

# The Metaphysical Neutrality of Husserlian Phenomenology\*

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**Abstract** I argue that Husserlian phenomenology is metaphysically neutral, in the sense of being compatible with multiple metaphysical frameworks (including frameworks Husserl argued against). For example, though Husserl dismisses the concept of an unknowable thing in itself as “material nonsense”, I argue that the concept is coherent, and that the existence of such things is compatible with Husserl’s phenomenology. I defend this metaphysical neutrality approach against a number of objections, and consider some of its implications for Husserl interpretation.

The question of Husserl’s metaphysical commitments has a long history, which extends back to his own students and interlocutors, e.g. Celms, Daubert and Ingarden.<sup>1</sup> Here are some of the main positions: Husserl was an idealist (Ingarden, Celms, Merleau-Ponty, Ricouer, Gurwitsch, Phillipse, Luft)<sup>2</sup>, Husserl was a realist (Ameriks, Willard, Smith and McIntyre)<sup>3</sup>, Husserl was an anti-realist (Zahavi 2010), Husserl was metaphysically

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<sup>1</sup> On this history through the 1980s see Ameriks (1977); Hall (1982); Holmes (1975). For references to additional scholarly discussion see Drummond (1990, p. 250). On Daubert see (Schuhmann and Smith (1985). Of course, the issue of the relationship between phenomenology and metaphysics extends beyond Husserl’s own works, and is particularly important in Heidegger’s work. Perhaps not surprisingly, given Husserl’s influence on Heidegger, interpretive controversies similar to those discussed here also arise in Heideggerean phenomenology; see, e.g. Cerbone (1995).

<sup>2</sup> See Gurwitsch (2010); Holmes (1975); Luft (2011); Philipse (1995).

<sup>3</sup> See Ameriks (1977); D. W. Smith and McIntyre (1982); Willard (2002).

neutral (Holmes, Hall, Carr, Crowell)<sup>4</sup>. These are heterogeneous groups. Some of the idealist interpreters (e.g. Ingarden) call Husserl an idealist in order to criticize him, while others endorse Husserl's idealism in various degrees (e.g. Luft). Those who say Husserl is metaphysically neutral mean different things by this, and some in that group are critical of each other (e.g. Hall is critical of Holmes).

To put my cards on the table, my sense is that the first group gets it right: Husserl was, at least by the end of his life, an idealist (though my main argument would go through, *mutatis mutandis*, for other readings of Husserl). One argument in favor of an idealist reading is that the most recent interpreters, who draw on the most up-to-date materials—in particular, Hua XXXVI (*Transcendental Idealism: Texts from the Estate*)—read him this way. But my main project is not to determine exactly what Husserl thought about metaphysics. Rather, my goal will be to consider what Husserlian phenomenology, considered as a free-standing philosophical system, actually implies about metaphysics.<sup>5</sup> I will argue that the answer is: not much. Husserl's concrete phenomenological proposals are, I shall argue, metaphysically neutral, in the sense of being compatible with a fairly wide range of metaphysical positions, including realism, idealism, and positions that allow for unknowable things in themselves. Another way to put this is to say that I will endorse the metaphysical neutrality approach, not as Husserl interpretation, but as what's really the case in terms of the metaphysical commitments of Husserlian phenomenology.

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<sup>4</sup> See Carr (1999); Crowell (2001); Hall (1982); Holmes (1975) and the discussion in Zahavi (2010).

<sup>5</sup> By "Husserlian phenomenology" I will mean proposals made by Husserl and his followers concerning the structure and dynamics of consciousness, as studied using such techniques as phenomenological reduction, mereology, and free variation. I do not mean to include Husserl or his followers' explicit claims about metaphysics under this heading: if I did, then Husserlian phenomenology would obviously not be metaphysically neutral.

I begin by considering Husserl's understanding of the relationship between phenomenology and metaphysics, which he develops in the context of his approach to transcendental idealism. I then critically assess Husserl's arguments. I describe a position that retains most of the substance of Husserl's phenomenology, but without what I take to be unwarranted metaphysical theses. After presenting my arguments in a general way, I flesh them out in more detail by responding to a series of objections. I conclude by considering some implications of this approach for Husserl interpretation.

