earlier characterized neutralization as a consequence of the epoché. Since Husserl claims that the epoché does not exclude questions concerning the being of the world, neutralization cannot be, as I emphasized in the second section, a necessary consequence of the epoché. What I mean to suggest here is that for

the first level of phenomenological investigation (neutralized pure phenomenology), neutralization quite naturally follows from the epoché, but neutralization can also be forestalled for the further level of phenomenological investigation (non-neutralized phenomenology of reason).

In addition, the intelligibility of these claims concerning phenomenology of reason requires that one understands the noema as distinct from the object. If the object is to fulfill the noema, which is no longer a pure sense of neutralized experience, then it cannot be identical with the noema. In a recently published text written around the same period as *Ideas I*, Husserl draws the distinction between the noema and the object quite explicitly in addressing this fulfillment relation between the two. “Every such experience has its intentional (its intentional content) and refers through it to its intentional object (the intended),” Husserl writes (2020, 2), adding in a footnote that he identifies the “intentional” (the intentional content) with the “noema” (2020, 2n2). Husserl continues to claim: “If the intentional [the noema] is valid (truth), then the meant objectivity as such (X) in ‘reality’ or (in) ‘truth’ corresponds to just such an objectivity (the true X)” (2020, 2). Here Husserl is talking about a correspondence relation between the noema and the object, which generates truth, and the relation rests on a distinction between the two. Given the identification of “the intentional” with “the noema”, the distinction is quite clear: “First of all, we contrast the intentional (and therefore also the act) with the objective [*Objektionale*] and distinguish it from the object [*Objekt*]. One could also distinguish the objective as the true, the object as the being” (2020, 2). The broader context of phenomenology of reason explains why Husserl makes claims about the referential relations between noema, sense or content, and object that seem to contradict with the East Coast interpretation. Husserl makes those claims because he is talking about something else than the noema as a methodological device; he is talking about the noema as content in his account of intentionality that also considers questions of truth and being.

Therefore, I argue that the West Coast interpretation is correct when it comes to the noema within phenomenology of reason or, in other words, the noema under reason’s jurisdiction. As such, the noema is indeed content that mediates an intentional relation between the experience and the object. The full noema containsthetic characters (features that characterize the object of perception as existing), the noematic sense (the object of perception determined as something, including horizontal indeterminacies), and the determinable X (the bare objective core of content). This full content is then either fulfilled or not by the object. Although this might make a strong case for the West Coast interpretation, I must emphasize that the interpretation is correct only with regard to one aspect of the noema. However, there is another aspect of the noema, and I argue that the East Coast interpretation, conversely, is correct when it comes to that aspect of the noema. The noema is indeed the purified object when it comes to phenomenological investigation within neutralized pure phenomenology. The purpose of neutralized pure phenomenology is to describe and investigate the most general structures of pure consciousness. The purity in this sense designates that the investigation is concerned with these structures at the most general level where it does not matter whether the objects of experience exist. It

does not (and indeed cannot) matter whether the noemas (neutralized of their thetic characters) are fulfilled.

This dual aspect interpretation of the noema and the restrictions that ensue from it solve issues in both interpretations. Since the West Coast interpretation applies to just one aspect of the noema, the interpretation no longer needs to be committed to a controversial understanding of the epoché. The epoché can be what the East Coast interpretation claims it to be, but there is a consequence of neutralization involved in the epoché that can be forestalled when one wants to focus on investigations in the phenomenology of reason. Similarly, the restriction of the East Coast interpretation to the aspect of the noema in neutralized pure phenomenology requires slight modifications to the interpretation. As detailed in the third section, the East Coast interpretation contains the claim that the noema and the object are, despite having different features, ontologically identical. One possible solution to this predicament is to argue that Leibniz's Law does not apply to transcendental phenomenology, meaning that the whole critique rests on a foundational category error. However, another alternative is to modify the interpretation so that the claim of ontological identity is no longer included. Smith has made just such a suggestion: "So it would be better to say, not that the noema is identical with the object, but that the noema is the object itself *restricted* to the presented aspect and *shorn* of its presumed existence" (Smith 2013, p. 295). Rather than being identified with the object as such, the noema is identified with the object "shorn of its presumed existence," which is a different thing from the object as such. With this modification, the purified noema is not ontologically identical with the object; it is the object in abstraction, neutralized of its posited existence. At its heart, this modification captures the same idea as Drummond's "not perfectly coincident" thesis, but it removes the conceptually problematic idea of ontological identity between the noema and the object. This much must be granted for the reconciliation to work: where the East Coast must relinquish its claim concerning ontological identity, the West Coast must be stripped of its commitment regarding Husserl's transcendental methodology. I believe that, despite these slight alterations, the interpretations nevertheless retain the gist of their philosophical import in this reconciling interpretation between them.

