



# Imagination in the Midst of Life: Reconsidering the Relation Between Ideal and Real Possibilities

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## Abstract

In this article I address the idea that in Husserl's eidetic ontology all possibilities are fixed 'in advance' so that actual objects and events—despite their contingency—can only ever unfold possibilities that are 'permitted' to them by their essences. I show how this view distorts Husserl's ontology and argue that this distortion stems from a misconstrual of the relations between essences and facts, and between ideal and real possibilities. These 'local' misconstruals reflect, I contend, a 'global' misunderstanding that mistakes descriptive distinctions for 'real' separations, and that remains indebted to a non-Husserlian understanding of the a priori–a posteriori-distinction. In support of this argument, I first lay out the relevant objection to Husserl's eidetics as I understand it. Then, I clarify the relation between ideal and real possibilities in the context of Husserl's eidetics as I see it. Finally, I make a general point about the status of Husserl's ontological differentiations 'in the midst of life,' namely in how what they differentiate is effective and (tacitly) manifest ever only as one moment (amongst many) of the complex whole that is a concrete life of consciousness. I end with some remarks on what this might mean for future phenomenological research on the imagination.

Husserl's eidetics have always caused irritation. The fact that through his methodological explication of eidetics Husserl elevated fiction to the status of a "vital element" (*Lebenselement*) of phenomenology" (Hua III/1, §70), immediately implicated imagination in the controversy. There are many bones of contention. Here I want to address only one, which concerns supposed untenable ontological and modal implications of Husserl's eidetics. More specifically, it concerns the idea that, ontologically speaking, all possibilities are fixed 'in advance'<sup>1</sup> so that actual objects

<sup>1</sup> Despite this formulation, the real target of discussion is not the less sophisticated view that essences would be temporally 'prior' to the facts they 'regulate,' but the notion that they are 'ontologically' prior. That they would be temporally priori is non-sensical in the Husserlian framework, already for the simple

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and events—despite their contingency—can only ever unfold whatever set possibilities are ‘permitted’ to them by their essences. In what follows, I show how this view distorts Husserl’s ontology and argue that this distortion stems from a misconstrual of the relations between essences and facts, and between ideal and real possibilities. These ‘local’ misconstruals reflect, I contend, a ‘global’ misunderstanding that mistakes descriptive distinctions for ‘real’ separations, and that remains indebted to a non-Husserlian understanding of the a priori–a posteriori-distinction. In support of this argument, I first lay out the relevant objection to Husserl’s eidetics as I understand it. Then, I clarify the relation between ideal and real possibilities in the context of Husserl’s eidetics as I see it. Finally, I make a general point about the status of Husserl’s ontological differentiations ‘in the midst of life,’ namely in how *what* they differentiate, is effective and (tacitly) manifest ever only as one moment (amongst many) of the complex whole that is a concrete life of consciousness. I end with some remarks on what this might mean for future phenomenological research on the imagination.

## 1 One Bone of Contention: The A Priori of Husserl’s Essences

The reception of Husserl’s work as a whole undoubtedly suffered from misgivings about his eidetics. It is not my intention here to exonerate Husserl’s account of essences as a whole. Instead, I argue that at least one such enduring misgiving is based on a misconception of the a priori of essences. This, in my view, creates further misunderstandings concerning the distinction between ideal and real possibilities, and concerning the role phantasy plays in the consciousness, constitution, and possible creation of such possibilities.

Husserl’s account of essences is often suspected of ultimately resulting in an ontology that hosts essences that ‘a priori’ prefigure ideal possibilities which, in turn, determine ‘in advance’ what is going to be ‘really’ or ‘empirically’ possible (or impossible) for all times to come. Andrea Zhok recently formulated this concern succinctly<sup>2</sup>:

Husserl seems to interpret the relation between essence and possibility so that the sphere of essences, as realm of all conceivable possibilities, sets the rules and conditions for all possible reality. (...) This stance evokes a picture where the set of all possible worlds contains and determines all reality (Zhok 2016, p. 223).

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Footnote 1 (continued)

reason that they, like all other objects, require correlative acts for their constitution and thus cannot be, so to speak, ‘ancestral.’

<sup>2</sup> Zhok argues against this interpretation by emphasizing the Husserlian conception of “possibilizations (*Ermöglichungen*)” as a “generative sphere” of “emergence” (Zhok 2016, p. 213). I will return to this point.

What is at issue for Zhok in this context are ontological considerations (his discussion is directed against a phenomenologically unfounded hypostatization of possibilities). However, Husserl's eidetics in general, and his notion of 'pure essences' in particular, have been charged not only with ontological problems. They have been seen to be perpetuating an idea of reality as subject to inviolable, unquestionable a priori laws of essence, committing Husserlian phenomenology to a rather crude form of essentialism that can accommodate the inescapable historicity of meaning and existence at best as an invariant structural feature of subjectivity. As Theodor Adorno puts it in his highly influential criticism of phenomenological eidetics (a critique that *expresses verbis* targeted not Husserl's, but Heidegger's account), even an eidetics that acknowledges the historicity of meaning cannot but remove "the salt of the historical" (*das Salz des Geschichtlichen*) and in effect only extends and only further bolsters the phenomenological "doctrine of invariants" (*Invariantenlehre*) (Adorno 2003, p. 134f.).

