

Husserlian Intentionality and Contingent Universals

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Abstract

Can one hold both that universals exist in the strongest sense (i.e., neither in language nor in thought, nor in their instances) *and* that they exist contingently—and still make sense? Edmund Husserl thought so. In this paper I present a version of his view regimented in terms of modal logic *cum* possible-world semantics. Crucial to the picture is the distinction between two accessibility relations with different structural properties. These relations are cashed out in terms of two Husserlian notions of imagination: world-bound and free.

After briefly presenting the Husserlian framework—his intentionalism, idealism and how universals figure in them—I set up my modal machinery, model the target view, and show that, depending on the chosen accessibility relation, the necessary or the contingent existence of universals can be derived. Importantly, since for Husserl both relations are *bona fide*, both derivations are legitimate. In Husserl's philosophy, then, there is room for both necessary and contingent universals.

Keywords: Husserl, intentionality, modality, imagination, universals.

Some philosophers believe in universals and some dismiss them as a myth. The former think that, in addition to—say—all red things, there is a further thing: the property of being red. Disbelievers, by contrast, have it that the property of being red is at worst a mere *façon de parler*, at best a linguistic, conceptual or mathematical construction, but certainly not a genuine 'thing'. Interestingly, in *both* camps virtually everyone agrees that if universals exist, they exist as a matter of necessity—or, as disbelievers would put it, that if they existed, they would exist as a matter of necessity.

What if all of them were wrong? That is to say, what if universals, conceived as *bona fide* objects distinct from, and irreducible to, their instances existed contingently? Does the notion of a contingent but genuine universal even make sense? Few philosophers have maintained that it does. One of them is Edmund Husserl, who in *Experience and Judgement* (1939) holds that universals come in two kinds—pure universals, or *eide*, and empirical universals—only one of which, namely the

pure, enjoys necessary existence (Husserl 1973, §82). In this paper I present a version of his position, regimented in terms of modal logic and possible-world semantics.

I need to spend at least a few words on the development of Husserl's outlook on universals. While doing so, however, I will not embark in fine-grained scholarly questions (Husserl says so-and-so in book *x* but denies it in manuscript *y* and then takes up an intermediate position in letter *z*). Not because I think they are trivial (they are not), but because here I am interested in the view itself. The adamant Husserlian scholar may thus read this paper as being about a view that is not *Husserl's* but *Husserlian*—as at the very least it does resemble Husserl's own view:

Empirical generalities [...] bring with them the copositing of an empirical sphere in which they have the place of their possible realization in particulars. If we speak of plants, cities, houses, and so on, we intend therewith in advance *things of the world*, and in fact the world of our actual, real experience (not a merely possible world); accordingly, we think of these concepts as *actual* generalities, that is, bound to this world (Husserl 1973: 330).

Notoriously, at the time of the *Logical Investigations* (1900-1901) Husserl was a Platonist: his view was that universals—items such as the property of being red or the relation of being friends with someone—are non-spatiotemporal objects existing independently of our minds and irreducible to their instances (even to their possible instances). The *Investigations* are indeed an attempt at investigating our epistemic access to universals Platonically understood, as well as to other ideal objects (these days we call them 'abstract') such as numbers and meanings.

By 1913, however, Husserl had become an idealist, and his outlook on universals had changed accordingly: he still retained the view that universals are irreducible to their instances, but he now dropped mind-independence.¹ However, he did not become a nominalist for that. He thought that universals are independent of any particular subject's mind (and thus, in particular, are not 'in' the subject's mind), but that their existence-conditions—along with the existence-conditions of every object, including spatiotemporal ones—should be spelled out in terms of consciousness and, ultimately, of intentionality. Some scholars, I should mention, deny that Husserl ever became an idealist. That Husserl was indeed an idealist is an assumption of this paper; if you need convincing, my suggestion is to look at the case A.D. Smith (2003) makes, which I endorse.

Now, although a number of idealistic existence-conditions for universals can be made out from Husserl's texts, I will only rely on one—which is, in a sense to be specified in due course, prior to (required by) the others. My treatment here may be seen as the core of a wider regimentation including all the conditions. Obviously a comprehensive treatment would be desirable; but first things first. Restricting attention to the relevant, necessary but not sufficient existence-condition simplifies things considerably and yields a reliable and fairly elegant picture, later to be developed on a step-by-step basis.

As far as the problem itself goes—whether, that is, universals may exist contingently—there is of course a disadvantage in working within Husserlian ideal-

¹ According to Mark Van Atten (2007), Husserl also dropped atemporality—albeit in a qualified sense. I tend to agree, but I will disregard the issue in this paper.

ism: the resulting discussion will not map on the current (or most of the traditional) debate on universals, because most believers in universals are realist, and most disbelievers disbelieve what believers believe, i.e., that universals exist in a realist sense (that is, mind-independently).² Nonetheless, I think, Husserl's view is worth taking into account for at least three reasons. One historical: seldom if ever have Husserlian scholars touched upon, let alone unpacked, this particular issue—contingent universals (Sowa 2007 is a notable exception). Secondly, Husserlian idealism is a curious environment, a natural habitat to some interesting breeds such as, for example, intuitionistic choice sequences: the only mathematical objects that develop in time (Van Atten 2007, 2015). I see contingent universals as drinking from the same pools and grazing the same grass. The third reason is that, I suspect, once regimented as I propose to do here, Husserl's view can be extended to realistic environments—though this, I have to admit, at this stage is mere conjecture. After briefly introducing, in Section 1, Husserlian intentionality and idealism—not comprehensively, but rather only as much as I need for my purposes—I will proceed to my regimentation of the theory. This will be in terms of basic modal logic and possible-world semantics. In Section 2 I will model the main concepts and claims presented in Section 1 by introducing some bespoke non-logical predicates and formalising the two main sentences to be proved: that universals exist necessarily and that universals exist contingently. In Sections 3 and 4 I will discuss accessibility between possible worlds and imagination. In the Husserlian framework, accessibility is to be cashed out in terms of imagination. Husserl has two notions of imagination: world-bound and free. In Section 3 I will characterise them, while in Section 4 I will show how they yield two distinct accessibility relations and illustrate their structural properties. Finally, in Section 5 I will show that, depending on the chosen type of imagination, the necessary or the contingent existence of universals can be derived.