Although the suggestion that a single term denotes two distinct aspects in Husserlian phenomenology might sound strange at first, the proposal should sound less surprising if one considers the fact that Husserl's phenomenology is pervaded by a distinction between the two attitudes of the natural and the transcendental. Since Husserl's phenomenology is always shifting focus between these two attitudes, it should not come across as completely implausible that his transcendental phenomenology, attempting to investigate the natural attitude, may include two areas of investigation as well. Although phenomenology of reason does not operate within the same natural attitude as science and everyday life do because phenomenology of reason is still part of transcendental phenomenology, it is clear to me that there is a subtle attitude shift between the two areas of phenomenological investigation, a shift that I have tried to explicate with the neutrality modification (understood in the specific sense elaborated in the second section). The more detailed exposition of these attitude shifts goes beyond the scope of this paper but let me just briefly remark that Husserl does discuss a modification to the natural attitude. Husserl writes that one

can return to the natural attitude after the epoché, but the natural attitude is then “not quite as before” (1976b, p. 214/210; see Jacobs 2013 for a discussion). It is my view that phenomenology of reason operates within such an altered disposition, but the view remains to be further developed.

For further textual support when it comes to the proposal of a dual aspect interpretation of the noema, it is also noteworthy to add that Husserl is explicit about denoting the noema at least in one sense that is different from its general purely phenomenological use. Although “[a]bysses separate everything of this sort [purely phenomenological] from all nature and physics, and no less from all psychology,” Husserl writes, “[t]he sense of perception *also* belongs self-evidently to the phenomenologically unreduced perception (the perception in the sense of psychology)” (1976a, p. 205/177, my square brackets). Husserl continues by saying that “[o]ne can thus make clear here at once how the phenomenological reduction can acquire for the psychologist a useful, methodological function of securing the noematic sense in sharp distinction from the object simply” (1976a, p. 205/177). While the precise meaning of “the noema in the psychological sphere” is vague, it is clear enough that here Husserl introduces a noema that is distinguished from the general methodology of transcendental phenomenology (hence tying it to “the phenomenologically *unreduced* perception”). Husserl leaves the details open, but, in light of my proposal, one could read this as appealing to the non-neutralized noema studied outside the purview of neutralized pure phenomenology. Regardless of how one reads this passage, it is indisputable that here Husserl makes a distinction between the noema and the object. Whether the noema in the psychological sphere designates mental content or something else, it is obvious that the concept points toward the possibility of there being more than one aspect of the noema. If any correct interpretation of the noema must be connected to a corresponding general understanding of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, then the proposal of a twofold distinction within transcendental phenomenology provides an avenue for taking the dual aspects of the noema into account.

Even if one did not accept the specific interpretation of the neutrality modification that I presented in the second section, I hope the preceding textual evidence and argumentation have made one thing clear: there is some kind of a dual structure in Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. It is exemplified by not just Husserl’s attempts to incorporate questions of existence into his transcendental phenomenology while maintaining the epoché as a bracketing of at least some such questions but also his seemingly conflicting descriptions of the noema, which is further reflected by the divergent noema interpretations. My interpretation of neutralization is merely an attempt to understand this dual structure, the co-presence of different kinds of inquiries within transcendental phenomenology. Perhaps the dual structure in question is not best captured in terms of the distinction between neutrality and non-neutrality, but it is nevertheless there. In addition to the distinction between phenomenology of reason and other pure phenomenology, one can see it, for example, in Husserl’s distinction between psychological and transcendental phenomenology. “It is easy to see, now,” Husserl writes in *The Amsterdam Lectures* (1928), “that the whole of mental content in its proper essence, a content which the psychological-phenomenological reduction brings to light and which psychological phenomenology describes, remains conserved as *transcendental*

content through the higher-level and radicalized *epoché*, except that whatever is of psychological-real significance within it is left behind in the phenomenon” (Husserl 1962, p. 341/246). In this passage, Husserl does not only affirm that non-transcendental discoveries in psychological phenomenology remain as they are within the transcendental attitude, but he also presents the claim by using the concepts of transcendental content (“transzendentaler Gehalt”) and mental content (“seelischer Gehalt”). One way to understand these two concepts would be to identify them with the two aspects of the noema. In light of my reconciling interpretation then, the West Coast interpretation would apply to mental content and the East Coast interpretation would apply to transcendental content. If one was to grasp the dual structure in Husserl’s phenomenology this way, however, one would also consequently detach one aspect of the noema outside transcendental phenomenology altogether (noema as mental content in psychological phenomenology), while leaving the other within it. Even if the distinction between neutrality and non-neutrality were not the best way to capture the dual structure in Husserl, it does enable one to retain both aspects of the noema within the transcendental dimension of phenomenology.