The political worry here goes further than the objections Adorno levels, already in the 1930s, against Husserl's notion of 'givenness,' which in Adorno's view advocates a passive reception not only of "accepted reality" (*akzeptierte Wirklichkeit*), but also of essential necessities and possibilities (Adorno 1990, p. 202; cf. p. 201f.) The ultimate political worry is not only that this might instill a generally 'accepting' attitude towards the *status quo*, but that the Husserlian doctrine of essences effectively downplays the transformative powers of political action. Alia Al-Saji has recently expressed this in the very terms of the contention at issue here: "when possibility is taken to precede and predetermine the real, the openness and unpredictability of the sense of futurity is lost. The future would then be no more than the realization of possibilities given in the present" (Al-Saji 2012). Referring to the concrete events of the Quebec student protests of 2012 (which at the time involved approximately 180,000 students), she, I think rightly, points out that to say that "the student strike was always 'possible'" is to betray "a negative and empty sense of possibility", which "has neither ontological hold, nor social efficacy, nor does it make a difference for lived experience" (ibid.). Along Bergsonian lines, Al-Saji instead argues for a "generative" conception of possibility that allows us to "say that possibility is [itself] *created*," and "not copied from the given or mapped in advance" (ibid.). Echoing again Adorno's criticism that Husserl's eidetics amounts to a 'betrayal' of the possible (cf. Adorno 1990, p. 201), but also of course resonating with existentialist concerns, Al-Saji writes:

In order to understand this generative sense of possibility, we must cease thinking of the possible as an unreal thing that prefigures the real; ... This instantiates a politics of the future, where the future is not read from the present but, in its unpredictability and newness, holds the promise of reconfiguring the present" (Al-Saji 2012).

I agree with her and others that what we need is an account that can also make intelligible how actual events as well as imagined future ones may transfigure the present and generate hitherto impossible possibilities. To be more precise, I believe that we need an account that can make intelligible not only the generation of ‘real’ possibilities, but also the generation of ‘ideal’ possibilities as realizable, and I believe that Husserl’s eidetics offers some resources for such an account.<sup>3</sup>

To start with, there are many different kinds of essences, according to Husserl, and they might not all ‘behave’ in the same way with regards to this issue. For example, the *formal*, and highly general essence ‘any object what so ever’ merely delimits the formal requirements any item must fulfill in order to be constitutable as an object. This may help us distinguish *objects* ‘of any kind what so ever’ from other kinds of items (lived experiences, let’s say); or, it can help us ‘manage our expectations’ with respect to what we may or may not rule out as future possibilities of an object *qua* object. *However, this does not mean that such an essence ‘ideally’ pre-determines in advance what may, or may not ‘really’ happen.* It just means that certain happenings are not possible as manifestations of an object. Should they occur, we might, for example, attribute them to a different kind of item (one that does not purport to be an object); or, if they still present themselves as changes of ‘whatever we thought was some kind of object,’ perhaps conclude that we were wrong, and that it was not an object after all. In other words, the occurrence of real events can, of course, neither be predicted nor regulated in advance, but the ways they can enter into the ontological and semantic economy is, according to Husserl, subject to essential laws.<sup>4</sup>

The same holds of ‘material’ essences, which, unlike formal ones, express species that, at different levels of generality, belong to different ‘material’ (*sachhaltige*) ontological domains, or, as Husserl puts it, ‘regions.’ What counts, for example, as ‘red,’ is evidently not subject to merely formal conditions, but to conditions that are specific to that particular color, to colors in general, and, going up on the scale of generality, to visual qualities and then to sensible qualities in general.<sup>5</sup> The same holds of the essential law that ‘any color has some extension.’ Such a law has, of

<sup>3</sup> This is not meant as an objection to the view Al-Saji defends in this article. I do not take issue here with the way she uses Bergson’s account of time to conceptualize this generation of until now impossible possibilities. I simply note her important concern and transpose it into the Husserlian context in question in this article.

<sup>4</sup> As I argue below, even these ‘formal essences’ are in principle subject to correction (e.g., we might be wrong about what we think may count as object), but this is not yet the point here. Moreover, the fact that even the greatest horizon of everything—‘the world’—may collapse, or as Husserl puts it so controversially in *Ideas I*, it may be ‘annihilated’ (cf. Hua III/1, §49) can be taken as a case in point. It is at least conceivable—especially in the light of Husserl’s well-known concession in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* that even apodictic insights are fallible (Hua XVII, p. 156)—that events could occur that would ‘explode’ the essential order and that, as a result, consciousness may experience not only a partial loss of order or meaning, that is, of something *within* the world, but a total loss of that horizon itself. See Majolino 2016 for an especially insightful account of this issue.—For full references to the *Husserliana* volumes (Hua hereafter), please see the shared bibliography for the *Husserl Studies* special issue this paper is part of.