1. Universals in Husserlian Idealism

The core idea of Husserlian idealism is that the conditions for the existence of objects, including universals, are to be specified in terms of consciousness. And since for Husserl conscious mental performances are intentional, in Husserlian idealism an object exists if and only if it meets certain conditions spelled out in terms of intentionality. In this section, then, I will sketch a Husserlian theory of intentionality, expand it into idealism, and show how universals figure in it, especially as regards their existence-conditions. As I mentioned earlier, I will only rely on one among several such conditions, hoping that my treatment may be expanded to include the others.

1.1. Husserlian Intentionalism

For Husserl, as well as for other philosophers, a wide class of mental acts are 'intentional': they are, by their own nature, *directed to something*. To think, for example, is to think of something; to love is to love something; to fear is to fear

² Clearly, by saying that Husserl was not a realist about universals I do not mean to say that he was an eliminativist: quite the opposite! I just mean that if a realist about universals is one that believes that universals exist mind-independently, then Husserl was not a realist but an idealist. Yet he did not doubt that universals exist. The realism-idealism issue here is, if you will, metaphysical, not ontological.

something; to hallucinate is to hallucinate something; and so on. And it seems that this directedness is part of what those acts are. One way of putting this is as follows: intentional acts link, by their own nature, a subject (a mind) to an object. Intentionality is thus a relation, whose first-place relatum is the subject and whose second-place relatum is the 'intentional object'. As some intentionalists point out, however, the intentionality relation has the following peculiarity: that its second-place relatum, the intentional object, is 'existence-independent' (Smith and McIntyre 1982, Drummond 1990).

Intentionalists of this stripe, including Husserl but excluding notorious intentionality-theorist such as John Searle (Searle 1973), deny that the objects of intentional acts are entities—where an entity is something that exists, that is part of reality. Of course, for there to be an intentional act there must be a subject that performs it (Husserl would say: that 'lives' it). However, the object of the act need not exist. Why think so?³ Because it is a phenomenological fact about consciousness that we can be aware of non-existents: we can think of Santa Claus, for example, or—if our calculus is rather rusty—look for the unique and completely determined result of $\int x + 1 dx$; or we can fall in love with a character in a book, or fear the ghost of Abraham Lincoln (which reportedly haunts the White House)—or, finally, hallucinate a fat man in our empty doorway. Even in these cases, intentionalists hold, we are aware of something, we have something over and against our consciousness, just as well as in cases in which what we are aware of exists in reality.

As A.D. Smith, a prominent intentionalist, puts it:

Central to intentionalism is the denial that the expression 'is aware of' must express a relation between two entities. On this view, to speak of an object of awareness is not necessarily to speak of an entity that is an object of awareness: for some objects [of awareness] do not exist (Smith 2002: 224).

That being their position, intentionalists need a way to construe the notion of 'object' that does not include the claim that an object, as such, exists. What we may call the Husserlian way is as follows. Talk of a mental performance's having an intentional object is, from an ontological standpoint, *just* talk of *the mental performance*, just the description of a particular way in which the subject is minded. So that, for example, the sentence 'I am thinking of Lincoln's ghost' does not by itself carry a commitment to the existence of a certain object, Lincoln's ghost; it only carries a commitment to the existence of a certain mental act, my thinking of the ghost, whose descriptive character (as Husserl would put it: whose descriptive essence) is best captured in terms of directedness to an object.

It is in this sense that, for the Husserlian intentionalist, the notion of intentional object has absolutely no ontological import (apart from implying that there exists a subject who is minded in a particular way), and is, rather, merely phenomenological: it only serves to adequately describe a certain class of experiences (namely, the intentional ones). And it is in this sense that existence and non-existence do not accrue to intentional objects qua intentional objects. In Husserl's words:

³ Different answers to the question may be found in the literature. For a discussion, see Spinelli 2016. Here I will pursue what we may call the phenomenological line.

[...] only one thing is present, the intentional experience, whose essential descriptive character is the intention [i.e., the specific directedness] in question. [...] If this experience is present, then, *eo ipso* and through its own essence, the intentional 'relation' to an object is achieved and an object is 'intentionally present'; these two phrases mean precisely the same. And of course such an experience may be present in consciousness [...] although its object does not exist at all. [...] The object is 'meant', i.e., to 'mean' it is an experience, but it [the object] is then merely entertained in thought, and is nothing in reality. [...] If, however, the intended object exists, nothing becomes phenomenologically different. [...] I think of Jupiter as I think of Bismarck, of the tower of Babel as I think of Cologne Cathedral, of a regular thousand-sided polygon as of a regular thousand-faced solid (Husserl 2001: 98-99).