## **1 Husserl on the Metaphysical Commitments of Phenomenology**

In this section I describe Husserl's transcendental idealism. Even though my focus is not Husserl interpretation, I consider Husserl's discussion of idealism at some length, because it is in this context that Husserl makes the more fundamental claim that I argue against: namely, that his phenomenology has metaphysical implications. For example, in *Cartesian Meditations* he says:

Only someone who misunderstands either the deepest sense of intentional method, or that of transcendental reduction, or perhaps both, can attempt to separate phenomenology from transcendental idealism (Hua I, p. 119/86).<sup>6</sup>

So, even though my main argument doesn't depend on reading Husserl as an idealist, Husserl's discussion of idealism provides the best launching point for my argument.

For Husserl *qua* transcendental idealist, to be is to be for consciousness. As Luft says, Husserl "gives a new meaning to the idealist doctrine of *esse est percipi*" (2011, p. 195): "What is forever eliminated is the idea of a world independent of experience, or in

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<sup>6</sup> Later in the same text he says "phenomenology indeed *excludes every naïve metaphysics* that operates with absurd things in themselves, but does not exclude *metaphysics as such*" (Hua I, p. 182/156).

Kant's terms, a thing in itself. [...] There is no escaping transcendental idealism; boldly stated, it is impossible to leave the confines of our mind" (2011, p. 12). The basic idea is that, after we perform the phenomenological reduction we are in a position to see how all of a person's reality—everything a person takes for granted in everyday life—is in some sense an accomplishment of consciousness. The physical world before me, the institutions I am part of, the culture I call my own, my political attitudes, my knowledge of the physical sciences—pretty much *everything* for me—is ultimately an accomplishment of consciousness. Physical things, for example, exist only insofar as perceptions of physical things occur and hang together in a certain harmonious ways.

It is important to emphasize how pervasive this result is. Husserl intended to show how all forms of being, in all ontological regions—including all the entities posited by all the sciences—are “constituted” by regulated, lawfully unfolding patterns of conscious experience. Thus physical entities like solid bodies, supernovas and leptons, as well as psychological entities like mental states, beliefs, and desires, require that experiences unfold in specific law-governed ways.<sup>7</sup> This in turn means that a certain kind of mind-world distinction persists, *within* consciousness, or if you like, within the brackets of phenomenological reduction. There are mental entities (e.g. a person's desires or beliefs), as they occur in my field of consciousness, and there are also physical entities, like trees and rocks, that also occur in my consciousness. Thus, all the phenomena associated with classical epistemology—phenomena like illusion, verification, truth, and falsity—can be given a phenomenological analysis.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I give a detailed analysis of the “phenomenology of psychology” in Yoshimi (2010).

<sup>8</sup> I believe a failure to recognize this inner/outer distinction *within* consciousness is the source of much of the confusion and ambiguity surrounding Husserl's discussions of these issues. This point should be kept in mind below: regardless of our broader metaphysical commitments, some form of mind-world distinction

If the appropriate kinds of regulated series fail to occur, then the relevant objects cease to exist for us. In the most radical case, all laws governing all forms of entities cease to be obeyed. In that case, consciousness does persist in some form (it is not an “absolute nothingness”; Hua XVI 288/250) but only as a kind of subjective chaos. These are cases of what Husserl famously called “world-annihilation” (*Weltvernichtung*; Hua III/1 p. 103/109). Because consciousness is the only type of being whose existence is not itself dependent on any specific laws or other types of being, it is “absolute”. It is the “residuum” that persists even if the world is annihilated (in Husserl’s special sense of “annihilation”). Consciousness is, in that sense, absolute.<sup>9</sup>

