A Husserlian Analysis of Imagining What is Unreal, Quasi-Real, Possibly Real, and Irreal

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Abstract

This article begins by exploring the essential difference, in imagination, between intentional acts of a pure phantasy and acts which represent an object by means of an image or a sign – without losing view of everything which separates the intuitive givenness of an imaginary object from the perceptive givenness of a real or of an illusionary object. The pure phantasy of an unreal or quasi-real intentional object is then further distinguished from perceptive phantasies and from the act of remembering the real object of an actual past perception. Just as memories, pure phantasies are intentional acts which are actually accomplished. Unlike memories, however, pure phantasies implicate the reproduction of an unreal or fictive quasi-perception. They bring about a scission of the imagining subject into a ‘real-ego’ and a ‘phantasy-ego’. The opposition between what is real and what is unreal in phantasy, loses further significance when one moves to the consideration of how imagination relates to the objects of a possibly actual experience. Imagined unreal objects can, indeed, become real objects which lend themselves to an actual perception. To allow for the realization of this possibility, acts of phantasy must comply with certain objective and subjective conditions. Only then can one speak of a ‘real possibility’. On the other hand, it is because they are not taken to really exist, that objects of phantasy most easily lend themselves to an eidetic variation and to an insight into the essential constituents or ‘essence’ of a certain type of objects and of their intentional experience. Essences have a reality of their own, which Husserl calls ‘irreal’. They concern the ‘ideal possibility’ of real and ideal objects and of their actual experience. It is through their contribution to an insight into the real and ideal conditions of possibility of different forms of intentional acts, that acts of phantasy best show their potential for Husserl’s entire philosophical project. Imagination or fiction becomes, in his own words, the ‘vital element of phenomenology’.

The analysis of imagining consciousness occupies a central place in Husserl’s exploration of the different forms and modalities of intentional consciousness. Retracing Husserl’s footsteps, we will explore the essential difference between acts of a pure phantasy or quasi-perception and acts which represent an object by means of an image or
a sign – without losing view of everything which separates the intuitive givenness of an imaginary object from the perceptive givenness of a real object. We will also pay attention to how the imaginative re-presentation (Vergegenwärtigung) of an unreal intentional object differs from remembering the real object of a past experience. It will soon appear, however, that the opposition between objects that really exist and objects that have no actual existence, is insufficient to fully account for the nature of acts of imagination and their intentional objects.

Imagined unreal or fictional objects can, indeed, also be objects of a possible real experience. Imagined objects can possibly become real objects and then lend themselves to an actual perception. For this to happen, the content of imagination must comply with both objective and subjective conditions of possibility. Only when these conditions are fulfilled, can the possibility for imagined objects to become real objects, be realized and merit the name ‘real possibility’. On the other hand, it is because they are not taken to really exist, that objects of imagination lend themselves to a (phenomenological) insight into the essential constituents of a certain type of object. For Husserl, an essence concerns what a real and an unreal object of a certain kind necessarily have in common. As such, an essence has a kind of ideal existence that operates as an (ontological and logical) condition of possibility for all real and unreal individual objects of its kind. Essences or essential laws thus concern the ‘ideal possibility’ of objects and of their experience. Despite being unreal in the sense of an empirical, mundane reality, essences and other kinds of ideal objects have a reality of their own, which Husserl calls “irreal”.1

Thus, in addition to the central role it plays in Husserl’s theory of intentional consciousness, the phenomenology of imagination also participates in his phenomenological investigation of the logical/ontological and modal categories of reality/unreality/irreality, (real and ideal) possibility/impossibility, and necessity/contingency.

No wonder then, that Husserl’s analysis of imagination has a central impact on his entire philosophical project. This is already true for the phenomenological method, whose most essential moments – such as the epoché, the transcendental reduction and the eidetic reduction – are most closely related to the refraining from positing the real existence of

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1 Husserl (1964), §§ 64-65.
empirical objects. The rupture with the course of natural life, the attention to the essence of a thing independently of its empirical context, the discovery of how the givenness of a thing depends on how it is subjectively intended: these are fundamental insights that phenomenology largely owes to its description of imagination. Imagination or fiction thus becomes, in Husserl’s own words, the “vital element of phenomenology” (Hua III, 1, § 70) and in particular of a phenomenological analysis of intentional consciousness. In what follows, we will also pay attention to how imagination leads Husserl to refine his analysis of the ‘inner’ consciousness of different kinds of intentional acts, and how, in imagination, intentional consciousness divides itself into separate modes of life through a scission of the ego or subject of experience.

