

OVERCOMING MATERIAL TYPIFICATION IN OPEN INFINITY. IN DEFENSE OF HUSSERL'S EIDETIC VARIATION

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Abstract. Husserl considers essences as the product of a method called eidetic variation, which has been widely charged with both circularity and the incapacity to escape material typification. The purpose of this paper is to show that, though several lines of defence have successfully overcome the former, solving the latter is still in need of further research.

Key words: Husserl, eidetic variation, essence, circularity.

Introduction

Husserl's method of eidetic variation is meant to protect the conceiving of essences from the prejudice of any presupposition of any kind. Thus, the role of eidetic variation is to ground the essences on an objectivity freed from the particular and, conversely, to see the particulars just as possibilities of the essences, where phantasy or imagination is the main vehicle for reaching the desired position.

The method has yet faced wide criticism, mainly emerged from two different standpoints; the first, and most widely spread throughout the literature, is the accusation of circularity. The line of argumentation roughly demands a clarification on how can anyone be asked in advance, to select an instance of an eidos, if the method itself is meant to achieve exactly such knowledge.

On the other hand, people like Alfred Schütz have expressed concerns with regard to the contingency of the purifying process itself, namely referring to the fact that the method provides no assurance that type limitations specific to concreteness could not 'slip' in all the imaginary variants of the given object.

Though several lines of defense have successfully overcome the first issue, regarding the circularity of the method, I will argue that solving the second one is still in need of further research. In this respect, a recent defense brought to Husserlian eidetic variation by David Kasmier manages, as opposed to previous lines of defense, to hint to a plausible clarification on the matter, covering both the above mentioned accusations.

In the first part of this paper, I will give a short account with regard to the method of eidetic variation as present in Husserl's Ideas I, and an overview of the two main lines of criticism.

In the second section, I will present the defenses brought to the method by Richard Zaner and David Kashmir.

Finally, I will argue that David Kashmir's defense is both closer to the Husserlian spirit, and succeeds in overcoming Schütz criticism, as opposed to all previous anti-circularity defense attempts.

1. Free variation might be too free

Among the multitude of highly disputed Husserlian proposals is the one that places attaining essences as product of a process called 'eidetic variation' (Husserl 1983: 50-51). This method is meant to protect any possible account of how we conceive essences from the prejudice of the 'natural attitude'. The general framework of this demand is Husserl's rejection of the nominalist thesis. To motivate this, he claims that there is a clear separation between the "apodictic insights"¹ and being exposed to the actuality of particulars or between the sight of the essences and the perception of particulars. Even a mathematical account of reality is not enough. "Eidetic sciences" are also manifestations rooted in the natural attitude. Overcoming the stage of actual (naïve) spatio-temporality given by the appearances does not mean that the essences are necessarily cut off from the particulars or sensuous data; it means that sensuous data is just a possibility of the essences.

In other words, by putting the eidetic variation in act, Husserl hopes to dissolve the metaphysical residuum which distorts the process of obtaining purity concerning essence, by replacing the actual experience of an object (given, the appearance) with a fictitious one, in order to reach a state of objectivity. This new kind of objectivity has met wide criticism. The most popular line of critique puts forth the circularity thesis with regard to eidetic variation; namely, the concern evolves around the very possibility of seeking the essence in the absence of any clear account regarding what is being searched for. On the other hand, scholars have expressed mistrust in the absolute 'purity' of the attained eidōs from the prejudices of the typification specific to the natural attitude.

The huge amount of interpretations is the product of analyzing different stages of Husserlian discourse, and, thus, they are not always compatible with each other.

¹ "What we usually call evidence and intellectual sight [...] is appositional, doxic and adequately preventive consciousness which "exclude being otherwise"; the positing is motivated in a quite exceptional manner by adequate givenness and is, in the highest sense, an act of "reason". The arithmetical example(s) illustrate that for us. In the example of the landscape we have, it is true, a seeing, but not an evidence in the usual pregnant sense of the word, an "intellectual seeing". Observing more precisely, we note two differences. In one example it is the matter of essences ; in the other, a matter of something individual; secondly the eidetic example the originary givenness is adequate, whereas in the example from the sphere of experience it is inadequate. [...] differences [...] will prove to be significant with respect to the kind of evidence". See also author side note: Eidetic seeing vs. seeing of something individual (Husserl 1983: 329).