A helpful way of understanding the view is in terms of reduction. As Smith has it, Husserlian intentionalism is an *ontologically reductive* view of intentional objects, because it holds that intentional objects are nothing over and above the experiences of which they are the objects. It is not, however, a psychologically (or, better, phenomenologically) reductive view: because for the Husserlian intentionalist the only adequate way of describing the experiences in question is as being directed towards objects. That is what Husserl means when he says that directedness belongs to the 'essential descriptive character' of the acts. In the analytic tradition, Smith is perhaps the prominent purveyor of this outlook (see his treatment of hallucination in Smith 2002).

Of course, Husserlian intentionalism is not immune to objections. Here are two. First, why trust phenomenology implicitly, as Husserl does? Could not phenomenology be deceiving? If it is, then what the Husserlian intentionalist takes to be facts are really no facts at all—and the whole theory goes with them. Secondly, does it make sense to speak of a relation with a non-existent relatum? Is it not written into the notion that for a relation to obtain its relata must first exist? If the answer is yes, then the Husserlian intentionalist is in trouble. And the fact that intentionality is a relation between an existent relatum and a non-existent one—rather than a relation between two non-existents—might be even more troubling.

The Husserlian could reply that while the claim that a relation must have relata is uncontroversial, the claim that a relation must have *existent relata* is far from obviously true. If correct, this would defuse the objection. Be that as it may, since my aim here is not to defend Husserlian intentionalism, but rather work within it, I will assume that these and other issues can be addressed satisfactorily, and carry on.

1.2. Husserlian Idealism

So we have seen what intentional objects are in Husserlian intentionalism, and in particular that existence and non-existence do not accrue to them as such: some intentional objects exist, some do not. A paradigm example is the pair perception-hallucination: both are intentional performances, but in the perceptual case the object exists, while in the hallucinatory case it does not. This is a distinction that we obviously want to make. Yet how exactly is it to be made?

Someone that we might call an intentional realist (a realist that buys into Husserlian intentionalism) would answer something like: 'That is actually quite easy: even though in both the perceptual and the hallucinatory case there is an intentional object, in the first but not in the second case the object is really out there'. An answer that, for all its *prima facie* plausibility, would not satisfy Husserl.

The reason is that it is simply not clear what ‘really out there’ means. What is doing the explanatory work (explanatory, that is, with respect to the concept of existence)? Certainly not ‘really’: appealing to a distinction between appearance and reality will not do, because what the distinction turns on—the fact that in one case the object exists, is part of reality, and in the other it does not—is precisely what needs explaining.

So the important bit must be ‘out there’. But what does it mean? Clearly it cannot mean that in perceptual cases, unlike in hallucinatory ones, the object is ‘over and above the mental act’, because that is just to say that the object exists—and this is, again, what needs explaining. Nor can it point to the fact that in the perceptual but not in the hallucinatory case the object is in space and time: because surely a hallucinated object is hallucinated as being in space and time. Thus, either the claim is that in the perceptual case the object is ‘really’ in space and time—and we are back to the previous point; or the claim is off-target, because, again, hallucinated objects are in space and time too.

A different approach available to the intentional realist is in terms of mind-independence: in the perceptual case, the object of awareness is not simply an object of awareness, but is mind-independent—it belongs to the mind-independent world—whereas in the hallucinatory case it is only an object of awareness. While it is not obvious that this illuminates the concept of existence in any way, Husserl definitely thinks, and repeatedly states, that the very idea of a mind-independent world is ‘nonsense’ (quoted in Smith 2003: 182; also Husserl 1969: 204). This cuts the discussion short; yet it is unclear to me whether for him it is a motivation for, equivalent to, or a consequence of idealism.

Finally, the intentional realist might take existence as a primitive: ‘At the end of the day’, he will say, ‘we must have primitives; and what better primitive than existence?’. And here we come to the main reason why Husserl is not satisfied with intentional realism. The reason is that he was a Cartesian: he thought that, outside or at the edge of our ‘natural’, everyday attitude towards the world, ontological statements are always liable to be doubted. Appealing to a mind-independent world to account for the existence of some intentional objects seems therefore suspicious to him: because, he maintains, while in the natural attitude we simply and firmly believe that there is such a mind-independent world, philosophically that belief needs justification. Hence the need, which since as early as 1906 was the motivation behind the so-called ‘transcendental turn’, to give every ontological statement a phenomenological reading (this is what the notorious ‘epochè’ and ‘transcendental reduction’ amount to).⁴ Thus, although we obviously want to say that some intentional objects exist while others do not, the only satisfactory way of cashing this out is, for Husserl, again in terms of consciousness—of intentionality.

Admittedly, this latter form of “methodological” idealism is weaker than the ‘mind-independence is nonsense’ stance we saw before. It is perhaps something of a stretch even to call it idealism. Yet, insofar as it includes the claim that existence is to be understood in terms of consciousness, I think the qualification is justified.

⁴ This implies that phenomenology is the fundamental element of Husserl philosophy. Oddly, this view has been challenged (Smith 2007). I do not believe there is anything to be said for any of the opposing theories. Yet to defend my position would take me too far afield. It is enough, for the sake of integrity, to have raised awareness of a debate lurking in this connection.

Thus, for Husserl, in order to account for the distinction between existing and non-existing intentional objects we should look at the phenomenology of the relevant intentional performances. And what we see once we do so is, for him, that what distinguishes existing from non-existing intentional objects—those perceived, say, from those hallucinated—is that the former are public in a way in which the latter are not.