It is also worth mentioning that there is nothing new per se in the observation that Husserl might have had more than one meaning of the term “noema” in mind (see e.g., Bernet 1989; Larrabee 1986). Such ambiguity of Husserl’s notion(s) of the noema has also been preliminarily explained by calling attention to the fact that Husserl keeps slipping between the natural and the transcendental attitudes in an obscure way in *Ideas I* (Ströker 1993, pp. 100–101; see also Zahavi 2017, p. 93). However, I believe my proposal provides additional clarity to this ambiguity. Rather than just saying that Husserl keeps slipping between the natural and the transcendental attitudes, I suggest that there emerges a further distinction within the transcendental attitude: the distinct areas of neutralized pure phenomenology and non-neutralized phenomenology of reason between which Husserl keeps shifting in his discussions of the noema. According to my proposal, it is not so that Husserl suddenly shifts from the transcendental back to the natural attitude but rather that he moves from neutral investigations within neutralized pure phenomenology to non-neutral investigations within non-neutralized phenomenology of reason. This corresponds to Husserl’s analysis of the noematic structure: his analysis moves between the noematic sense or the neutralized noema (in neutralized pure phenomenology) and the full noema (in phenomenology of reason). This also better explains why Husserl’s discussion of the noema seems to fluctuate between two levels of discourse, describing the noema both as the object considered differently and as content. The co-presence of two areas of phenomenological investigation shows why both the West and the East Coast interpretations are needed and why they must be complemented by each other.

5 Noema and the Internalism–Externalism Debate

The reconciling interpretation of the noema as both the purified object and intentional content can solve a parallel issue concerning Husserl’s relationship with the internalism–externalism debate about mental content. This is because the problems

are similar to those identified above. There are various interpretations in the literature regarding Husserl's position in the internalism–externalism debate, but here I focus on the interpretation introduced by Zahavi (2004; 2008; 2017; for similar views, see Murchadha 2003; 2008; Man-To 2014). According to Zahavi, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and its notion of the noema should not be understood within the internalism–externalism framework. Zahavi's argument is that due to the basic nature of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, “the internalism/externalism divide loses its relevance” (Zahavi 2017, p. 119). The sphere of purity that Husserl investigates precedes “any divide between psychical interiority and physical exteriority” since the pure structures emerge from “investigations of the dimension in which any object—be it external or internal—manifests itself” (Zahavi 2008, p. 372).

Although Zahavi is correct in spelling out the internalism–externalism debate with the question whether intentional content is “determined by factors *internal* to the mind or by factors *external* to the mind” (2017, p. 118), I would suggest framing the debate in slightly different terms. This is because the spatial terminology of internality and externality, as Zahavi (2017, pp. 118–119) rightly observes, does not fit well with Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Since Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is concerned with the correlative whole of experience, and since its investigations precede a divide between internality and externality in spatial terms, it is quite understandable that many Husserl scholars find the application of the internalism–externalism framework to be misguided. However, one alternative and useful way of framing the debate, when it comes to considering the debate specifically in relation to Husserl, is to think of internality and externality in epistemic terms of subjective distinguishability and indistinguishability based on a suggestion made by Katalin Farkas (2003). If I can distinguish between some aspects of my two experiences, then those aspects are internal, even if they were outside the spatial borders of my body. Conversely, if I cannot distinguish between some aspects of my two experiences, then those aspects are external irrespective of their spatial location. Consider, for example, a case where I perceive a glass of water on my office table. I leave my office for a moment and during my absence someone switches the glass of water to another glass that contains liquid that is qualitatively identical to water. However, the liquid is not actually water but some other substance whose diverging properties from regular water are not distinguishable to the naked eye. As I return to my office, I am unaware that any switch has taken place and continue perceiving the glass as per usual. The crucial question is whether subjectively indistinguishable features (the distinctive properties that are not distinguishable to the naked eye) determine the content of my perception of the glass. To an externalist, they do, and the content of my perception changes after the switch has occurred, whereas, to an internalist, they do not, and the content of my perception remains the same despite the switch.