Insofar as entities essentially involve certain types of appearance, traditional metaphysical ideas -- e.g. the realist idea that a physical world exists independently of consciousness, or the Kantian concept of a noumenal realm -- involve what Husserl calls material (as opposed to formal or logical) contradiction.<sup>10</sup> Husserl allows that we can utter the words “thing in itself” or “world independent of us” without logically contradicting ourselves. Referring to extra-mental or noumenal realms is not like saying “*p* and not *p*”. As Husserl says, “The hypothetical assumption of something real outside this world is, of course, ‘logically’ possible; obviously it involves no formal contradiction” (Hua III/1, p. 102/108). However, making these kinds of assumption does involve a “material contradiction”, something like a category mistake (cf. Zahavi 2010),

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will persist within consciousness. For an idealist, mind and world within consciousness are all there is to the mind-world distinction. In a realist framework mind and world within consciousness correspond in different ways to mind and world beyond consciousness.

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of this concept of the absolute, with references to earlier scholarship—as far back as Boehm (1959)—see Zahavi (2010).

<sup>10</sup> On the material/formal distinction see Hua XIX, Investigation 4, especially sections 10 and 12, and Investigation 1, section 15. By “material nonsense” I mean what Husserl calls “*Widersinn*” (as opposed to *Unsinn*) in Investigation 4, section 12, which is sometimes translated as “absurdity”. Husserl’s own use of these terms is not always consistent, though his meaning in particular contexts is usually clear.

where one tries to connect things whose essences preclude each other. It does not make sense to talk about the roundness of a square because the essence of roundness precludes squareness. It does not make sense to point at a determinate spatio-temporal region and say “that is the university”, since universities by their essence cannot be located in determinate spots. In a similar way, the essence of absolute consciousness—as the sole foundation of all reality—precludes the existence of things “outside” of it: “if transcendental subjectivity is the universe of possible sense, then an outside is precisely—nonsense” (Hua 1, p. 117/84). To be is to be experientiable in absolute consciousness, so to speak of unexperientiable things in themselves is like referring to unexperientiable things that can be experienced. Thus, Husserl says, “an absolute [extra-mental] reality is just as valid as a round square” (Hua III/1, p. 120/129).<sup>11</sup>

Even if Husserl believes a certain form of metaphysical realism is nonsense, another form of realism is perfectly fine for him. In the natural attitude we are realists, and phenomenology provides a way of understanding that realism as an accomplishment of regulated series of appearances. Zahavi refers to this as “redeeming” the realism of the natural attitude (Zahavi, 2010, p. 80). This is just the kind of work referred to above, where the real objects given in everyday life are analyzed in terms of the regulated series of experiences relative to which they exist for us at all. Husserl himself says in a letter: “No ordinary ‘realist’ has ever been so realistic and so concrete as I, the phenomenological ‘idealist’” (Husserl 1994, Vol. 7, p. 16), and elsewhere says that transcendental idealism “contains” realism within itself.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Compare Ameriks; “Husserl’s position could be expressed in the trivial sounding statement that it is ‘nonsense’ to assume something exists which is transcendent yet in principle unperceivable” (1977, p. 502). Also see Zahavi (2010, p. 77).

<sup>12</sup> From Zahavi (2010). Zahavi also refers to similar discussions in *Crisis* (Hua VI, p. 439-440).

In fact, Husserl at times presents his position as somehow “above” or “beyond” the realist/idealist debate, perhaps most famously in his epilogue to the English translation of *Ideas I*. As Gurwitsch, discussing this text, says:

It is not a matter of advocating an “idealistic” thesis over against a “realistic” one, but a question of clarifying the sense of existence of which we continuously make use in the non-phenomenological attitude. [...] Thus we reach a level above the traditional conflict between realism and idealism which moves in the opposition of thesis and counter-thesis; positive constitutional analyses and discoveries take the place of “arguments” (2010, p. 111).<sup>13</sup>

Speculations about ultimate reality are replaced with the hard work of constitutive analysis, where the phenomenologist laboriously studies how we come to understand beings in different realms. As Husserl says: “*The proof of this idealism is [...] phenomenology itself*” (Hua I, 119/86). Or, as Luft puts it, “Husserl’s Transcendental Idealism [...] allegedly solves all one-sided isms through a new method, with the difference that Husserl believed that he was finally *doing* it instead of merely announcing it” (2011, p. 186).