A hallucinated object will be available for the hallucinating subject but not for others. In fact, if prompted other subjects will deny it exists. Now you need not be an idealist to accept this. The realist can say: of course, if the object does not exist, non-hallucinating subjects will—at least in principle—deny that it does. But they will do so *because* it does not exist, not the other way round! Where is the explanation, then?

What makes Husserl an idealist is that he thinks that intersubjective confirmation is not only a necessary condition for the existence of an intentional object, but also a sufficient one. Indeed, Husserl's phenomenological account of existence consists in providing increasingly comprehensive accounts of what it is for an intentional object to be public in this sense, i.e., for it to be available *as an intentional object* to a community of subjects.

Notice that Husserl's view is not, after all, too far removed from common sense. Consider the following question: 'What do you mean when you say that the Eiffel Tower, this thing you are seeing right now in front of you, really exists?'. It is just natural, I submit, to answer it by saying something like: 'I mean that I am seeing it now, and that if I turn my head and then turn it back again I will still see it; and that if I had been here yesterday I would have seen it—and you too; and that anyone who stands here and is not blind will see it; and that anyone who has stood here since 1889 and was not blind has seen it'. The only difference—and what a difference—is that for Husserl 'I mean' is to be taken seriously, i.e., as an equivalence (in fact, probably as an analysis).

Existence, then, is cashed out in terms of the intentional performances of what Husserl calls 'transcendental intersubjectivity'. In other words, for an intentional object to exist is for it to be available not only to one subject at a given time and under specific circumstances, but to any possible subject at any suitable time and under any suitable circumstances.

Husserl's view is complex and is never put forward entirely in any one particular text. So it would be impossible for me to do it justice here. Smith 2003 is a good place to start. Here I will simply work within the Husserlian framework and without questioning it. This, of course, is not to say that the framework faces no difficulties. For example: given that intentional objects are nothing over and above a subject's mental performances, how can an intentional object—the *same* intentional object—be available to two distinct subjects, or in fact even the same subject at two particular points in time, let alone to an all-comprehensive, actual and possible transcendental intersubjectivity? To this question Husserl does have a (good?) answer, of course, and it is in terms of yet further intentional acts in which intentional objects are identified. Daredevils may approach Husserl 2005 for further detail. See also Hopkins 2016 for a critical discussion.

1.3. Universals and Existence

There is evidence that for Husserl the existence of spatiotemporal objects and the existence of ideal objects, such as numbers and indeed universals, are to be accounted for in similar ways. For example the following passage:

The *transcendence of the world* [i.e., for my purposes, the reality or the existence of the world] ... is of the same species as the *transcendence of numbers* and other [ideal] objects (Husserl 1959: 180).

A universal will thus be an existent intentional object, as opposed to a mere intentional object, if it is at the very least such that, in addition to being something someone has actual epistemic access to (e.g., something someone is actually thinking about), is something that some other possible subject has epistemic access to (e.g., thinks about). In other words, if it is public at least in a minimal sense.

In an exhaustive picture, further conditions would have to be put on the existence of universals. For example, the universal in question must not generate contradictions—the underlying thought being that a contradictory universal will be disconfirmed in a similar way as a hallucinatory object is. Thus, although the property of being the set of all sets that are not members of themselves is, under our basic condition, an existing intentional object, since it gives rise to Russell's antinomy it does not exist under the stricter, suggested condition. Here however, for reasons I have already given, I will only work with the basic criterion. There is still some work to do to get even that criterion right, however. At a first approximation the condition looks as follows:

(ExU1) For a universal u to exist in the actual world is (partly) for it to be not only an intentional object in the actual world, but also an intentional object in some possible world accessible from the actual.

Surely, though, if we are prepared to say that a given universal exists, we must also be prepared to concede that it exists *regardless* of whether someone in the actual world is thinking of it or has even ever thought of it. Take for example the property of being a pathological function (i.e., a function that is uniformly continuous in \mathbb{R} but nowhere differentiable). That property was never an intentional object before 1830, when Bernard Bolzano discovered its first instance.⁵ Surely, however, if the property exists then it existed before 1830. Moreover, it *would have existed* even if no one had ever discovered or thought about pathological functions. Otherwise it is dubious that we would be targeting a plausible, if idealistic, concept of existence—at least as far as universals are concerned. The existence-condition as it stands, then, is too strict. Let us relax it a little:

(ExU2) For a universal u to exist in the actual world is (partly) for it to be an intentional object in some possible world accessible from the actual.

Thus, in Husserlian idealism a universal exists only if, at the very least, it is possible that it should be an intentional object. Moreover, and consequently, it exists necessarily only if it is necessarily possible that it should be an intentional object; and it exists contingently if it does not exist necessarily, i.e., if it is not necessarily possible that it should be an intentional object.

A final remark—almost a side note—to dispel misunderstandings. We have seen that Husserl's view is that the existence conditions of both spatiotemporal

⁵ In fact, pathological functions only became mainstream thanks to a 1872 paper by Karl Weierstrass, and that is probably when the concept became established. Incidentally, Husserl, who had studied in Berlin under Weierstrass, was also his assistant for a short time between 1882 and 1883.

and non-spatiotemporal (ideal) objects are to be cashed out in terms of consciousness and, in fact, in similar ways. But, of course, the two accounts will differ at some level. For one thing, different types of intentional acts will be relevant in each case. In the case of spatiotemporal objects, perception will be paramount, while in the case of ideal objects thought will. So, even though ExU1 and ExU2 are, in an abstract sense, applicable to both spatiotemporal and non-spatiotemporal objects (as surely the former, if they are to be real, must be intentional objects not only in the actual world, but also in some possible world sufficiently close to the actual), once the mental performances with respect to which the relevant items are intentional objects (in the actual or in some possible world) are specified the two accounts will differ significantly.