<sup>5</sup> For an exceptionally clear and succinct exposition see Majolino 2015, for more detail see Sowa 2007.

course, no influence on what colors will actually appear. It does mean, however, that it is in principle possible to have the ‘eidetic’ insight that no color will ever appear without being extended, without having to worry about exceptions to this rule—as one would have to, if one was to rely on induction alone.<sup>6</sup>

Husserl is of course mostly interested in the essences and essential laws pertaining to (inter-subjective) *consciousness* and, correlatively, to the (life)*world*. Phenomenology, for him, is a “material eidetic science” (Hua III/1, p. 150/161), which, due to the morphological nature of its subject matter, can never establish and express its eidetic insights with exactness. As Husserl explains, it “is peculiar to consciousness of whatever sort that it fluctuates in flowing away in various dimensions” (Hua III/, p. 156/168), and thus phenomenological essences too are “morphological.” Within transcendental-eidetic phenomenology, they become targets of an effort to describe lived experiences, an effort that excludes idealizations generated for the sake of exact concepts (Hua III/1, p. 155/167) as much as “deductive theorizings” (*deduktive Theoretisierung*) (Hua III/1, p. 157/169). Such a description of consciousness, however, only becomes ‘scientific’ when phenomenologists do not regard individual factual lived experiences but corresponding “essences belonging to *higher levels of specificity*,” which, unlike their less general counterparts, “are accessible to rigid differentiation, to continuous identifying maintenance [*Durchhaltung*], and strict conceptual formulation” and thus enable “the task of a comprehensive *scientific* description” (Hua III/1, p. 157/168; my emphasis). This is why, according to Husserl, in phenomenology understood as a rigorous science...

... we describe and, in so doing, determine by *strict* concepts the generic essence of perception as such (*Wahrnehmung überhaupt*) or that of subordinate species, such as the perception of physical things and their determinations, the perception of animate beings, etc.; likewise the essence of memory as such (*Erinnerung überhaupt*), empathy as such (*Einfühlung überhaupt*), willing as such (*Wollen überhaupt*), etc. Prior to these, however, are the highest universalities: lived experience as such (*Erlebnis überhaupt*), *cogitatio* as such (*cogitatio überhaupt*), which already make extensive essential descriptions possible. (Hua III/1, p. 157/168; translation modified)

It is for this reason, then, that *pure* essences become the target of phenomenological eidetics. Purified from any reference to the real world, these *eide* (e.g., perception as such), extend over all possible facts of their kind (e.g., all possible perceptions), *regardless of whether they are possible in the real world, or only amongst the ‘pure possibilities’ in the world of phantasy*. And indeed, what we can find out about them (e.g., that they constitute real objects as ‘there in person’) or about essential laws pertaining to them (e.g., ‘perception always gives its objects in adumbrations’) is valid for *all* their possible exemplifications (real or not). It is also because of their purity, understood as their lack of boundedness to the real world, that the imagination acquires such an important methodological role in phenomenological eidetics.

<sup>6</sup> At least one would ‘only’ have to worry about the general fallibility of phenomenological insights (see fn. 4).

To come back to our bone of contention here, whereas formal essences—precisely because of their merely formal nature and thus their complete divorce from any materiality (*Sachhaltigkeit*)<sup>7</sup>—might plausibly be taken to suggest the idea of an ‘a priori in advance’ (after all, their *formal* nature puts them in close proximity to a Kantian *a priori*, which still largely dominates discussions on the topic)—a brief reflection on the nature of material essences suffices to understand that this idea is not appropriate to them. For example, the *eidōs* perception, *qua* essence an ‘object of thought,’ is constituted as such an object in a complex process of methodic thinking that ultimately recognizes the invariants gained from eidetic variation as the ‘fulfillments’ of otherwise ‘empty’ (or, at least, ‘emptier’) modes of thinking about it. In fact, the process, which could not be further from a simple ‘seeing’ (cf. Bernet 2003; Lohmar 2005; Majolino 2016; De Santis 2012), is more complex still because the *eidōs* is thought as ‘object’ in virtue of understanding it as the substrate of essential laws that are brought to evidence by means of eidetic variation. Thus, the *eidōs* of perception (‘perception as such’) is thought as the object of essential laws of the kind ‘perception as such is always perspectival’ or ‘in perception objects are always given inadequately,’ etc.<sup>8</sup> Rather than to a ‘seeing’ the *eidōs perception as such*—a formulation that easily facilitates caricatures of *Wesensschau*—‘eidetic intuition’ refers to a methodically sophisticated process, a “reflective-experimental procedure” (Lohmar 2005, p. 83) of insightful cognition of essential laws that *gradually* ‘fulfills’ our grasp of *what* perception ‘essentially’ *is*. It thus lets us cognize our subject matter in a way that is epistemically, and thus scientifically, superior to understanding it merely conceptually and thus, as Husserl likes to put it, ‘emptily.’

As already mentioned, *eide*, and the eidetic laws pertaining to them, are ‘pure’ and *a priori* valid in virtue of being indifferent to any connections to the real world. Their extensions thus include *all* possible exemplifications of its kind, not just the ones that are possible in the real world. They thus delimit a space of ‘ideal possibilities’ constrained and opened up by eidetic necessities. In that sense, then, they do have a prescriptive function, which, again, could be taken to suggest that they are part of the ontological inventory that is in some sense ‘prior’ to any of their realizations.<sup>9</sup> It does not help that Husserl clearly struggles to provide temporal characterizations of *eide*, which he describes, first, *qua* ideal objects, as “timeless” (*unzeitlich*) (Hua XIX/1, II, §8, p. 129), then as “supra-temporal” (*überzeitlich*) (Hua Mat 7, p. 87; Hua XVIII, p. 134) and, ultimately, as “omni-temporal” (*allzeitlich*) (Husserl 1948, §64c), thereby giving the impression that they somehow ontologically ‘hover above’ the empirical cases whose possibilities and impossibilities they supposedly regulate. However, this projects a rigid separation that is not upheld by phenomenological evidence.