This is the project of constitutive and eidetic phenomenology: working out how experiences must fit together in order for objects in various ontological domains to appear. Each domain is governed by a set of laws describing invariances in specific classes of possible experience. Sorting out the details of this account is the hard work of Husserlian phenomenology, the core, and what I also believe is its most important

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<sup>13</sup> Zahavi (2003, p. 8) gives three possible interpretations of the idea that transcendental idealism is “beyond” traditional idealism and realism. Such an account may (1) seek to combine elements of realism and idealism, (2) show that *both* involve material nonsense, or (3) claim the debate is concerned with different matters altogether. The last position is a kind of neutrality position, in that it claims that Husserl’s idealism “lacks metaphysical impact”.

feature. Husserl famously emphasized this laborious dimension of phenomenology, the hard work at the foundations, the infinite task; the “small change” (*Kleingeld*) of detailed analyses.<sup>14</sup>

## 2 Metaphysical Neutrality of Husserlian Phenomenology

In this section I argue that Husserlian phenomenology is metaphysically neutral. In broad outline, my argument is this: Husserlian phenomenology is either committed to idealism or is metaphysically neutral. Husserlian phenomenology is not committed to idealism. Therefore Husserlian phenomenology is metaphysically neutral.<sup>15</sup>

Husserl’s idealism can be understood as an endorsement of this claim:

(C) All entities are constituted by regulated series of experiences.

I take “entities” to encompass all forms of being—physical, mental, abstract, etc.—of all ontological categories: properties, relations, tropes, substances, facts, whatever. If it exists, it’s an “entity” in my sense. “Regulated series of experiences” is shorthand for the kinds of lawful relationships between conscious experiences Husserl describes in his phenomenological system. “Constituted by” can be read in several ways. It can be read vividly but problematically as “is built up from” or “is made up of” (as in “a molecule is

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Herbert Spiegelberg’s comments: “What stands out most vividly in my memory is Husserl’s plea for thoroughness at any price. ‘One must not consider oneself too good to work at the foundations.’ He himself did not want to be anything but a worker at foundation walls” (Embree, 1991). Also cf. Zahavi: “Husserl [...] stressed the importance of providing minute and careful analyses at the expense of developing ambitious and speculative systems. As he wrote in a letter to Natorp, he remained unsatisfied ‘as long as the large banknotes and bills are not turned into small change’” (Zahavi, 2010, p. 89; quoting from Husserl (1994), Vol. 5., p. 56).

<sup>15</sup> It is natural at this point to ask whether the disjunction in the first premise is exhaustive, since one could imagine that Husserlian phenomenology commits us to some other metaphysical framework, e.g. physicalism. However no one to my knowledge defends such an alternative reading, so the argument as it stands covers the main interpretive options. More importantly, my reasons for claiming that Husserlian phenomenology does *not* commit us to idealism (premise 2) should be generalizable to any claim of the form “Husserlian phenomenology commits us to metaphysical framework *x*”.



constituted by atoms”),<sup>16</sup> or it can be read more plausibly but less vividly as “is a demonstrable unity (*ausweisbare Einheit*) relative to” (more on what this means in section 3).<sup>17</sup> Thus C corresponds to a kind of idealism: anything that exists is built up from or is a demonstrable unity relative to regulated series of experiences. I will argue that Husserl has given us no good reason to endorse C. If we accept C for non-phenomenological reasons, that’s fine, but it is not entailed by anything in Husserlian phenomenology.

We can contrast C with a weaker, more plausible thesis, whereby what is constituted by consciousness is reality *for us*. Call this C’:

(C’) All entities-for-us are constituted in regulated series of experiences.

“Entities-for-us” here means objects—again, of all kinds—but *as they appear to conscious human agents*. C’ may seem trivial or circular: it just says that entities that appear to us are built up from or are demonstrable unities relative to conscious experiences. The substantial aspect of C’ is that it claims that how entities are for us is based on the specific kinds of lawful experiential processes Husserl describes. Thus C’ can be read as an endorsement of *Kleingeld* phenomenology, the painstaking work of understanding the regularities that govern the appearance of entities in specific ontological domains.