Nonetheless, I wish to stress, they are analogous. This is, if you will, a phenomenological and idealistic take on the Meinongians' distinction between subsistence and existence. Notice, moreover, that ExU1 and ExU2, as well as their analogues for spatiotemporal objects, are only necessary existence conditions: to characterise the two types of existence fully, sufficiency clauses are needed.

1.4. Universals and Genetic Basis

I have already stressed that at no stage was Husserl a nominalist. However, he always maintained that without the prior consciousness of similarities among particulars there would be no consciousness of universals. This is not to say that for Husserl consciousness of universals reduces to consciousness of particulars: the second *Logical Investigation* is just a long argument against precisely that view. It is to say, however, that for him intentional performances that have universals as their intentional objects are based or grounded on, or at least made possible by, systems of intentional acts in which the subject becomes aware of the relevant similarities among particulars. Long and very technical analyses of the relations between these two types of acts, or systems thereof, may be found in *Experience and Judgement*.

What matters for my purpose, however, is that in Husserl's view for there to be an act directed at universal u in a given world w —and thus for u to be an intentional object in w —there must be some u -particulars in w such that the recognition, on the part of the subject, of their similarities forms the basis for the u -directed act. If the universal in question is the property of being black, for example, for it to be an intentional object in w there must be black particulars in w . *Ex post*—that is, once universal u is brought to consciousness—we say that those particulars are a (proper) subset of the extension of u : some of its instances. In fact, however, they are a privileged subset: as I will refer to them, they are the *genetic basis* of u .

In a world without a suitable genetic basis, u is simply not brought to consciousness—it is not an intentional object. That is not to say that u does not exist in that world: because existence is, as ExU2 states, the possibility of being an intentional object. Hence, for u to exist in a world w with no u -particulars in it, it is enough that 1) there is a possible world w_1 accessible from w with u -particulars in it, and 2) that u is an intentional object in w_1 .

Some remarks about possible worlds are in order. Hintikka 1975, Hintikka and Harvey 1992 and Smith and McIntyre 1982 have attempted to reconstruct (and to an extent improve) Husserl's theory of intentionality by regimenting it in

terms of possible-world semantics. They have been criticised for that: see e.g. Mohanty 1985, 1999, Drummond 1990, Welton 2000. Now, what I am attempting to do here has nothing or very little in common with those contributions. I need, however, to say something about the notion, common to most critics, that since there is ample room to doubt that Husserl ever took talk of possible worlds seriously (Mohanty 1985: 35-39—but to be fair both Hintikka 1975 and Smith and McIntyre 1982 acknowledge this), it is at least dubious that one can even start to think of legitimately reconstructing any part of Husserl's philosophy in terms of possible worlds.

This line of reasoning is fallacious: you need not take possible worlds seriously to use them. Modal actualists, for example, think that talk of possibilia ultimately reduces to talk of actualia. That, however, does not prevent them from using such talk for semantic purposes: see for example Fine 2005a, 2005b. Interestingly, Wallner 2014 argues that Husserl himself was an actualist of sorts—albeit perhaps implicitly. He calls the Husserlian brand of actualism 'phenomenological actualism'. So modal reasoning can be framed in terms of possible worlds even if possible worlds are not taken seriously from a metaphysical standpoint: one need only be a (tolerant) modal actualist, as Husserl himself arguably was.

2. Modal Machinery

Let ' $E!(u)$ at w ' mean 'Universal u exists in possible world w ', and ' $\text{Int}(u)$ at w ' mean 'Universal u is an intentional object in world w '. Let also the following be the necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of u in world w (as I said, it is in fact only necessary; I will treat it as necessary and sufficient for the sake of simplicity, and explain why that is no problem at the very end of the paper):

$$[\text{Ex}] \quad E!(u) \text{ at } w \leftrightarrow \diamond \text{Int}(u) \text{ at } w.$$

Let $@$ be the actual world. Then, given $[\text{Ex}]$ and the usual truth conditions for \diamond :

$$[\text{Ex}@] \quad E!(u) \text{ at } @ \leftrightarrow \exists w^{@Aw} (\text{Int}(u) \text{ at } w).$$

Superscripts such as ' $@Aw$ ' mean 'world $@$ has access to world w '. They are up there because I need subscripts to indicize worlds.

There are two modalised versions of $[\text{Ex}@]$. The first gives the formulation of the possible existence of u at $@$. It follows again from $[\text{Ex}]$ and the truth conditions for \diamond . The only difference is that now we have a double diamond: because possible existence of u at $@$ is the possibility of the possibility of u 's being an intentional object at $@$. A few calculations:

$$\begin{aligned} & \diamond E!(u) \text{ at } @ \\ & \diamond \diamond \text{Int}(u) \text{ at } @ \\ & \exists w^{@Aw} (\diamond \text{Int}(u) \text{ at } w) \end{aligned}$$

yield:

$$[\diamond \text{Ex}@] \quad \diamond E!(u) \text{ at } @ \leftrightarrow \exists w^{@Aw} (\exists w^{Aw_1} (\text{Int}(u) \text{ at } w_1)).$$