<sup>7</sup> We are leaving aside now that the constitution even of formal essences requires *some* indeterminate experience (cf. Zhok 2016).

<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is because *eide* (*qua* ideal objects) can sustain predicates and can be substrates of laws that, in Husserl’s view, they “cannot be a mere fiction, a mere *façon de parler*, a mere nothing in reality” but “must have being;” for “if these truths hold, everything presupposed as an object by their holding must have being” (Hua XIX/1, II, §8).

<sup>9</sup> See fn. 1.

Already qua ideal objects, *eide* are lifted from the ‘hic et nunc’ of the real. This is not only relevant to their normative validity, but also to their epistemic function, because it means that we can—despite the empirical flux—always return to them in thought (cf. Zhok 2016, p. 226). However, especially in the case of ‘material’ *eide*, it should be obvious that they do not *mean* anything, that we cannot even *think* them (other than completely ‘emptily’) independently from (our experience of) the matters *whose eide they are*. In turn, those matters only receive determination, and can thus be entertained as empirical facts (as opposed to merely fleeting *tode ti*’s, ‘this there’s’), by predicates whose use always already betrays, according to Husserl, at least our ‘naïve’, ‘passive’, and ‘typified’ familiarity with essences. Thus, material essences and facts are ontologically intertwined in an ‘ontological entanglement’ that first of all lets them be constituted *as* essences and *as* facts (as opposed to ‘empty’ general concepts and ‘this there’s’).<sup>10</sup> Thus nothing speaks against the idea that an essence is ‘instituted’ (*gestifted*) *with* the emergence of any of its exemplifications, even though *for those* it has always been valid and will, ‘until further notice,’ continue to be, in what Zhok has, in my view aptly, called “potential eternity” (Zhok 2012, p. 190).

We see thus that the whole problematic of the ‘crisis’ of the European sciences (and of European culture more broadly), understood *as an increasing alienation*, in abstract scientific conceptualizations and explanations of the world, *from the ways that world is ‘lived’ and ‘experienced’ concretely*, is exponentially aggravated by scientific idealization and formalization, but is also connected to the basic essential possibility for consciousness to turn its ‘regard’ towards essences as ideal objects, away from the essence-fact-complex whose forgetting can lead, for example, to a hypostatization of essences, to a nominalist denial, or to a naturalistic reduction of them, all of which ultimately lead, in different senses, to ‘empty’ thinking and possibly existential alienation.

Here the imagination (phantasy) is critical, not only as a methodic tool for phenomenological eidetics, but first and foremost as a mode of consciousness that, beyond any scientific interests or practices, affords a ‘natural’ modal engagement that teaches consciousness to learn appreciate, in non-rigorous ways, distinctions between actualities, possibilities, and necessities. It does so most directly by aiding the constitution of possibilities, which is also the very reason why it eventually becomes so important for phenomenological eidetic investigations.

## 2 Relational Modalities: Real and Pure Possibilities

Before we get to a discussion of Husserl’s notion of ‘pure’ possibility, let’s first consider, for contrast, what he calls ‘real’ possibilities. A real possibility can be understood as a possibility that is motivated by the actual course of experience. “It

<sup>10</sup> I thus would go even further than Zhok here. Not only could there be no truth in “a mere realm of facts,” as he puts it (Zhok 2016, p. 220), there could not even be a ‘realm of facts.’ This is another way of saying that facts and essences are ‘correlational’ (see below).

is,” as Husserl puts it in the revisions to the 4th chapter of 6th Logical Investigation, “a possibility, ‘for which something speaks,’ sometimes more, sometime less” (Hua XX/1, p. 178). We actively constitute such ‘real possibilities,’ for example, in guesses (*Vermutungen*) (Hua XX/1, p. 179), which *posit* something as ‘possibly’ the case, or ‘possibly’ real, or ‘possibly’ doable, etc.—not as merely theoretical possibilities, but as possibilities that are more or less strongly ‘suggested’ by what is actual (Husserl speaks of ‘*Anmutungen*’<sup>11</sup> [*ibid.*; cf. Hua XI, p. 42f.]). Unless we ‘actively’ intervene in what we do, we mostly passively yield to real possibilities, which manifest pre-reflectively in an affective pull, enticing us to tend to this rather than that, do this rather than that.

These possibilities do not pre-exist. They emerge ‘in the midst’ of life, in the course of experience. On the one hand, they are themselves motivating and as such ‘enabling’; as Zhok puts it, they “help us to conceive a meaningful world, pervaded by opportunities to act and endowed with an intrinsic telic dimension” (Zhok 2016, p. 229), that is, a dimension of ends or purposes. On the other hand, they are also in a sense ‘created,’ i.e., *made* possible in the very actual course of experience that they ‘entice’ along. For every actual event, every action redistributes the weight with which some such possibilities come to stand out over others and are therefore posited as real possibilities. As Zhok accurately and helpfully points out, we best think of them as *emergent* possibilities, which also have their noetic correlates in what Husserl calls ‘practical possibilities,’ ‘potentializabilities’ (*Vermöglichkeiten*), or, short, the “I can” (Hua IV, p. 258; cf. Zhok 2016, p. 225).