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<sup>16</sup> This is clearly a problematic reading of Husserl’s idealism. To say that a table is made out of table perceptions sounds like superficial Berkeleian idealism, which Husserl was at pains to resist. This was roughly Ingarden’s reading (constitution as “creation”), which Wallner lambasts as a “crude form of subjective idealism” (Wallner 1987, p. 8; also see the discussion of constitution on p. 16). However, some have suggested that the crude Berkeleyan reading may be more apt than Husserl would have liked (Philipse 1995, pp. 286–287).

<sup>17</sup> Another formulation is to say that all facts supervene on facts about consciousness (A. D. Smith, 2003). I address this formulation in section 3.

C' is metaphysically neutral. According to C', lawful dynamical processes describe the development of an agent's overall sense of reality. This idea is compatible with idealism, realism, and any of a range of metaphysical frameworks. Perhaps idealism obtains, so that our sense of reality is all that there is to reality (in that case both C and C' are true). Perhaps there exists a mind-independent reality whose structure mirrors the structure of reality for us. This is more or less the classical realist picture, which is associated with the semantics of first order logic and assumed by a great deal of analytic philosophy. On the other hand, there may exist a mind-independent world that is nothing like our experience of it: in that case there exists a noumenal realm that we simply have no access to. All of these scenarios are consistent with C', which describes the structure of consciousness and the way a person's sense of reality develops over time, but takes no stand on the status of reality beyond consciousness.

In these terms, my basic argument can be restated as follows. Husserlian phenomenology commits us to either C or C'. Husserlian phenomenology does not commit us to C. Therefore Husserlian phenomenology only commits us to C'. The second premise is the main burden of my argument: I need to show that Husserlian phenomenology does not commit us to C.

The basic problem with C is that it is unjustified. It lacks proper warrant. It is a universal claim whose scope is all being, but the evidence for it is based on a particular kind of being, namely, human experience. Husserl has not given us any reason to believe that *all* of reality is constituted in consciousness, even if he makes a good case that all of *experienced human* reality is constituted in consciousness. Even assuming (as I think we should) that all of *human* reality is constituted in consciousness, there could still be some

other reality, called it reality\*, out there beyond us. We can't say much about reality\*. But it is nonetheless logically and, I will argue "materially" possible, that there is some such reality\* beyond the constituted realm.

Consider the following analogy. (The analogy is a bit unfair, since it depends on contingent sensory limitations that Husserl himself acknowledges. However the analogy is vivid and provides a good starting point for my arguments, which ultimately apply even in light of Husserl's acknowledgement of contingent sensory limitations). Suppose we humans in our 3d world are observing creatures in a 2d world, what Edward Abbott called a "flatland."<sup>18</sup> Those who live in the 2d world do not have any direct acquaintance with our 3d world. If we were to intervene in flatland, e.g. inserting a finger into their 2d world and then retracting it, the 2d locals would gasp in amazement at this object appearing and disappearing, in violation of their physics. Suppose a wise philosopher in flatland—call him Husserl2d—has developed a theory according to which everything is constituted in consciousness, including 2d physical reality. He even has a book called *Thing and Space*, but it has fewer chapters than his 3d counterpart's book by the same name. Further, suppose that a mathematician in the 2d world—call him Riemann2d—has developed a theory of higher dimensions. Riemann2d can explain things like the appearing and disappearing object as the result of intervention from a third dimension. Husserl2d could agree and take inspiration from this story, given his interest in mathematics and geometry in particular.