Then there is the formulation of the necessary existence of u at $@$. It follows from $[\text{Ex}]$ and the usual truth conditions for \square . Again a few calculations:

$$\begin{aligned} & \square E!(u) \text{ at } @ \\ & \forall w^{@Aw} (E!(u) \text{ at } w) \\ & \forall w^{@Aw} (\diamond \text{Int}(u) \text{ at } w) \end{aligned}$$

yield:

$$[\Box Ex@] \quad \Box E!(u) \text{ at } @ \leftrightarrow \forall w^{@Aw} (\exists w_1^{Aw_1} (\text{Int}(u) \text{ at } w_1)).$$

Superscripts '@Aw' and 'Aw₁' state, respectively, that *w* must be accessible from @ and that *w*₁ must be accessible from *w*. As I mentioned in the Introduction, in the next two sections (3 and 4) I will show that two accessibility relations are available in Husserlian idealism. In Section 5 I will argue that one relation gives necessarily existing universals, while the other gives contingently existing universals. In other words, depending on the chosen accessibility relation I will derive:

$$[\text{Nec}] \quad \Box E!(u) \text{ at } @$$

in one case, and:

$$[\text{Cont}] \quad \neg \Box E!(u) \text{ at } @$$

in the other.

3. World-Bound and Free Imagination

I have mentioned that part of my regimentation of Husserl's view that it makes perfect sense to speak of contingent universals consists in understanding accessibility—the A relation of Section 2—in terms of imagination. In this section I briefly present Husserl's two notions of imagination; in the next I discuss them qua accessibilities. The most instructive text to look at in this connection is Husserl 2005. Useful remarks may also be found in Husserl 2013.

As I suggested, and as Wallner 2014 argues at length, Husserl was an actualist of sorts: he thought that possible worlds, and possibilities in general, should not be understood as non-actual counterparts of our world existing just as concretely as it does. For Husserl, possibilities are ideal objects (Husserl 2001) and, in particular, they are the intentional objects of acts of imagination:

A possibility is posited when anything at all with such and such a sense is posited as something that can be realised by phantasy intuition (Husserl 2005: 661).

The notion that the achievements of our mental performances should be a reliable way of tracking possibility has been doubted by several influential analytic philosophers (most famously Yablo 1993). Husserl's view must thus be anathema for those philosophers: because for Husserl not only does imagination track possibility, but—as he would put it—'constitutes' it. In the Husserlian framework, however, this is no problem at all: because in it everything is, at some level, an achievement of our mental performances.

Possibilities, and possible worlds, are thus the intentional objects of acts of imagination. Imagination itself comes for Husserl in two species: world-bound and free imagination (*freie Phantasie*). The former term, I should mention, is not Husserl's, because—to the best of my knowledge—he only refers to it as 'phantasy' without qualifying it and rather relying on the context. World-bound imagination yields real possibility (*reale Möglichkeit*), while free imagination yields pure possibility (*reine Möglichkeit*). I have no space to follow Husserl's extremely detailed and fascinating descriptions and characterisations. They are in Husserl 2005, especially No 19 and Appendix LVII. The upshot, however, is the following.

World-bound imagination is constrained by what is the case in the actual world, while free imagination is not. Suppose, for example, that upon looking at

a red house I imagine it suddenly turning blue (not my suddenly seeing it blue, but its suddenly turning blue). In world-bound imagination, the transformation is imagined but then ‘cancelled’ and deemed impossible: because the actual world speaks against the possibility of the house suddenly turning blue. As Husserl puts it, the red ‘raises a protest against the house being blue’, as the house’s suddenly turning blue ‘has no motivation in actual experience [and thus in the actual world]’ (Husserl 2005: 640). The same happens if, upon seeing a pen on a table, we world-bound imagine picking it up, dropping it and that it should float towards the ceiling: the actual world speaks against that, and so the imagined event is deemed impossible—or, more precisely, really-impossible (i.e., not a real possibility). Again Husserl:

What I have given as existing [...] I can ‘imagine as otherwise’. I can phantasy it as if it were otherwise. I can suppose, assume hypothetically, that it is otherwise. The supposition is then [...] abrogated as null by my actual experience (Husserl 2005: 674).

Not so, however, in free imagination, which is such that the actual world has no hold on it. So I can imagine jumping from my balcony and freely fly over London, and have tea with Mary Poppins on a cloud. Of course the actual world speaks against the event; but in free imagination that is irrelevant. So what distinguishes the two types of imagination is whether, while engaging in them, we hold on to the belief of the world and its implications for possibility or suspend it. Another way of putting it is indeed (to coin a phrase) in terms of suspension of disbelief: a disbelief motivated by what the actual world looks like.

This difference in imagination carries over to possibility: what is really possible with respect to the actual world is constrained by what the actual world looks like, whereas what is purely possible is not. Again, features of imagination carry over to possibility because of the peculiar framework we are in: Husserlian intentionalism, idealism and phenomenological actualism. The move would be suspicious in a realist environment.

Now, accessibility is precisely designed to capture semantically the notion of possibility with respect to a world and make it precise. A possible world’s being accessible from another is simply the former’s world being possible with respect to the latter. It is just natural, then, to treat the two notions of imagination as two distinct accessibility relations in the Husserlian framework. Importantly, they are both legitimate: we can engage in each of them more or less at will, and, although their results are sometimes incompatible, the acts themselves are not.⁶

Finally, that precisely these notions of possibility are at play when, in Husserl’s philosophy, it comes to universals, is readily substantiated. Here is a passage from *Experience and Judgement*:

The extension of [empirical] concepts is indeed infinite, but it is an [...] extension [...] of things [...] really possible in [I read ‘in’ as ‘with respect to’] the given world. These real possibilities [...] must not be confused with the pure possibilities to which pure generalities refer (Husserl 1973: 330).