Pure possibility, by contrast, involves no positing of anything actual—not even ‘possibly.’ In this refraining from positing anything as actual lies its kinship with—equally pure—phantasy. This lends *prima facie* plausibility to the idea that while perception is the consciousness of actuality (*Wirklichkeit*), imagination is the consciousness of possibility (*Möglichkeit*). Certainly, a genuine case of perceiving takes the perceived object to be actual, and a genuine case of imagining, or, as we often say, of ‘merely’ imagining, does not. The imagined object is experienced in the mode of the ‘as if,’ as ‘irreal,’ as Husserl puts it, a ‘quasi object’ that is neither posited as real nor as non-real, *that is not posited at all*. However, experiencing something as non-actual, as ‘as if,’ is not the same as experiencing something as possible, which involves *positing* something as possible.<sup>12</sup>

The switch from the ‘irreal’ to the ‘possible’ is itself made possible by the complex structure of phantasy consciousness. For the “double-intentionality” of phantasy involves not only a presentification (*Vergegenwärtigung*) of a ‘quasi object’, but also a ‘reproduction’ (*Reproduktion*) of inner consciousness, that is, a second inner consciousness that is experienced as non-original. This involves not only

<sup>11</sup> It might be interesting to some readers that the term ‘*Anmutung*’ was also part of the vocabulary of early *Gestalt* psychology, for example, in the writings of Wolfgang Köhler. One possible, however non-literal, English translation of the term is ‘affordance.’

<sup>12</sup> Husserl increasingly insists that we must distinguish phantasied objects from possible objects (Hua XXIII, p. 687) because, as he puts it, “one could run into confusion if one took phantasies, without further ado, to be possibilities” (Hua XXIII, p. 684, note 2). See also John Brough’s introduction to the English translation of the volume, Hua XXIII, p. xliiii.



an imagining ego, but also the (co-imagined) ego involved in the phantasy itself. The condition of possibility for the constitution of possibility by means of phantasy lies in this self-duplication and self-distancing of consciousness in phantasy. For it enables two different attitudes and therewith two different kinds of acts. I can live, without positing anything, in my phantasy as the phantasy *quasi*-ego having her or his phantasy quasi-experiences. But I can also take the position of the *actually* phantasizing ego, who is itself not part of the phantasy. As this actual ego, I can posit my phantasy, both in terms of the quasi-object and in terms of the quasi-experience, as a *possibility*, a possible object and a possible experience. As Husserl explicates in the *Bernaer manuscripts*:

To the essence of phantasy belongs the possibility of a change of attitude, which transforms phantasy into a positing consciousness, a consciousness of possibility. The I, the actual one, has no place in phantasy insofar as it is pure phantasy; it remains outside the ‘as if’, which is in itself closed. The I is the subject of phantasizing, but the act of phantasizing does not occur ‘in phantasy,’ that is, within the framework of that which is conscious as phantasized. However, the actual I can relate positingly to what is phantasized, and then it posits, when it does not also perform a backward reference to the act of phantasizing, the positing of a possibility. The phantasy thing becomes something possible and [becomes] this possibility. (Hua XXXIII, p. 342, my translation; cf. Hua XX/1, p. 183 f.)

Thanks to this transformation, possibilities cannot only be entertained in theoretical *thought*, but they can show themselves in intuition.

... the *being* plainly given in the mode of phantasy-as-if, the actually phantasized, the actually feigned in its phantasy modalities, that is the *possible*, the possibility that *is* (*die seiende Möglichkeit*), and it is self-given in intuitive phantasy... (Hua XXIII, p. 560)

This intuitive manifestation of possibility has clear epistemic advantages. It means that we are in principle able to distinguish between merely theoretical possibilities, which we can only intend ‘emptily’ in ‘mere’ thought, and genuine ‘ideal’ possibilities, i.e., possibilities that are capable of intuitive fulfillment.

The fact that each pure phantasy, i.e., each phantasy that is unbound by references to actuality and not in need of ‘motivation’ by anything in the actual world, is open to this transformation also points to another important feature that pure phantasy and possibility have in common, namely their insusceptibility to *individuation*. Even though we can phantasize ‘individual’ objects (this unicorn, this pink elephant, my fairy-tale prince, etc.), imagined objects are only ever quasi-individual because they do not have an absolute position in time. Phantasizing them has a duration, and they may be part of a phantasy world with its ‘quasi-time’, within which, for example, the imagined prince of my phantasy *first* endures hardship and wins many battles, *and only subsequently* saves me from my dreary life. However, since he was never actual, he is without absolute time position—he is at any time and no time, or ‘once upon a time.’ Lacking that time

position, he also lacks the uniqueness (*Einmaligkeit*) that would ensure his repeatability *as one and the same prince*. Precisely *because* the prince is *not* unique, he is not repeatable, at least not as one and the same, as an identical individual. I can never meet him (again), even though I can so easily conjure up new similar phantasies of his quasi-self.