1. Pure phantasy: imagination without signs or images

With each of the two major transformations in the Husserlian conception of imagining consciousness, there is a deepening and an enriching of his understanding of the imaginary mode of the presence of an object. This also entails a transformation of Husserl’s phenomenological understanding of both the perceptual presence of an object and of its symbolically signified presence.

In distancing himself from understanding imagination as an ‘improper’ (uneigentlich) representation in the Brentanian sense of the term, the first transformation establishes the nature of imagination once and for all as an intuitive and sensuous form of intentional consciousness. The imaginary in the sense of acts of phantasy is thus cut loose from a mathematical conception of the imaginary. The radical separation between the intuitive imagination or phantasy and signifying acts will also mean, quite notably, that the givenness of the improperly or emptily appearing moments of a perceived external object (for example its unperceived backside) will no longer be confused (as was still the case in theLogical Investigations) with a subjective representation by means of a sign or a ‘signitive partial intention’. Husserl was soon to realize, however, that such an ‘improper mode of appearance’ (uneigentliche Erscheinung) within an act of perception is not a matter of imagination.

The second transformation of the Husserlian conception of imagination has to do with the discovery of a new form of difference which, this time, exclusively concerns the
re-presenting (vergegenwärtigend) consciousness itself – even though it will also have certain implications for the understanding of acts which present (gegenwärtigen) their object. When elaborating his new analysis of pure phantasy (reine Phantasie), Husserl introduces a radical distinction between acts of imagination which re-present an absent object by means of an (external or internal) image, and acts of pure phantasy which involve, on the contrary, a reproductive doubling of intentional consciousness itself. We will see that this new and updated theory of pure phantasy as a neutralized or non-positional re-presentation goes together with a remarkably deepened understanding of remembering (Wiedererinnerung) as the other form of an intuitive re-presentation of self-given intentional object. The new analysis of pure phantasy will also have a decisive influence on the analysis of an aesthetic perception (or perceptual phantasy) and on the analysis of an appresentation of someone else’s mental life. This last involves a representation more analogizing than reproductive, which nonetheless must be radically distinguished from an analogy grounded in the presence of an image. This truly revolutionary overhaul of the entire edifice of the phenomenological investigation of different types of objects and different corresponding types of acts or intentional experiences, which comes on the heels of the discovery of a reproductive inner consciousness, would not have been possible without the exploration of the temporal dimension of consciousness, and more particularly, of the inner consciousness of the effectuation of intentional acts.

2. The neutralization of reality in pure and perceptual phantasies

Husserl’s pure phantasy is a form of imagination that is cleared of any contamination by reality – even by the reality of an (external or internal) image. It is thus a matter of an intuitive consciousness which freely produces or creates, by dint of its invention, fictive objects and imaginary worlds. As is clearly shown by the example of fantastic tales and mythological stories, such fictive objects and worlds can have their own form of coherence. They are the product of a consciousness or an attitude sui generis which is distinguished not only from the perceptions in real life, but also from what Husserl calls ‘perceptual phantasies’. A perceptual phantasy consists in seeing something unreal (which is to say, having no actual existence), for example seeing King Lear on
stage. If such a perceptual phantasy seems to be related to some sort of illusion, the same certainly cannot be said for pure phantasy or imagining phantasy. One must thus clarify the intuitive – but not perceptual – character of the pure phantasy as well as the neutralized positing of the existence of its objects, which makes all the difference with perceptual illusions. This presupposes a better understanding not only of the different sorts of conflicts or incompatibilities which characterize, respectively, pure phantasy, perceptual phantasy, and illusory perception, but also a better understanding of the distinction between an illusory semblance (Schein) and an imaginary semblance.