This characterization of the philosophical questions at stake as well as the distinction between the two areas of phenomenological investigation presented above are useful for illuminating Husserl's position with regard to the internalism–externalism debate. One no longer needs to be bothered by the fact that Husserlian phenomenology is concerned with the correlation and investigations preceding a spatial

divide between internality and externality. Given that neutralized pure phenomenology studies experience that is neutralized of its positionality, i.e., its commitment to the reality of the object of experience is modified, it makes sense that neutralized pure phenomenology cannot appeal to subjectively indistinguishable features in the object of experience in its descriptions of neutralized experience. Neutralized pure phenomenology is only concerned with first-person descriptions of purified experience in general, and these descriptions provide access only to subjectively distinguishable features. Therefore, it might seem natural to conclude that neutralized descriptions can only amount to internalism. Yet I think Zahavi's broader point about Husserl's transcendental phenomenology at large is quite helpful here. It would indeed be more appropriate to say that neutralized descriptions cannot be understood in either internalist or externalist terms. This is because those descriptions do not contain any philosophical claims about content. However, in regards to non-neutralized descriptions in the phenomenology of reason, I would argue in opposition to Zahavi's broader point, room opens for a proper discussion of internalism and externalism because non-neutralized phenomenology of reason involves claims about content.

This distinction between the two areas of phenomenological investigation clarifies how to understand Husserl's relation to the internalism–externalism debate and to see what is wrong in some earlier characterizations of the two different noema interpretations within the internalism–externalism framework. In responding to various internalist interpretations of Husserl, Zahavi claims that those interpretations follow from “misunderstandings” of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, one of which is the West Coast interpretation of the noema (Zahavi 2017, pp. 77–78). Although there may be historical connections between the internalist reading of Husserl and the West Coast interpretation of the noema, I think Zahavi's claim is incorrect. While it is clear that there are internalist West Coast interpretations,⁷ it is also true that there are other West Coast interpretations in the literature. For example, there is Beyer's interpretation of the noema that is accompanied by an externalist reading of Husserl (Beyer 2000; 2013; 2017). If the West Coast interpretation is the conjunction of the claims (i) that the noema is ontologically distinct from the object and (ii) that the noema is content that mediates the relation between an act and an object, then the interpretation can subscribe to an externalist form of representationalism where content is determined by external factors. However, this is just one possibility; one can just as well propose an internalist reading alongside the West Coast interpretation or another version of externalism. The upshot is that neither internalism nor externalism follow from the West Coast interpretation.

The same issue lies in Zahavi's characterization of the East Coast interpretation. Zahavi argues that if one accepts the East Coast interpretation, “it becomes far less obvious that Husserl should be an internalist” (Zahavi 2017, p. 82). However, the way I see it, accepting the East Coast interpretation has no implications

⁷ For example, consider Smith and McIntyre who explicitly argue that “the ‘transcendental’ foundation of Husserl's phenomenology (...) is incompatible with letting the object of perception, or any other part of the external world, play a role in perceptual intention” (1982, pp. 225–226).

for the question whether Husserl is an internalist or an externalist. If the reconciling interpretation presented above is accepted, then it is clear that the East Coast interpretation, which sees the noema as the purified object, can have no implications for the question whether Husserl is an internalist or an externalist. This is because the question of the internalism–externalism debate cannot be resolved, strictly speaking, within investigations of the purified object. Even if some of the details of the reconciling interpretation were not accepted, it would still be difficult to see how the East Coast interpretation, which identifies the noema with the object and distinguishes the noema from content, could have implications for questions about the determination of content.

Therefore, specific interpretations of the noema have no implications for whether Husserl is an internalist or an externalist. Yet, there is an important difference with regard to the relation between the two interpretations and the internalism–externalism debate. Although neither noema interpretation implies internalism or externalism, the question concerning internalism and externalism only makes sense for the West Coast interpretation. Since the interpretation identifies noema with content, one only needs to decide then how that content is determined in Husserl’s account of intentionality to answer the question concerning internalism and externalism. Things are different for the East Coast interpretation. Since the interpretation specifically divorces noema from content, the interpretation cannot contribute, in any obvious way at least, to a philosophical debate about the determination of content. Whether this is an advantage or a disadvantage, of course, depends on how one regards such philosophical debates in general.