In free phantasy, which we now want to consider as a phantasy completely free from any positing of actuality, we have objects, temporal objects, and objects that are of the same kind as manifest in perception, as in positing experience. However, these objects lack what is necessarily characteristic of actually existing ones – the absolute position, the absolute and serious uniqueness (once-off-ness) of the individual content given as temporal. (Hua XXIII, p. 333)

Moreover, the continuous fulfillment of phantasy is not subject to the same demand for concordance (*Einheitlichkeit*) as the continual fulfillment of my perceptions, or even as the gradual filling out of my memories. My imaginary prince tolerates all kinds of variations that a real prince would be ontologically incapable of tolerating. While the imaginary one can be held, or grasped by me as a ‘quasi’ same, even though he is rapidly changing characteristics depending on my rapidly changing fancies, the real one simply would cease to be the same if he lacked a certain robust continuous unity of characteristics. Further, the real prince—let’s say I was to live with him—would gradually become more and more ‘fulfilled’ in terms of his determinations. In other words, I would get to know him better. The imaginary prince, on the contrary, even though my phantasy can become more and more elaborate and detailed, is impervious to increasing determination; whatever phantasy I build up, it can be revoked, undone, replaced by a different one, even one that contradicts earlier ones. The features I would have to hold on to in order for me to still be imagining that quasi-prince in his quasi-individuality are only very few. Thus, the sense of the imagined quasi-object—by contrast to the sense of an actual, perceptual or remembered object—is ‘in flux (*fliessend*)’, as Husserl says. It is ‘fixed’ only with regard to ‘something general’ to which I have a certain distance.

I have in phantasy as a presentification of varying degrees of clarity necessarily distance to the object itself and from the proper quasi-perception, which I quasi originally build up, and so the phantasized object is indeterminate in respect to the sense quasi building up – unlike a recollection, which in advance has a directedthetic intention. Thus the intuitive sense is here in flux. It is only fixed ‘in general’, determined as colour, as redness, etc., which here is not something thought as general, something conceptual, but instead a form of variability. For the quasi individual itself, the phantasized one, no determinate difference is fixed and none is ultimately fixable. It is something open... (Hua XXIII, p. 550)

Now, with regards to individuation, phantasy is clearly lacking then. However, from a different perspective, the comparative indeterminacy of phantasy, its ‘generality’ and ‘openness,’ and its ‘distance’ from the ego (lost when we over-identify with our

phantasies) are extraordinarily productive. They facilitate the movement from the concrete towards the general. Phantasy therefore does not only lend itself functionally to a process of ideation, but we might also say that it *affords* it. In other words, it ‘invites’ concept formation, just as it, as a ‘form of variability’, ‘affords’ or ‘invites’ the process that Husserl considers proper to ‘*scientific*’ concept formation, namely eidetic variation. But it goes deeper than that. According to Husserl, *imagination (phantasy) makes possible modal consciousness in the first place*:

Everything given absolutely in normal experience is simply taken for granted as actual ... on the basis of experience. It is not subsumed under the concept “actuality”. It is subsumed under the concepts which, within nonreflective consciousness, *determine* the actual. In the natural attitude, there is at first (prior to reflection) no predicate “actual,” no genus “actuality.” It is only when we imagine, and, taking a position beyond the attitude which characterizes life, we pass to actualities given in the attitude of imagination (the attitude of quasi-experience in its different modes), and when, in addition, going beyond the occasional isolated act of imagination and its objects, we take them as examples of possible imagination in general and of fictions in general that there arise for us the concept of fiction (or of imagination) and, on the other hand, the concepts of “possible experience in general” and “actuality.” (Husserl 1948, §74, p. 360/298)<sup>13</sup>

However, no ‘ideal’ kinship between pure phantasy and pure possibility by itself clarifies the complex genetic and generative dimension of possibility-*constitution*. Here we run into the difficulties that Husserl addresses, for example, in the *Cartesian Meditations* when he addresses the insufficiency of a merely eidetic-ontological approach. Even though...

... the task of an apriori ontology of the real world – which is precisely discovery of the Apriori belonging to this world’s universality – is inevitable but, on the other hand, one-sided and not philosophical in the final sense. Such an ontological Apriori (for example: of Nature, of the psychophysical, of sociality and culture) does indeed confer on the ontic fact, on the de facto world in respect of its “accidental” features, a relative intelligibility, that of an evident necessity of being thus and so by virtue of eidetic laws; but it does not confer philosophical—that is, transcendental, intelligibility. Philosophy, after all, demands an elucidation by virtue of the ultimate and most concrete essential necessities; and these are the necessities that satisfy the essential rootedness of any Objective world in transcendental subjectivity and thus make the world intelligible concretely: as a constituted sense. Only then, moreover, do the “supreme and final” questions become disclosed, those that are still to be addressed to the world even as understood in this manner. (Hua I, § 59, p. 164 f.)

<sup>13</sup> Husserl reaches a similar insight here as, I believe, Sartre does in the conclusion to his *The Imaginary* (Sartre 2004). For a detailed discussion of common lines of thought on the issue between Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty see Jansen (2018a).

Concretely, in our case here, this means that a merely ‘ideal’ analysis of the eidetic structures of pure phantasy and pure possibility will remain ‘abstract’ and incomplete as long as it is missing the transcendental account of how either are constituted *for a transcendental subject*. And it turns out that, on that *transcendental* level of analysis, pure phantasy and pure possibility are not entirely independent from actuality after all. For they depend on an actual ego—an ego, as Husserl says in *Experience and Judgment*, “who lives in experience:”

Only he who lives in experience and from there “dips into” imagination, whereby what is imagined contrasts with what is experienced, can have the concepts of fiction and actuality. (Husserl 1948, §74, p. 360/298f.)

What is required, then, is an actual ego who is able to move between reality and phantasy, actuality and possibility—an ego who is, in other words, *free* insofar as it has the “capacity of complete freedom to transform, in thought and fantasy, our human existence and what is there exposed as its life-world” (Husserl 1970, p. 374f.).