For the moment, I will limit myself to a brief account of the main reproach, namely that concerning the problem of intentionality contributing to its own fulfillment. More precisely, criticism has maintained that, either intending an object in certain way implies a level of already-acquired knowledge with regard to what the essential feature of object might be, or encountering the essence is, at least, improbable.

Husserl's proposed method of accessing the eidos has been, on one hand, accused of lacking specific laws under which it should function. If the method's aim is to produce instances totally arbitrarily, and without restriction, matter of facts (possibilities) that are not 'like' those being investigated could be 'allowed in'.

J.N. Mohanty described this concern, with regard to the possibility of a never ending variation effort. Transposition of the given objects must be limited by a principle; otherwise, the possibility of attaining the essence seems at least contingent:

[...] the method requires that at some point in my imaginatively fabricating variants, I must be able to say 'this is not any longer an \emptyset . How can I say 'this is not any longer an \emptyset ' unless I have already an acquaintance with what that something must be like in order to be counted as an \emptyset , or what something must be like in order to be ruled out as an \emptyset (Mohanty 1989: 33).

Accordingly, it is impossible to 'see' the universal because we face a problem of open infinity of actual and possible examples. The identity under which an object functions would dissipate into unlimited possibilities.

Along with above mentioned line of argumentation comes John Scanlon's criticism: "if the method is meant to achieve knowledge of eide [Pure Essences], how can anyone be asked, in advance, to select an instance of an eidos and then to imagine a series of arbitrarily varied instances of the same eidos?" (1997: 168).

How can someone perform the free variation, which requires producing a multitude of 'alike-nesses', if he has no account of what is the specific criterion for that likeness? In the virtue of what would consciousness deliberate that any virtual example shares an essence with the actual modality of the object? This line of criticism is different in nuance from the previous, and stronger than it might seem at the first glance. Namely, it implies that either you must know before the eidetic variation what is the essence you want to purify or, otherwise, that the method might multiply the exact property which lacks any essential sense. In other words, it seems that no matter the level of 'givenness', it might be impossible through free phantasy to have eidetic insights.

Another manner of questioning the validity of free variation is to argue that consciousness, as being the locus for finding the essences, cannot invent its own limits. Here is Klaus Held:

[...] those limits which are discovered by consciousness while running through the variants are clearly already given to it [...] Rather, it bumps into them; they are the

boundaries beyond which such a running through of the variants cannot go. What sets such boundaries for phantasy in its free play? What engages varying consciousness in such a way that rejection can bring the invariants in it forward? (2003: 32)

So, if the origin of the essences must be found during ideation and not before, how are these essences interrelated with the objects? Consciousness does not seem to be a product of the actual perceived object but vice-versa, and from this it cannot set limits to essences, therefore the latter could become merely a continuum, open to constant redefining.

2. Free variation might not be so free

Another reproach addressed to the method of eidetic variation regards the lack of assurance that the limitations of concreteness could not ‘slip’ in all imaginary variants of the (given) object. At this second level of criticism, it has been argued that free variation might not be so free from the natural attitude. Alfred Schütz argues that the natural attitude is, in this respect, impossible to overcome:

Is it possible to grasp by means of free variations in phantasy the eidos of a concrete species or genus, unless these variations are limited by the frame of the type in terms of which we have experienced in the natural attitude the object from which the process of ideation starts as a familiar one, as such and such an object within the life world? Can these free variations in phantasy reveal anything else but the limits established by such typification? (1959: 164)

Indicating the arbitrariness of the imagined examples as a central variation point could be insufficient to grant that the discovery is more than an empirical essence for the object. In other words, it could be the case that someone is inducing through imagination an infinite catena of the same contingent property. If we allow for the objects of the eidetic effort to be ‘examples’, or members of types, entering the imaginative process, we do not escape the prejudice of the natural attitude.

If the eidetic variation starts with an actual moment of experience as part of a type (or the object is represented as a distorted identity) with biased limitation, how could this fact be overcome in imagination? Thus, a possible argument for rejecting free variation would state that the method just multiplies ‘natural’ properties in imagination, and, in doing so, the essence is grounded in the natural attitude. In this case, the prejudice would be that the natural limitations of the objects are maintained during the whole process.