According to the most commonly accepted conception, an illusion is a false perception. It consists, for example, in perceiving a real person when, in truth, there is only a manikin before me. For me to realize, after the fact, that what I had taken for a perception, was only an illusion, I must have of a new, more correct perception of the object. Once unmasked as an illusion, the former perception ceases to be as much: I can no longer believe either in the object’s presence ‘in flesh and bone’ (leibhaft) or in its actual existence. What prevents me from this is precisely the perceptual givenness of a new, truly existing object. As soon as I come to see that this human form is in reality a wax figure, I can no longer perceive it as being a real person. The former illusory perception does not for all that disappear from my consciousness; rather it is preserved as an illusion, or as Husserl says, under the form of a ‘crossed-out’ (durchgestrichen) perception.

A perceptual phantasy cannot be an illusionary perception for the simple reason that it does not pretend to be the perception of a real object. An adult spectator never believes that what he sees on stage is the real King Lear (or the real Julius Cesar); he never perceives him as he perceives the attractive lady in the first row of the side-balcony. However, he also does not perceive the actor independently of his playing King Lear. The spectator rather sees Lear in the actor or the actor as Lear. Consequently, the actor and King Lear are too interdependent and too mixed up with each other to allow for any perceptual conflict between them. It is true that, when the acting is good and the fictional drama sufficiently compelling, the spectator completely forgets about the actor and only sees (or quasi-perceives) Lear and his daughters. However, this will not make him totally ignorant of the unreal character of what he perceives on stage. Even when he
loses all interest in the acting of the actor and pays no attention to the surrounding reality, he will not stand up and physically interact with King Lear. A perceptual phantasy is not an illusion in the common sense of the word. It is a fiction made visible and not a perceptual reality becoming unreal because of a perceptual conflict.

In both a pure phantasy and a perceptual phantasy, the (neutralizing) modification of the positing of the existence of the intentional object is not imposed on the subject from the outside, by an external conflict affecting the appearing object. The absence of belief or neutralizing modification of the existence of an imaginary object results, on the contrary, from an attitude freely adopted by the subject. In true acts of phantasy, the subject deliberately disengages itself from the intercourse with real objects and with the real world. As Husserl’s term ‘neutralization’ suggests, a subject that does not believe in the real existence of the imaginary object, also does not believe in its unreality or non-existence. In the particular case of a perceptual phantasy under the form of an aesthetic contemplation, for example of a painting, the will to carefully separate what, in the intentional object, is real and what is unreal, would be out of order and mistaken. Losing interest in the difference between the real and the unreal: this is how an aesthetic attitude distinguishes itself from a naturally realistic attitude. Showing its indifference to that difference: this is the mode of appearing of an imaginary object under the form of an aesthetic semblance (Schein).

For Husserl all phantasy is the product of an act of subjective freedom and conscious choice. Even in a perceptual phantasy, it is the subject who suspends belief in the existence of what it perceives and who decides how to perceive it. It is true that this inhibition of belief is often motivated by the vague, changing, or incoherent manner in which a fictional object is presented in the real world. But this is insufficient to explain why, from the beginning, the subject never fully believed in the reality of what it saw. This is even more true in the case of a pure phantasy. The freedom of this act can thus be said to be absolute, in the sense that it cannot, in principle, be motivated by any kind of perceptual appearance. Even though the imagination of fictive objects (such as the centaur) often makes use of elements drawn from a perceived reality, one cannot say that a perception (of a real man or of a horse) is what motivates the imaginary re-presentation of a fictive object.
Perceptual phantasies and pure phantasies differ in their *neutralization* of the existence of their imaginary intentional object. In a *perceptual* phantasy, the modification of neutrality concerns a perceptual consciousness, which is to say, an act of perception that is actually experienced. By contrast, when I imagine a centaur in an act of *pure* phantasy, there is no *actual* perception involved that could be neutralized. The intuitive givenness of the centaur, far from involving the modification of an actual perception, is rather a givenness that I give to myself. It is one that I create in freely producing the imaginary representation of the centaur. The way in which this centaur is intuitively given to me in an act of pure phantasy involves no real object, the existence of which could or should then be neutralized.² This makes pure phantasy not only a less ambiguous act, but also a more positively productive one. Liberated from the concern to distinguish itself from any kind of actual perception, a pure phantasy is not only more free but also more open and creative. Taking for granted that what it imagines is not real, nothing holds it back from a kind of (quasi-)belief in the (fictive) existence of the intentional object. Pure phantasy is a free and productive act of imagination that can best be characterized as a quasi-perception of a quasi-real object.