However, Husserl was under no illusion about the ‘complete freedom’ of *actually* phantasizing egos (phenomenologically trained or not). In a telling footnote, which we find in the revisions to the 6th Logical Investigation, Husserl clearly states what we might consider a serious obstacle to the very task he put to us, namely the task of identifying *eide* (pure essences) from eidetic variation in *pure* phantasy:

One could object: Freedom of phantasy is no actual freedom. We cannot at all dispose freely over phantasy... The ‘images’ simply do not come, and when they do come, their posturing as something springing from ‘free will’ (*Willkür*) is mere semblance. From the start it is clear that what we mean by the freedom that we attribute to phantasy in phenomenological contexts cannot be the empirical freedom of being-able-to-imagine... (Hua XX/1, p. 180, fn.; my translation)

So what now? Is this simply confirming what many have believed all along, namely that Husserl’s blind belief in the ‘free’ abilities of the phenomenologist to ‘neutralize’ her own position and its empirical constraints has him send us on a methodological wild goose chase with his eidetics, just as he does, some might add, with his *epoché* and transcendental reduction?

Husserl was very aware of this problem, but did not consider it an absolute hindrance<sup>14</sup>. Rather, the reconciliation of the researcher’s ‘standpoint’ with her ambition to reach beyond it, is an inevitable difficulty that *no* scientific research is immune against. Insisting that ‘perfectly performed’ scientific eidetic research and concept formation *would* require ‘pure’ freedom in phantasy, only serves to highlight that the dangers of bias and essentialism lurk everywhere. In light of that, and in full awareness of that, Husserl still believes that we have no better way of legitimizing our concepts and of discovering eidetic laws, even though whatever ‘purity’ and

<sup>14</sup> For a thorough critical discussion of a variety of potential methodological problems, see Lohmar (2005), pp. 79–91.

‘freedom’ we claim is at best *relative*. This is how he explains his use of ‘freedom’ in the continuation of the same footnote I just quoted: “We *contrast* the freedom of ‘mere’ acts of phantasy... and the unfreedom that belongs to ‘actual,’ unmodified acts...” (ibid.; my translation and emphasis). In other words, it *does* make sense, *by way of contrast*, to talk about the ‘relative’ freedom of phantasy *over against* the unfreedom of, for example, perception. And it does make sense to speak about ‘relatively’ pure phantasy *over against* phantasy that is obviously and directly bound to a ‘real’ context. This difference would be obscured if we simply stated what is also true: that there is in actuality no ‘purely pure’ phantasy and that, therefore, all phantasy use actualizable by us is ‘impure.’<sup>15</sup> In other words, ‘free’ and ‘unfree,’ ‘pure’ and ‘impure,’ are relative terms, just as ‘pure possibility’ and ‘real possibility’ are relative modal terms. In fact, they are not only relative to each other (and in this sense ‘correlative’), but they are also, as I mention above, relative *to an actual ego*. To highlight this specific ‘relativity,’ I call them *relational modalities*. What I have above called ‘ontological entanglement’ correlates here with what we might call ‘modal entanglement.’

This modal entanglement, albeit only partially, addresses Al-Saji’s concern I cited above. From this Husserlian perspective, it is this ontological entanglement that opens up feedback loops between present real possibilities, future real possibilities, and (relatively) ‘omni-temporal’ ideal possibilities, each affecting and conditioning, in enabling as well as constraining ways, the others.

### 3 Conclusory Remarks: Husserl’s Ontological Differentiations ‘in the Midst of Life’

Holding the view I just outlined has consequences, of course, and they are rather far-reaching. If we cannot, in an ‘absolute’ way, distinguish pure from bound phantasy, and thus pure from real possibility, then, it seems, we cannot, in an ‘absolute’ way, distinguish between *eide* and impure essences, perhaps not even between them and types (as Alfred Schütz already suggested more than half a century ago, cf. Schütz 1959). Drawing this line of thought to its conclusion would mean the collapse of the *a priori-a posteriori*-distinction,<sup>16</sup> *but only in a certain sense*. The sense of that distinction *as we know it through the broadly speaking Kantian tradition* is indeed abandoned. However, this does not leave us with a world within which that distinction has lost all meaning. What it retains as its phenomenologically clarified meaning, is its ‘relative’ and even ‘relational’ senses that intertwine it with the ontological and modal entanglements I tried to unravel in the two main sections of this

<sup>15</sup> We find these kinds of formulations in Husserl’s later writings. See, for example: “Die Phantasiemöglichkeiten als Varianten des Eidos schweben nicht frei in der Luft, sondern sind konstitutiv bezogen auf mich in meinem Faktum... erst dadurch wird das Eidos die Form der Möglichkeit von Seiendem. Somit geht die Wirklichkeit der Möglichkeit voraus und gibt den Phantasiemöglichkeiten erst die Bedeutung von *realen Möglichkeiten*” (Hua XXIX, p. 85f.; my emphasis).

<sup>16</sup> For a much more detailed discussion of the different senses of possibility in Husserl and their systematic relations to his notion of essences see Zhok 2016 and Aguirre 1991.

paper. This makes understanding and researching them a much more complex and difficult task, but it by no means makes this task superfluous. On the contrary, rather than having to understand this distinction only ‘once’ to use it ‘once and for all,’ it has to be continuously investigated, in different contexts and domains, and re-understood, at hopefully increasing levels of ‘adequacy.’