However, there is one thesis about which Husserl2d and Riemann2d might disagree. Riemann2d might insist that there could be physical structures in higher

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<sup>18</sup> Abbott may have been influenced by Helmholtz, who described such a world in a popular lecture. Husserl was aware of this lecture, and mentions it in *Crisis*. Luft (2011) develops this same idea, to a different purpose, at several places.

dimensions that flatlanders *could not directly experience or understand*. Husserl<sup>2d</sup> could accept this talk of a third dimension to some extent—in particular as talk of an abstract mathematical structure that can be used to make sense of, for example, the appearing and disappearing object. But talk of some kind of *3d object*, perceivable by other kinds of beings but inaccessible to flatlanders, is, for Husserl<sup>2d</sup>, a kind of material nonsense. It involves something unexperientable. Talk of a 3d space makes sense, for Husserl<sup>2d</sup>, only insofar as it is accessible to flatland cognition. Any further way in which a 3d world could make sense to an agent is, from the standpoint of Husserl<sup>2d</sup>, nonsense.

But of course, we in the third dimension know better. There *is* something distinctive about living in a 3d world that goes beyond its mathematical description. So when people in flatland talk about a robust 3d reality, they are not talking nonsense, they are simply pointing at something they cannot fully grasp. Riemann<sup>2d</sup> is not uttering absurdities like “square circle” when he talks about a possible 3d experience, he is simply gesturing at something that is coherent but otherwise inaccessible to his cognition.

In a similar way, I want to say, even if we as humans were to complete the infinite task of Husserlian phenomenology, and enumerate every essence of every domain of possible experience—there could still be forms of reality left out of the analysis. We are to 2d flatland as possible creatures in a 4d world are to us. And similarly for creatures in 5, 6 and arbitrarily many dimensions. The analogy is meant to make vivid how one can coherently gesture at some reality beyond what is accessible to them, without engaging in material nonsense.

Other thought experiments could be deployed for similar purposes. Someone could, as in Nagel (1974), know all about echolocation but not have the slightest clue

what it's like to actually experience echolocation in the way bats do. We can coherently gesture at bat reality without having any direct acquaintance with it. Similarly, one could, as in Jackson (1982), imagine that a neuroscientist named Mary lives in a black and white environment, and has no idea what color experience is actually like, but can nonetheless coherently assert its existence.

These examples involve a kind of analogical extrapolation from one system of experience to another. Thus, perhaps these examples are too weak, insofar as one might, in such cases, succeed in intuiting what I claim to be inaccessible forms of reality. Humans can, in fact, engage in forms of echolocation, for example by snapping their fingers, and it has been shown experimentally that by using virtual reality tools humans can get a sense for higher dimensional spaces.<sup>19</sup> However, even if none of these thought experiments or actual experiments were at our disposal, it still seems plausible to me that we could gesture at some form of experience—some kind of Martian experience, or perhaps divine experience—that could constitute a reality that is completely beyond anything we can conceive, even analogically.<sup>20</sup>

Or, pushing even further, we could imagine forms of reality that are not experiencable *by any conscious agent at all*. Perhaps subjective conscious processes have features that rule out access to certain kinds of reality. Or perhaps it is just a matter of brute fact that some things can't be experienced. Who knows? We are deep in to metaphysical speculation here. But I see no material contradiction in any of this. We have our conscious reality, but there could be other realities or aspects of reality that are simply inaccessible to conscious beings. The essence of reality does not, as I understand

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<sup>19</sup> See Stroffregen and Pittenger (1995) and D'Zmura, Colantoni, and Seyranian (2000).

<sup>20</sup> Compare "Mysterian" arguments in the philosophy of mind, e.g. McGinn (1989).

it, require experiencability. Of course, if such inaccessible realms exist, this precludes the possibility of an omniscient conscious being, but I see no problem with that: perhaps there is no such being. Or perhaps there is, and this whole business about inaccessible reality does not obtain. I have no idea, and I submit: neither does Husserl.

If I'm right, C is unjustified, for there could be forms of reality not constituted in human, or perhaps *any*, consciousness.

### 3. Objections and Replies

In responding to my argument, one might begin by developing the more subtle account of Husserl's idealism described above, whereby "constitution" is read not in terms of "creation" but in terms of "demonstrable unities". To begin, let's review Husserl's position. He would concede the logical possibility of what I have called "reality\*", a world beyond all our human experience. He just insists that such a conception involves material nonsense. Here is the relevant quote from *Ideas I*:

The hypothetical assumption of something real outside this world is, of course, "logically" possible; obviously it involves no formal contradiction. But when we ask about the essential condition on which its validity would depend, about the mode of demonstration demanded by its sense [...] we recognize that something transcendent necessarily must be experiencable [...] as a demonstrable unity relative to its concatenations of experience [...] If there are any worlds, any real physical things whatever, then the experienced motivations constituting them must be *able* to extend into my experience and into that of each Ego (Hua III/1, pp. 102-103/108-109).