3. *Pure phantasy and memory*

How then does consciousness go about freely and creatively producing the fictive objects that are given in a quasi-perception? The main difficulty stems from the fact that pure phantasy is an act of *intuitive* re-presentation involving neither the modification of a present actual perception (as is the case for the perceptual phantasy), nor the reproduction of a past actual perception (as is the case with remembering) – even if it shares with perceptual phantasy the fictional character of its intentional object, and with an act of remembering its reproductive nature. Accordingly, one should say that *pure phantasy is a reproductive form of consciousness which intuitively re-presents an object whose unreality has the form of a fictive existence*. Obviously, more explanation is needed here.

² This is why Husserl, in the 1920s, will cease using the term “neutralization” to characterize the absence of a doxical positing concerning the object of a pure phantasy. Given the lack of an original positing of this object, its givenness in the mode of the “as if” cannot be understood to be the result of a neutralized positing. Cf. Hua XXIII, § 20.
What pleads in favor of understanding pure phantasy as a kind of reproductive consciousness, is its similarity with an act of remembering (Wiedererinnerung). Instead of perceptually presenting (gegenwärtigen) a present object, an act of pure phantasy, like remembering, intuitively re-presents (vergegenwärtigt) a physically absent object. For Husserl, this intuitive presence of an absent object is the result, for both pure phantasy and remembering, of a present act of re-presentation intentionally involving or ‘implicating’ an implicit act of perception. When one remembers a past object, it is presently given as having been experienced in the past. Because it is presently remembered as past, the intentional object of memory cannot be perceived – not even perceived again. Remembering is different from the present repetition of a former perception. However, in an intuitive act of memory, the object re-presented is itself truly given as past. Remembering is thus an act of intuitive re-presentation, where re-presentation means the implication of the former perception of a formerly present object. It is not a re-presentation of a past object by means of a present perception of a present image or sign. Husserl calls the mode in which a former perception is implicated in the present memory of a past object ‘reproduction’.

Likewise, the manner in which a pure phantasy intuitively re-presents its imaginary object, involves no presently perceived present image or sign. Husserl concludes from this, that, just as in the case of an act of remembering, it must re-present its object by means of an implicated imaginary perception. He also claims that this implication of an imaginary perception must be understood in terms of a reproductive consciousness.

Pure phantasy and intuitive remembering must thus be intentional acts of an intuitive re-presentation of an intentional object that involve the reproduction of an intuitive presentation or perception. There is, however, an important difference between a pure intuitive phantasy and an intuitive memory: memory believes in the existence of the object of the reproduced perception, phantasy does not. Memory also involves the reproduction of a past real perception; phantasy involves the reproduction of a present imaginary perception. For Husserl, this difference manifests itself most fundamentally in the way in which the reproduced – either imaginary or real – act of perception is experienced in the inner consciousness of the subject. In a pure phantasy, it is
experienced as an unreal perception or as a ‘quasi-perception’. This singular mode of the ‘quasi’ is the expression of the fact that the implicated perception of the imaginary object is not an actual perception of a real object and never has been one in the past. Stated otherwise, the quasi-perception of the fictive object is the modification of an implicit perception that has never actually taken place before being reproduced and modified. In contrast to remembering, it is thus a matter of a reproduction producing the quasi-perception that it reproduces. This operation, at once paradoxical and mysterious, becomes fully comprehensible only with the help of the Husserlian theory of inner consciousness.