⁶ ‘Sometimes incompatible’, as opposed to ‘always’, because I can very well freely imagine something that the actual world does not speak against.

In the next section I will first discuss the structural properties of accessibility in an abstract fashion, and then bring in world-bound and free imagination and suggest which of those properties they enjoy.

4. Structural Properties of World-Bound and Free Imagination

Accessibility relations are liable to have a number of structural properties. If w_1 , w_2 , w_3 are possible worlds, then:

Reflexivity: w_1Aw_1

Symmetry: If w_1Aw_2 , then w_2Aw_1

Transitivity: If w_1Aw_2 and w_2Aw_3 , then w_1Aw_3

Left-Euclidean: If w_1Aw_2 and w_1Aw_3 , then w_2Aw_3

Right-Euclidean: If w_1Aw_2 and w_1Aw_3 , then w_2Aw_3

Seriality: For every w_1 , there is a w_2 such that w_1Aw_2

Notice that Euclidean (either right- or left-, or both) entails transitivity, and reflexivity and Euclidean together entail transitivity and symmetry. In **S4**, a normal modal logic, accessibility is reflexive and transitive. In **S5**, the most powerful and—I believe—most widely endorsed modal logic, accessibility is reflexive, symmetric and transitive (or reflexive and Euclidean).

I suggest that world-bound imagination is both reflexive and serial, but neither symmetric nor Euclidean (neither left- nor right-Euclidean). I will argue as much in Section 5 as part of my proof of [Cont]. What this means structurally, however, is that one can always world-bound imagine a world w from that same world w (reflexivity), and that there is always a world w_1 that can be world-bound imagined from w (seriality). However, and again at this stage this is only a suggestion, it is not always the case that if w_1 is world-bound imaginable from w then w is also world-bound imaginable from w_1 (non-symmetry). Moreover, it is not the case that if a world is world-bound imaginable from two worlds, then one of these two worlds is world-bound imaginable from the other (non-left-Euclidean). Finally, it is not the case that if two worlds are world-bound imaginable from a third one, then one of the two is world-bound imaginable from the other (non-right-Euclidean). Free imagination, on the other hand, has no constraints at all, and thus, I suggest, cannot be anything short of reflexive, symmetric and transitive (or reflexive and Euclidean). This seems to me to follow straightforwardly from the notion, and therefore I will assume it rather than arguing for it. It is crucial, however, for my proof of [Nec].⁷

Let us map this onto logic. If I am right and world-bound imagination is neither reflexive nor Euclidean, then it has no place in **S5**. As a corollary, real-possibility is not **S5**-like. On the other hand, since free imagination is reflexive, symmetric and transitive (or reflexive and Euclidean); it is an **S5**-accessibility relation; as a corollary, pure possibility is **S5**-like.

It is an interesting question whether world-bound imagination is at least an **S4**-compatible accessibility relation: for accessibility in **S4** need not be either symmetric or Euclidean. It only needs to be reflexive and transitive. My conjecture is

⁷ Actually free imagination is, for Husserl, constrained by the essence of the imagined objects. This connects with Husserl's theory that essence is the source of necessity and to his method for discovering facts about essence, 'free imaginative variation'. It is, however, beyond my purpose here.

that world-bound imagination is not transitive, because even if nothing in w_1 speaks against w_2 and nothing in w_2 speaks against w_3 —so that w_2 and w_3 are world-bound-imaginable from w_1 and w_2 respectively—there may still be something in w_1 that does speak against w_3 : something which is in w_1 but not in w_2 . The catch is that this something, present in w_1 and lacking in w_2 , must be such that its absence from w_2 is no incompatible with w_1 : because otherwise w_2 would not, after all, be world-bound-imaginable from w_1 . I have to say I have not been able to construct a plausible situation; so as far as I am concerned the notion that world-bound imagination is not transitive is mere conjecture. In any event, it has no role to play in what follows.

5. Derivation of [Nec] and [Con]

Assume $\text{Int}(u)$ at $@$ (i.e., that universal u is an intentional object in the actual world). If, as seems plausible, world-bound imagination is reflexive (a world is world-bound-imaginable from itself), there is at least a world w accessible (world-bound-imaginable) from $@$ in which $\text{Int}(u)$, namely, $@$ itself. Thus,

- (1) $\diamond\text{Int}(u)$ at $@$.

This is a rather trivial way of securing (1). Here is a more substantial way. Surely if $\text{Int}(u)$ at $@$ there is always a $w \neq @$ that is world-bound-imaginable from $@$ such that $\text{Int}(u)$ is true in it (this, among other things, shows that world-bound imagination is serial). Because if u is an intentional object at $@$, then it has a genetic basis a, b, c in $@$, which in turn means that there are u -particulars in $@$. But *this* means that, since actuality entails possibility, u -particulars are not only actual but possible and, in particular, really-possible and world-bound-imaginable from $@$. For if they were not, then the actual world would speak against their possibility—except that it does not, because, by hypothesis, there simply are u -particulars in the actual world. Thus, there is a w such that u is constituted in it on genetic basis d, e, f (where d, e, f may or may not be identical with a, b, c). But if $\text{Int}(u)$ in w , then, since w is world-bound-imaginable from $@$, (1) will follow non-trivially.

Once we have (1),

- (2) $\text{E}!(u)$ in $@$

is secured. But how does u exist at $@$? Necessarily or contingently? Let us first prove:

- [Cont] $\neg\text{E}!(u)$ at $@$.