That is, experiencability is essential to existence. In order to be meaningful to us, any object must have some mode of verification or fulfillment. As Ameriks (summarizing Husserl) says: “to meaningfully assert something exists is to say that there are determinate and connected ways in which it could be progressively verified” (1977, p. 505).<sup>21</sup>

If it is of the essence of the concept of a transcendent object that some possible mode of verification in “concatenations of experience” be available, then to talk of unexperiencable realities is for Husserl like talking about round squares—transcendent beings must by their essence be experiencable, so they can’t be unexperiencable.

This is good Husserl interpretation, but I don’t see how it disarms my argument. Why, in particular, should we accept that it is of the essence of transcendent objects to be experiencable?<sup>22</sup> I see no warrant for such a claim. Indeed, above I gave examples of transcendent objects whose existence we can gesture at, but which we cannot otherwise experience. So it appears *not* to be of the essence of things to be experiencable, in which case there is no material counter-sense or contradiction in talking about unexperiencable transcendent objects. It is true, as Husserl suggests, that to be meaningful *for us*, a transcendent object must have some mode of validation in concatenations of experiences, but that is just a consequence of C’, the weaker counterpart to C I endorsed above.

One could try to rescue C by appealing to a supervenience-based formulation of idealism (A. D. Smith, 2003, p. 183). On Smith’s version of this formulation, physical

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<sup>21</sup> Or, as Husserl himself says, “What cannot be known cannot exist; existence is knowability” (Hua XV, p. 370, quoted in A. D. Smith 2003, p. 186); “it makes no sense to ascribe existence to a fact, when there is no consciousness” (Hua XXXVI, p. 18, quoted in Uemura 2013, p. 147).

<sup>22</sup> One might insist that “transcendence” in Husserl’s sense is a term of art that denotes a phenomenon that does require experiencability. But of course, that settles nothing. If we take that line, then careful Husserl interpretation will only clarify how Husserl’s own terms relate to each other, and we can introduce a new term to describe the kind of transcendence whose material possibility I’m considering. Husserl can’t stipulate his way out of the problem.

facts (and ultimately, all facts) supervene on “experiential facts”, in the sense that (1) some experiential facts entail facts about physics (once a certain pattern of conscious experiences occurs the corresponding physical thing occurs as well); (2) all facts about physics depend on experiential facts (given that a physical thing occurs, certain patterns of conscious experience must have occurred), and (3) experiential facts do not depend on facts about physics (patterns of conscious experience, e.g. sensory chaos, can occur that do not support the occurrence of any physical things).

The problem with the supervenience formulation of idealism is that, while relatively precise, it does not add anything essential to the arguments already given. So the same counter-arguments apply. To see this, note that Smith’s formulation, once generalized, says that *all* facts supervene on experiential facts. Thus, according to Smith’s condition 2, the occurrence of *any* fact—physical or otherwise—entails the occurrence of some experiential fact. But if there are unexperientiable things in themselves, then this assumption is clearly false: the fact of their existence is precisely the kind of fact that can occur without some experiential fact also occurring. So supervenience, while a useful tool with much promise for *Kleingeld* phenomenology (see Yoshimi 2010), adds no extra support to idealism.

A second objection is as follows. One could note that in the very act of talking about a mind-independent “reality\*” I thereby bring the relevant bit of reality into contact with my conscious reality. As Luft puts it, “the statement ‘the world exists independently of experience’ is a statement made on the part of an experiencing agent. There is no escaping transcendental idealism” (p. 12). The very act of expressing something or even



gesturing at something imbues that thing with phenomenological existence: to express or gesture at  $x$  entails that  $x$  has some kind of phenomenological existence.