In an abrupt manner, this thesis can be synthesized by interpreting the objects like invariant micro-ontologisms with independent existence (prototypes), and, thus, the essence is merely an actual type. This interpretation allows Schütz to question the possibility of freedom to reach more than an actual type for an experienced fact. Thus, free variation “can reveal nothing that was not pre-constituted by the type” (Idem); therefore the eidetic distillation is impossible.

Obviously, this result would be far from what Husserl had in mind claiming eidetic variation as the method which offers reliable access to purified essences.

3. First defense: clarification vs. discovery

There are two major interpretations on Husserl's work in this respect, each of them aiming to defend the method of free variation against critiques regarding the alleged circularity involved in the process of attaining objectified knowledge of essences.

First attempt to remove circularity objections is to interpret free variation as a fine tuning method for obtaining essences. Accordingly to this approach, eidetic variation is merely shifting attention from the individual/particular/actual object to a not- yet -clarified essence (Zaner 1973a: 32). The main idea is that, before the eidetic variation, we need to choose what aspect we are interested into:

[...] the validity of the method of free variation always rests on the apprehension of the intentionality of the consciousness and its indented correlates. It is from the apprehension of noetic-noematic character of any actual or possible experience that the method of free variation begins (Zaner 1973b: 202).

Accordingly, eidetic variation requires an already present intention of a type as an intuition of the furtherness, but that type is not clearly determined and consequently neither are the essences. Anyway, taking the object as an example of its type doesn't imply that we have a clear knowledge of what is its essence. So, shifting to types of the objects must take place despite the lack of clarity the specific content of the type itself may have initially. In the process of extracting the essence, the actual object is isolated as noema (and its necessary relations as noesis). The process of variation, (initially vague by the virtue of only partial grasping) offers a determinate essence of the object. In this way, the apparent circularity is not vicious due to the fact that the method of free phantasy is a method for clarifying the essential character which is initially given in an unclear manner: "[...] when the actuality- mode (stated noematically, the givenness-mode) – disregarding the changes in continuous flux – necessarily varies according to certain discrete types, something essentially common always still remains throughout the variations. Noematically, what is preserved as identical sense [...]" (Husserl 1983: 292).

Thus, it is true that the method requires that we think about objects as subsequents of identities, but this does not entail that we already know the essential character of the object in order to treat that object as an example of its kind. Free phantasy deals with unclarity of types which can be clarified in the process of variation. Practically, the arbitrariness is indicated as guarantor of escaping that vicious circle, the point of departure being followed by the clarification of the essences. Using the analogy with geometry, Husserl argues that essences could be obtained when elevating 'seeing' to imagination: "Even when one 'ponders' while

looking at the figure, the processes of thinking that follow are, with respect to their sensuous substratum, processes of phantasy the results of which fix the new lines in the figure”(1983: 156-157).

Essences are only sourced in how objects are given to consciousness and constitute themselves form appearances, and not by the virtue of being member of certain types. And this does not presuppose that the intention of a particular (a moment) or a starting intuition has already access to a specific type, just that it is about to find it. Also, it is not necessary that variant cases are cases of the same type; they are only restricted to share the same actual property. Zaner’s interpretation assumes the validity of the method despite the coexistence of material types along with the formal ones.

Still, while understanding actuality as modality of a universal type is a part of rejecting circularity (something unknown is to be found), it does not explain how the access to the ‘most a priori’ level is to be guaranteed. So free variation could be performed without the danger of circularity, but there is no guaranty that it will produce the most fundamental character for the matter in question. To conclude, this interpretation rejects the accusation of circularity but does not cover the problem of the purity of essences. At this point, questions about the famous regional ontologies² arise; namely is it possible to establish a hierarchy among those ontologies and consider one of them as being the most fundamental? And, accordingly, is it possible to speak about a hierarchy among types?