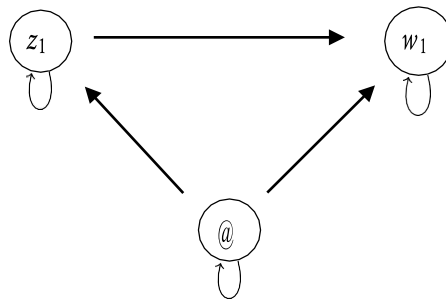
For [Cont] to be true, there must be a w_1 world-bound-imaginable from $@$ such that $\neg\text{E}!(u)$ at w_1 ; that is, a w_1 world-bound-imaginable from $@$ such that $\neg\diamond\text{Int}(u)$ at w_1 . In turn, this means that there must be a w_1 world-bound-imaginable from $@$ such that no w_2 world-bound-imaginable from w_1 is such that $\text{Int}(u)$ in w_2 . I will now try to construct w_2 . Whilst doing so, I will in effect be giving a counterexample to the symmetry and the Euclideanity of world-bound imagination.

Consider a w_1 with no canids: no dogs, no wolves, no jackals and so on. This world is world-bound-imaginable from the actual world: because even if there actually are canids, it is not incompatible with this fact that there might not be. Now put yourself in the shoes of a citizen of w_1 . Could you world-bound-imagine canids? I submit you could not: just as we cannot world-bound-imagine dragons, say, or chimerae, because our own world speaks against those kinds of animals.

Of course, just as in our world we have had a Hieronymus Bosch who imagined (and depicted!) all sorts of weird animals (e.g. in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, especially the Hell panel), there could be a Bosch in w_1 able to imagine (and depict) canids. That, however, would be free, not world-bound imagination: otherwise, our Bosch's weird animals would be world-bound-imaginable from our world, and that is not the case.

If I am right, then, w_1 is such that no w_2 with canids in it is world-bound-imaginable. In a world where no canids dwell, however, the universal Canid has no genetic basis and therefore is not an intentional object. Thus, in no w_2 world-bound-imaginable from w_1 (including w_1 itself) is u an intentional object. Thus, $\neg\phi\text{Int}(u)$ at w_1 . Hence, there is a w_1 world-bound-imaginable from $@$ in which $\neg\phi\text{Int}(u)$. As a consequence, there is a world world-bound-imaginable from $@$, namely w_1 , in which $\neg E!(u)$. Hence, $\neg\Box E!(u)$ at $@$: [Cont] is proved and u —the universal Canid, in our example—is contingent in the actual world.

A diagram may help visualise how this situation is a counterexample to the symmetry and the Euclideanity of world-bound imagination. Here is a restriction to worlds $@, z_1, w_1$ of the graph of A (for A = word-bound imagination):



$@$ is the actual world, w_1 (from the proof above) is a world world-bound imaginable from $@$ with no canids in it, and z_1 is a world world-bound imaginable from $@$ with canids in it. The arrows represent both accessibility and the fact that accessibility is reflexive (loops) and non-symmetric. The latter, notice, is readily shown: we have $@Aw_1$ but $\neg w_1A@$, because no world with canids is world-bound imaginable from a world with no canids. Against left-Euclideanity, notice that w_1Aw_1 and z_1Aw_1 , but, for the same reason, $\neg w_1Az_1$. Finally, against right-Euclideanity, notice that $@Aw_1$ and $@Az_1$, but, again for the familiar reason, $\neg w_1Az_1$.⁸

If accessibility is free imagination, on the other hand, $\neg\Box E!(u)$ at $@$ cannot be derived: because w_2 cannot be constructed. The reason is that free imagination from w_1 does not depend on what w_1 looks like. Therefore, canids will be freely imaginable in w_1 even if no canids have ever existed in w_1 . Every world is freely imaginable from any world. In terms of accessibility, this means—as I have already mentioned—that free imagination is reflexive, symmetrical and transitive, and pure possibility is **S5**-like. But then the **S5** axiom:

⁸ Since z_1 has canids in it, worlds with canids, including $@$, are—barring other incompatibilities—accessible from it. This does not show in the diagram; on the other hand, it is irrelevant to my purpose.

(S5) $\diamond p \rightarrow \Box \diamond p$

will apply, guaranteeing that every possibility is a necessary possibility. Coupled with:

(1) $\diamond \text{Int}(u)$ at @.

this gives [Nec] straightforwardly.

A final remark. I have claimed that even though $\diamond \text{Int}(u)$ is a necessary but not sufficient existence condition for u , treating it as necessary and sufficient (as I have done) is not problematic for my argument. It is high time I said why. My strategy to prove [Cont] has been the following:

$\Box E!(u)$ at @ $\leftrightarrow \Box \diamond \text{Int}(u)$ at @

$\neg \Box \diamond \text{Int}(u)$ at @ (with WBI)

$\therefore \neg \Box E!(u)$ at @

In other words, I effectively worked on $[\Box Ex@]$ to negate $\Box E!(u)$ at @. Now, treating $\diamond \text{Int}(u)$ as a merely necessary condition just means formulating $[\Box Ex@]$ as a conditional rather than as an equivalence. But this would still suit me, because to implement the strategy—working on $[\Box Ex@]$ to negate $\Box E!(u)$ at @—I do not need an equivalence: a conditional will do. I used an equivalence rather than an implication only for the sake of simplicity: because that way I was able to use substitution instead of the somewhat more laborious modus tollens (or contraposition and modus ponens).⁹

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