This is ultimately not only a phenomenological-ontological task, but, and here I have the very concerns in mind with which I began this article, also an ethical (as Husserl himself saw) and political one. It requires the phenomenological critique, in ‘historical *Besinnung*,’ not only of other sciences and philosophical traditions, as Husserl so strongly advocated in his *Crisis* (Hua VI), but also of phenomenology itself understood as an actual historical science and practice, with *its* ‘entanglements’ in the historical lifeworld. What holds for the basic concepts of all sciences, *a fortiori* holds for all the ‘correlative’ and ‘relational’ concepts of phenomenology: a priori–a posteriori, real–ideal, fact–essence, passive–active, founding–founded, pure–impure, free–unfree, consciousness–world, noesis–noema, real–ideal, perception–phantasy, nature–spirit, etc. Even though they have undergone multiple critiques by Husserl and later phenomenologists, and are already in part results of such critiques,<sup>17</sup> this kind of critique can only ever make sense in being performed in perpetuity. As Elisabeth Ströker puts it:

These are thus in their omnitemporal, ahistorical marks on the world, still themselves a historical occurrence within world history; once upon a time entered into it, developing and changing, also perishing and vanishing in parts—and yet enduring and persisting in what has been once posited as standard of valid cognition, what has become binding as guideline for the scientific search for truth, and *whose Once has been in this respect intended as a Once-and-for-all* (Ströker 1987, p. 173; my translation).

In this context, we must pay attention to the historical genesis of concepts, their hierarchies and interrelations, not only in the generative sense of history, but also in the genetic sense. By this I mean that we must keep in mind that with whatever phenomenological distinction we draw, we lift something out of its lived noetic-noematic nexus and thus (relatively) absolutize it. As Husserl himself remarks, “by the manifold interweaving of theoretical and other acts, essential phenomenological distinctions arise which can be seen more easily than they can be clearly marked off” (Hua IV, §5, p. 11/13). Whatever our given interest and standpoint lend prominence to has a background of interwoven acts; whatever we distinguish in analysis, remains inseparable from the life of consciousness, which it is embedded in and remains relative to: “No line of knowledge, no single truth may be absolutized and isolated” (Hua VI, p. 339/291; cf. Hua VI, §§ 40, 70).

<sup>17</sup> Think, for example, of Heidegger’s replacing *Bewusstsein* with *Dasein*, or of Husserl’s coining of concepts such as noesis/noema, lifeworld, etc.

Within the framework of Husserlian phenomenology at least, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of how to perform the kind of critique required here without recognizing historically and interculturally open and trained eidetic analyses as insufficient but necessary means,<sup>18</sup> and thereby without historically and interculturally open and trained imagination (cf. Jansen 2018b). It requires recognition of the complex ‘entangled’ nature of what we are investigating (lifeworld), our (cultural, historical, etc.) position in it, our means to do so (consciousness), as well as special training in such ‘entanglements’ that are specific to our respective focus of investigation. However, it also requires safeguarding that very relative freedom we have to imagine what we would not be able to consider if we never, not even in admittedly very relatively pure phantasy, attempted to “slacken” (Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. xv) our ties to reality and imagined possibilities that we do not (yet)<sup>19</sup> consider real.

Only by continuously refining these insights and practices, and by protecting and using that real imaginary freedom, can we collectively make use of what Adorno called the ‘utopian surplus’ of eidetic phenomenology<sup>20</sup>. In his eyes, this is phenomenology’s strongest suit, “the eidetician’s paradoxical boldness,” whose paradoxicality I had very much in mind when writing this article. As Adorno puts it:

Not *the eidetician’s paradoxical boldness* provokes criticism. In it the best *agens* of phenomenology manifests itself; the *utopian surplus beyond the accepted world of things*; the latent drive to let, in philosophy, the possible come forth in the actual and the actual from the possible, instead of being satisfied with the surrogate of a truth drawn from mere facts and their conceptual ‘extension.’ (Adorno 1990, p. 201; my translation and emphasis)

Let’s continue to be paradoxically bold. Let’s continue to play our strongest suit. And let’s continue, to transform the real possibilities of the present and future by using our ‘relatively’ pure phantasy in thought as well as in action.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For important work already being done in this vein see, for example, Aldea (2016, 2019) and the various contributions to Aldea and Allen 2016.

<sup>19</sup> In the second (on feeling and value) and third volume (on will and action) of the just published *Studien zur Struktur des Bewusstseins*, we find passages in which Husserl reflects on the porous boundaries between pure and real possibility. For example, when we attempt to do something in a purely imaginary scenario, this can ultimately affect our sense of real possibility. Husserl calls this “possibility on the basis of an hypothesis” (*Möglichkeit aufgrund eines hypothetischen Ansatzes*) because it involves imagining ourselves as if we were able to do something that we know we are not really able to do (Hua XLIII/3, p. 112).

<sup>20</sup> For an exceptionally clear discussion of the connection between existentialist notions of freedom and the priority of possibility over actuality, in particular between Husserl’s and Heidegger’s overlapping views in this regard, see Aguirre (1991).

<sup>21</sup> For references to primary resources (Husserl texts and materials) other than the ones mentioned here, see the shared bibliography for the *Husserl Studies* special issue this paper is part of.

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