4. Solving the ‘residuum problem’

The second important family of considerations into the defense of the method of eidetic variation is based on the distinction between actual/material universals and ‘pure’ essences. Those pure essences can be discovered by overcoming the actuality in enhancing variational efforts beyond the consciousness of the concreteness. According to David Kasmier (2010), Husserl recommends a high dose of imagination in the process of attaining essences in order to reach a non-empirical quality of those essences (2010: 23). Somehow, this way of interpreting eidetic variation is rooted in the belief in the legitimacy of switching from material/empiric to ‘pure’ as possible/thought universals. This second understanding of Husserl implies a rejection of the empirical moment for the starting point in the demarche of obtaining objective knowledge. Empirical types are experienced at the level of actuality and they are the subject of natural sciences. Through modalisation, Husserl rejects a priori sciences the naturalistic ones.

The sole purpose of the process is to reject any biased grasp of essences or partial account for identity of the fact (object) in question. The universal must be a priori in the sense of a necessary general *form* of existence for any state of affaires. So, in eidetic variation, we find a tool which reveals the necessary way of any

² “Husserl divided ontology into formal ontology and several material or regional ontologies. Formal ontology deals with formal ontological concepts, those concerned with objects in the most general form of existence” (Simons 1995: 312).

existence uncontaminated by the accidents of the physical interpretation. The pure essences are to be found by overcoming the level of the particular and contingent (which can have its own essences, like extension).

That is to say, it is true that mathematical sciences could have a particular *eidos* (for example the space bound determination in geometry), but Husserl's interest rests on the most universal types, in which a fact can recognize its apodicticity: "[the] necessary general form, without which an object such as this thing, as an example of its kind, would not be thinkable at all" (Husserl 1977: 54).

Thus, the aim of eidetic reduction is to raise the level of knowledge to the most a priori law under which a fact is possible. This task is best performable in imagination, beyond which we encounter the limits of absurdity. Doing so, an open infinity is offered for any particular and, consequently, an apodictic general 'reality' for any modality. In short, in removing circularity one needs to understand Husserl's ideation not through the glance of dependency (particulars as part of types), but as a basis for an intuition of pure universals. This primordial mode of the object (beyond which the fact stops to exist in any possible way) is revealed by the process of eidetic variation which works in the virtue of two principles: 1) the already bracketed relation of the fact with the existence of the world, and 2) the possibility of finding in imagination an unlimited number of subsequents for the universal ("open infinity") (Kasmier 2010: 24). Husserl demands this open infinity to ensure objectivity for the essences exactly as a mathematician conceives a function which links an infinite numerical domain with its co-domain. In fact, the defender of this account is aware of the possible empiric qualities of a moment (given fact), but he holds that Husserl choose to ignore those qualities and, like a geometer who ignores the actual materiality of a worldly figure and has access to an analogue "open infinity", to be concerned with the pure essences of the given, according to its descriptive formal ontology (here, formal referring to the apodictic form of an object not logical formalism). So, Schütz's doubts can be dispelled by conceiving the purity of essences as to be found in the open infinity, where all natural characters can be washed away.

Conclusion

Zander's interpretation of Husserl's eidetic variation successfully removes circularity, showing that before the process an explicit type is chosen, and the fundamental character of this 'x' type is revealed in the ideational demarche. This 'explicit' intention is the law according to which (against Scanlon's views), during the free variation, we do find the criterion to accept or to reject the fictive cases. Roughly speaking, first we 'see' something, and then, in accord with what we have seen, a clear and distinct idea of the given fact arises in ideation.

Despite the success in avoiding circularity, this understanding of free variation leaves open the problem of induction and consequently fails to show how this method is different from an arbitrary abstraction. In other words, a fact/object

is the pole of multiple and very different properties and is hard to elect the fundamental ones. The main weak point of Zaner's account is that it leaves open the possibility of failing to reach the level of fully grasped essences, and to remain in a space of partial description. On the other hand, Kasmier both solves the problem of circularity and successfully overcomes the difficulties described by Schütz. The danger described by the latter's position is that any intuition of the type considered before eidetic variation could be fundamentally limited by the extension of the particular/ actual case and, thus, to just end-up in a broadened extension (in a Cartesian sense). A fictitious scenario is the completion of fact taken purely in all its possibilities. Thus, the method rejects the possibility of an actual/material 'typification'. The difference is quite clear: "the extension of a pure essence is not limited to the actual world" (Kasmier 2010: 29).

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