4. Inner consciousness

According to Husserl’s theory of (temporal) inner consciousness, the actual accomplishment of every act – regardless of whether it is an act of presentation or an act of re-presentation – is necessarily accompanied by an implicit impressional awareness, which Husserl (after Brentano) calls an ‘inner consciousness’. It goes without saying that pure phantasy (like remembering) is such an actually accomplished act and that, as such, it must be impressionally experienced by the inner consciousness of an imagining subject. This cannot be the case for the quasi-perception or imaginary perception (reproductively) implicated in the act of a pure phantasy. Unlike the (real) act of a pure phantasy, the implicated (imaginary) perception is not really or straightforwardly effected and never has been so. The mode in which the latter is experienced by the inner consciousness can thus not be impressional. One should then say that what inner consciousness experiences in the effectuation of an act of pure phantasy is the actual accomplishment of an intentional act which reproduces the act of an imaginary perception whose re-presented intentional object belongs not to the real world but to a fictive one.

Put differently, the inner consciousness of the effectuation of an act of pure phantasy is the experience of a doubling of intentional consciousness. In an act of a pure phantasy this doubling of intentional consciousness amounts to a veritable form of scission in subjective life, because the imagining intentional act and the imagined intentional act have a wholly different nature. This is not so in remembering where the
(reproductive) present intentional act and the (reproduced) past intentional act belong to distinct moments of *one and the same* actual ‘stream of consciousness’, the unity of which is attested by the continuity of an entirely impressional inner consciousness. In a pure phantasy, on the contrary, the intentional act of a reproductive re-presentation is impressionally experienced by the subject, while the quasi-perception which it reproduces is not and has never been. An intentional act that is not impressionally experienced in inner consciousness is, as it were, experienced at a *distance*. The ‘quasi’ of the quasi-perception involved in an act of pure phantasy would thus not only relate to its lack of belief in the existence of the imagined object, but also to the marginal place such imaginary perceptions occupy in the real life of a subject.

5. *The quasi-reality of imaginary subjective lives in imaginary objective worlds*

This marginalization, in the real life of a subject, of quasi-perceptions and of their fictive quasi-objects does not exclude different quasi-perceptions, imagined by a subject, from becoming interwoven with each other in such a way as to form a coherent and enduring unity of one imaginary life. The intentional correlate of such a unified imaginary life lies in the unity of meaning and duration of one fictive quasi-world or ‘Phantasiewelt’ (phantasy-world). This last is a world made up with the intentional fictional objects of the imaginary life of an imaginary subject or ‘Phantasie-Ich’ (phantasy-ego) who participates in this world in the capacity of a spectator or of an actor (or of both at once). This phantasy-ego – unlike the ‘Real-Ich’ (real-ego) who actually entertains the phantasies – does not have any reason, in himself, for not believing in the existence of his imaginary world. One could thus say that, within one and the same subject, the unity of parallel lives come to be knitted together, where the life of a phantasy-ego in its phantasy-world forms a sort of simulacrum or imaginary replica of the actual life of the real-ego, such as takes place in the real world.

*Phantasizing* belongs to the actual life of the real-ego. This is why past acts of a pure phantasy can be remembered in the same way as one remembers one’s past acts of actual perception. It is only the content of a phantasy – the *phantasized* perceptions of a phantasy-ego living in a phantasy-world – that remains irremediably separated from the real life of the real-ego in the real world. In contrast to the continuity of the real life of the
real-ego in the real world, a phantasy-ego and its fictive world last only as long as a particular phantasy endures, as for example one that stages a particular myth or fairy tale. We are not entitled to think that the life of one phantasy-ego in its particular phantasy-world could join up with the life of another phantasy-ego in another imaginary world in such a way as to form a unity of one fictive life in a common imaginary world. There is no more of a community between imaginary worlds than there is between different phantasy-egos. Nothing justifies thinking that the world in which centaurs wreak havoc and the one in which Snow White sleeps her mortal slumber would form one and the same imaginary world. Each phantasy-ego is, on the contrary, a prisoner of his own particular world, and there are as many imaginary worlds as there are phantasy-egos.\(^3\)

There remains, thus, an ineliminable contrast between the imaginary lives enjoyed by diverse phantasy-egos in their fictive worlds, and the actual life led by a real-ego in a real world, which it shares with other real-egos. It is ultimately because of how a particular subject experiences this contrast in its inner consciousness that all the objects in which a phantasy-ego places its faith deteriorate into fictive quasi-objects for the real-ego. In an opposite manner to imaginary experiences, all the actual experiences of one and the same real-ego are integrated into the weft and woof of one and the same actual life accomplished in one and the same real world. While the phantasy-ego and its fictive world lend themselves to a multiplication which is, in principle, unlimited, every actual experience of one and the same real-ego participates in one and the same real life that takes place within one and the same real world.