This connects to the general problematics of both the East Coast interpretation and Zahavi’s reading of Husserl: their ambivalence regarding content or sense. Although Zahavi claims that to Husserl “[t]he mental act is directly and in its own right, i.e., independently of any representational content, open to the world,” Zahavi admits that the East Coast interpretation does not “mean that there is no role for content in Husserl’s theory of intentionality” (Zahavi 2017, p. 89). Given the problems the East Coast interpretation faces when it comes to Husserl’s notion of content or sense and that Drummond regards noema, sense or content, and object as identical (Drummond 1990, p. 113), it is not entirely clear what that role would be. Zahavi’s claim seems to imply a distinction between noema and content, but Zahavi nevertheless continues to characterize, very much like Drummond, content in identical terms to the noema as “the object itself, just as-it-is-intended” (2017, p. 89). Despite the ambivalence of first disengaging the noema from content and then describing them in equivalent terms, I think Zahavi is on the right track. The noema is indeed both content and something else (the purified object). Zahavi just fails to appreciate what this amounts to: a combination of the two opposing interpretations of the noema. There is, on the one hand, the noema as the purified object for neutralized phenomenological inquiry, but there is also, on the other, the noema as the content for non-neutralized phenomenological-philosophical investigations. The reason why Zahavi ends up describing content in equivalent terms to the noema, I think, is that in one sense noema is content. An answer to the question what role content has in Husserl’s account is provided by the West Coast interpretation: content determines reference.

It is then a separate question to decide whether this determination can have sources in subjectively indistinguishable features of worldly objects or not.

The main takeaway from these responses to the problems in Zahavi's interpretation is that both interpretations of the noema must be enriched by one another. Where the West Coast interpretation must be supplemented by a proper understanding of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology at large that is more akin to the understanding that corresponds to the East Coast interpretation, the East Coast interpretation must be supplemented by a proper account of content that is more akin to the West Coast interpretation. The seemingly incompatible interpretations can be brought together once the distinction between neutralized pure phenomenology and non-neutralized phenomenology of reason is recognized. Characterizing one noema interpretation as internalist and the other as externalist simply deepens the wedge between them to an unnecessary extent. Seeing that the internalism–externalism debate can only be dealt with in one area of phenomenological investigation shows that the internalism–externalism debate poses a separate question that is relevant for only one of the two aspects of the noema.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the two opposing noema interpretations can be reconciled by recognizing first that there are in fact two aspects of the noema, which both interpretations describe, respectively, and second that there is a corresponding distinction between two areas of phenomenological investigation in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. The reconciliation is important because both interpretations seem to be partially correct readings of Husserl. Where the West Coast interpretation, which insists that there is an ontological distinction between the noema and the object, is better supported by some textual passages that are directly concerned with the noema, sense or content, and the object, the interpretation falls short in the broader programmatic framework of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Although the East Coast interpretation, which denies an ontological distinction between the noema and the object, aligns better with the overarching program of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, the interpretation faces challenges in integrating some of these passages in support of the opposing interpretation with its own interpretation of the noema. Since the main difference between the two interpretations derives from their diverging starting points either in the assumption of the noema as a methodological device (East Coast) or as a concept in Husserl's theory of intentionality (West Coast), their reconciliation requires a distinction between two areas of phenomenological investigation. The reconciliation that I propose suggests that the East Coast interpretation is correct in one area of phenomenological investigation, neutralized pure phenomenology, whereas the West Coast interpretation is correct in another area of phenomenological investigation, non-neutralized phenomenology of reason. The main result is that both the West and the East Coast interpretations correctly designate one aspect of the noema: the noema as intentional content within phenomenology of reason and the noema as the purified object within neutralized pure phenomenology. One way to spell out the difference between these

two aspects of the noema is to think of them in terms of their functions. Where the noema as the purified object is the methodological means to investigate the givenness of the object, the noema as content is the concept used to explain intentional reference and study fulfillment.

With the help of this reconciliation, I have finally made the argument that the internalism–externalism debate, which has been discussed in relation to the noema debate in recent years, only makes sense for one of these aspects of the noema, the noema as intentional content. Furthermore, I have argued that neither noema interpretation has any implications for the question whether Husserl is an internalist or an externalist. The incapability of the East Coast interpretation to address the internalism–externalism debate exemplifies the need for complementation because the interpretation must admit a role for content while the interpretation has little to nothing to say about content itself. The most plausible option for the East Coast interpretation is to identify one aspect of the noema with content. This means that the East Coast interpretation needs to be complemented by something like the West Coast interpretation. Conversely, however, the West Coast interpretation needs to be complemented by the East Coast interpretation and its corresponding understanding of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology at large because the West Coast interpretation lacks a plausible understanding of the broader program of Husserl’s philosophy.

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