Yet, since it is nevertheless the same person who simultaneously lives in the real world and in fictive worlds, one must conclude that a human person can simultaneously lead a double life: an actual life and an imaginary one. These two forms of life – despite all their essential differences – are not totally separated, because all imaginary lives and their diverse phantasy-egos are still the product of a real act of intuitive phantasy accomplished by a real-ego. The fictive life of a particular phantasy-ego is thus, for a certain lapse of time, superimposed upon the actual life of the real-ego. Put differently, the fragments or episodes of the multiple imaginary lives of the multiple fictive subjects imagined by a single subject all remain anchored in the fabric of its real life. This

\(^3\) Cf. Bernet (2004).
anchoring of the imaginary in the real, far from being the consequence of a simple logical or metaphysical requirement, is clearly established by the inner consciousness of the real-ego. The imagination of (proper or foreign) fictional lives is also often motivated by (the misfortunes of) one’s real life. In addition, the content of a phantasy-world amounts always, to some extent at least, to a modification or variation of the real world. This is why a phantasy-world can reveal aspects of the real world that are usually overlooked. However, it is mainly when we imagine something that could possibly be or become real, that phantasy and reality, instead of excluding or merely implicating each other, show their essential complementarity.

6. The role of imagination in the assumption of real possibilities

In his Revision of the VI. Logical Investigation Husserl makes a distinction between “real” and “ideal” possibilities. (Hua XX/1, §§ 46-50) A possibility is real, when something, usually an originary intuition, “speaks for it” (für die etwas spricht) or entices it. On this basis, a real possibility does not necessarily relate to a possible empirical reality. Theoretical or methodological reasons can also speak in favor of the assumption of the possibility of an ideal reality, for example a non-Euclidian space. Consequently, one must make a distinction between real and imaginary possibilities for both empirical and ideal objects. Ideal possibilities can thus – for both empirical and ideal objects – be unreal possibilities that one just imagines in an act of phantasy that makes no claim concerning their possible realization, or they can be irreal possibilities or possibilities a priori that are founded on a truly intuitive insight into an essence or an essential law. While latter ideal possibilities can also be real possibilities, this is not the case for the former, merely imaginary possibilities. Further, what speaks for real possibilities can be explicitly and actively grasped or it can be passively presupposed. Finally, real possibilities can also differ in the weight with which they entice a positing assumption.

The assumption of real possibilities relating to empirical things is most often motivated by former experiences of real things and of the real world, and it is oriented towards an anticipation of future experiences of the same realities. Usually, these future experiences or events are not only assumed to be possible, they are expected as a future reality. They belong to the horizon of a present perception and, as such, are already
virtually perceived. When a present perception reaches out to the next perception of a
single real object, this obviously goes far beyond the consideration of mere real
possibilities. This why Husserl distinguishes this kind of “potentiality” (Potentialität),
which belongs to the “horizon of expectation” (Erwartungshorizont) of an experience,
from a mere possibility. (Hua I, pp. 18-19) One can then further differentiate between
potentialities that essentially relate to the nature of the object (for example the backside
of a spatial thing), and potentialities that are related to the subject (for example its habits,
interests, etc.). In addition, a subject that is involved in such objective and subjective
potentialities not only anticipates a future experience or appearance of the object, it
usually actively contributes to their realization.

The anticipation of the further course of an actual perception of a real thing is not
a matter of mere phantasy but of the perception’s actual potentiality. Phantasy alone can
not even account for the nature of the real possibility of a real thing and its actual
perception. Assumptions about really-possible experiences involve a belief, a pre-
predicative affirmation that is in no way neutralized. Finally, when it comes to a subject
making this future experience really possible, namely to its ‘possibilization’
(Ermöglichung), it goes without saying that imagination is of no use at all. Pure phantasy
not only lacks belief in what it imagines, it also lacks the potentiality to make its
imagined objects become real.

This doesn’t mean that possibilities related to real empirical objects do not lend
themselves to acts of imagination. It only means that imagination is different from an
anticipation or expectation, and that imagination alone cannot account for or justify the
assumption or affirmation of a possibility – especially a real possibility. Only an original
intuition can legitimate the position of a real possibility: a sensible perception in the case
of empirical objects, and an intellectual intuition in the case of ideal objects. Imagination
remains, however, a privileged way to leave the mere observation of real facts behind and
to explore possible events. But again, it is not imagination that makes these events really
possible. Imagination under the form of a pure phantasy has no concern for whether what
it imagines can possibly become real. We must thus say: 1) The belief or affirmation that
what one imagines is really possible, belongs to an act that goes beyond the content of an
act of imagination. 2) Whether this subjective belief or affirmation is legitimate or not
depends on an original intuitive experience and knowledge of the nature of the object, and not on imagination.

The first statement needs to be nuanced. We have seen that a phantasy-ego can very well be concerned with the consistency of what he imagines. Yet, he does not care whether or to what extent his phantasy-world could possibly become real. Such a care can only be ascribed to the real-ego who actually accomplishes the act of a pure phantasy – but not insofar as he does this and only this. When the real-ego wonders about the possible reality of what he imagines or when he assumes it positively, this comes in addition to his phantasies. For example, one wonders subsequently whether what one has imagined with pleasure, could possibly become real. In a more theoretical attitude, one can use one’s pure phantasies to explore possible aspects of the real world one has never experienced so far. In both cases, the real-ego makes an instrumental or methodological use of his pure phantasies, a use that is foreign to their normal function. In doing so, the ego takes advantage of what we have called the double life of the subject involved in imagination.

The second statement makes us move into the realm of phenomenological, ontological and logical considerations about possibilities. Whether, what one imagines, is truly really possible, depends on its compatibility with all that we authentically know about the nature of reality. Most things we know about the nature of empirical reality come from our (common!) effective perception of it. The justification of our belief that what we imagine could possibly become real, depends thus on our intuitive empirical knowledge of the real world. Given that this knowledge is far from being adequate, our belief in the real possibility of the empirical objects that we imagine, is never entirely justified.

7. Imagination and ideal possibilities

Husserl believes, however, that not everything we know about the real world comes from our empirical intuitive experience of real facts. Real facts depend on both empirical and ideal conditions of possibility. Formulated in Husserl’s language, this means that all empirical facts ‘have’ an essence, and that this essence governs their ideal possibility. We must thus keep in mind our former distinction between ideal possibilities
that are *unreal* or opposed to a real possibility, and ideal possibilities that are *irreal* and in agreement with a real possibility. The former are merely imaginary possibilities for the assumption of which ‘nothing speaks’, the latter are essential and necessary conditions of the possibility for both empirical and ideal objects. Regarding the latter form of ideal possibilities, Husserl further distinguishes between logical and ontological ideal conditions of possibility, and he carefully analyses, for both of them, their different levels or degrees of formalization. Most important in our present context is, however, the insight that real and ideal conditions of possibility do not exclude each other. Quite to the contrary: what is really possible must also be ideally possible. (Hua XX/1, pp. 178-179) An event or course of events that one imagines, can thus possibly become real only when, in addition to its *compatibility* with the nature of empirical reality, it satisfies the rules of logical and ontological *consistency*.

For Husserl, what he calls the essence of an empirical object, cannot be grasped in the same way as we experience real empirical objects. The essence of a table remains, however, a true object for him, because it has its proper kind of (irreal) existence and lends itself to an intuitive experience *sui generis*. Husserl calls this experience an ‘intuition of essence’ (*Wesensschau*) or an eidetic intuition. He also uses the term ‘*Wesensanschauung*’ to emphasize that the intellectual intuition of an essence is a kind of perception – though not a straightforward one like a sensible perception. In Husserl’s final account, such an intuition of an essence is obtained by means of an ‘eidetic variation’. This is a ‘free’ variation of examples that allows for the intuitive givenness of their invariant common essence. The *freedom* of this variation is thus geared towards a delimitation of what *binds* the variable examples together.

In this variation, variable real empirical objects or facts are de-factualized or, better, de-realized to allow for an insight into their common ideal essence. De-realized objects are empirical objects, the existence of which has been neutralized. In the operation of an eidetic variation a manifold of different neutralized or unreal empirical objects of a certain kind (for example different tables) become variable examples or instances of one and the same irreal essence (table in general). This general essence of all tables can be further formalized and then it becomes, in its turn, a specific example of a more general essence such as ‘something in general’. The same eidetic treatment can also
be applied to predicative judgments and even to our experience of all kinds of intentional acts and objects. This is to say that, in addition to ontological eidetic considerations, logical objects such as meanings, and phenomenological objects, such as the acts of intentional consciousness, also lend themselves to an eidetic approach.

What is then the relation between essences (or the eidetic sciences built on them) and imagination? And what is the relation between essences and possibilities?

To answer the first question, we must remind ourselves of the pure phantasy’s refraining from taking its intentional objects to actually exist in an empirical reality. Since a de-realization of variable empirical objects is the first step leading to the intuition of their common essence, and since imaginary objects are, by definition, unreal, we are allowed to think that the imaginary objects of a pure phantasy are best suited for the intuition of an essence. Equally, the free eidetic variation of de-realized or imagined objects is most easily and most efficiently carried out in an act of imagination. Imagined objects lend themselves best to an imaginary variation, and imagination thus becomes, for Husserl, the royal way leading to the intuition of essences and to the formation of eidetic sciences – including phenomenology. We now understand better how he could consider “‘fiction’ [as] the vital element (Lebenselement) of phenomenology.” (Hua III, 1, § 70)

Turning to the second question, we must keep in mind that the intuition of an essence, while best initiated by an imaginatively variation of imagined objects, is not itself an act of imagination. Essences are true and not imaginary objects. They have their own kind of existence that is not unreal but irreal. Just as a sensible perception is required for the justification of a belief in the real existence of empirical objects, only an act of true eidetic intuition (and no intuitive pure phantasy) can justify the ideal existence of an essence. In whatever way one may account for their existence (in terms of validity, of lawfulness, of region or realm, etc.), essences are neither imagined objects nor merely possible objects. Their relation to possibility rather consists in allowing for a possibility or in lawfully prescribing the condition of possibilities.

Essences not only allow for ideal possibilities concerning ideal objects. They also allow for real possibilities concerning empirical facts or real things, and real possibilities concerning an intuitively fulfilled experience of them. Yet, essences can in no way help realize the possibilities they normatively prescribe. The real existence of an empirical
thing or of an individual fact can never be deduced from an intellectual insight into the nature of an essence. This limitation marks a constraint but also an opening. On the negative side, eidetic sciences can never completely substitute themselves for sciences of facts (*Tatsachenwissenschaften*). On the positive side, eidetic sciences formulate ideal laws, the validity of which is not restricted to already existing empirical sciences. These laws also apply to novel empirical sciences, which eidetic sciences can help to bring into view or help to promote.

*Phenomenology* as an eidetic science concerning the intentional correlation between mental events and objective phenomena does more than this. It formulates the ideal conditions of possibility for all existing empirical sciences of nature and spirit, it allows for the establishment of a new transcendental phenomenology as a rigorous science, and it contributes to a reformation of the already existing empirical and eidetic sciences. As an eidetic science based on the imaginary variation of mainly imagined intentional mental events, Husserl’s phenomenology appeared to many (including phenomenological) critics as living on the thin air of a platonic ideal space. These critics mistook the distinction between fact and essence to indicate a radical *ontological separation*. However, Husserl made clear that, just as all facts ‘have’ an essence, all essences and eidetic sciences eventually refer back to facts. Consequently, the phenomenological eidetic (and transcendental) science of intentional consciousness cannot be said to lose all interest in the factual experiences of real persons and in the existence of the real world. Husserl’s phenomenology just investigates these facts, with the help of imagination, as real and ideal *possibilities*.

**References**