I think this conditional is either trivially true (more specifically, true in a way that does not affect my main thesis), or else false. If we think of “phenomenological existence” in terms of the existence of the relevant expressive or gesturing activities, then the conditional is trivially true. Of course, my statement or my act of gesturing has some kind of phenomenological existence: I live through the act of gesturing or saying something. Statements and gestures are as much a part of the lifeworld as rocks and trees, and are thus subject to phenomenological analysis. But what is at issue here is whether these expressive acts refer to some independent but unexperiencable reality. I have argued that this is a coherent possibility. Consider again Riemann2d. All of Riemann2d’s statements about higher dimensions are themselves, *qua* statements, constituted in flatland reality, including the statement that “there may be higher dimensions and objects within them that we cannot fully comprehend.” But even if his utterances have phenomenological reality for him, as utterances, the 3d objects he refers to with these utterances do not have any phenomenological reality for him. So I acknowledge the trivial truth that expressing or gesturing at  $x$  entails that those expressions and gestures have phenomenological existence as expressions or gestures, but this does not affect my main thesis: that other forms of reality, like reality\*, may exist independently of our expressions and gestures.

We can also read the conditional as follows: to express  $x$  or gesture at it requires that  $x$  has phenomenological existence in the sense (discussed above) of verification via concatenations of experience. If I refer to a distant star I refer to something I could in

principle go to and see for myself. Anything we talk about is, in virtue of our talking about it, thereby connected to us; is thereby part of the one total universe we are part of. However I have already argued that the conditional, read this way, is false. I have argued that it is possible for someone to gesture at something that he or she could not, even in principle, have any conscious access to via any verification chain. Another way to put the point is to note that the conditional, read this way, simply restates the idealist thesis I have argued against above; the conditional does not, as far as I can tell, provide any additional reason to endorse it.

Second, one might object that Husserl can, using the method of free variation, generalize beyond human consciousness to all possible consciousness, and in this way provide warrant for C. The variational method is used to identify the pure essences or *eide* pertaining to a domain of beings: one begins with an exemplar of that domain, freely varies it in imagination (treating it as a pure possibility, not limited by any factual constraints of the actual world), and observes what remains constant throughout the variation (cf. Hua IX, section 9). These invariant features are the pure essences of the type of object in question. Free variation must not be constrained by any contingent features of human existence, for example that humans typically have two eyes and are bipedal, and should thus have a scope that extends beyond any specific contingencies of human nature. As Husserl he says, “Obviously there are physical things [...] which do not admit of being definitely demonstrated in any *human* experience; but that has purely factual grounds which lie within the factual limits of such experience” (Hua III/1, section 48).<sup>23</sup> Husserl could acknowledge, for example, that *Thing and Space* is about the way

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<sup>23</sup> Also see Hua III/1 sections 52 and 79, and Hua IX, section 9, where Husserl discussed free variation and notes that “A pure *eidos* treats the factual actuality of the single cases attained in the variation as

physical reality is constituted for a being with two eyes and a particular type of body, and could concede that, were our bodies and sensory apparatus different, we might constitute reality in a very different way; he refers, for example, to “Egos who see better and further” (Hua III/1 p. 111/119). So Husserl would presumably not have any problem with my story about experience in higher dimensions, which simply involves creatures whose sensory apparatus is different than ours.

Though I am a fan of Husserl’s method of eidetic variation—a tool whose promise has yet to be fully realized, in my view—I do not think it can achieve what it sets out to. Others have argued this point well, so I won’t reiterate their arguments in detail here.<sup>24</sup> Suffice it to say that insofar as a human phenomenologist freely varies possibilities in imagination, she never moves beyond her human imagination, so it is not clear that she can identify essences that apply to anything but humanly experientiable objects. So it is not clear in what sense Husserl can overcome contingent limitations using the eidetic method. One save, though it is not clear that Husserl would endorse it, would be to read Husserl’s variational method as a kind of conditional method, which begins by assuming a particular set of contingent limitations, and then identifies invariant phenomenological laws within the bounds of these limitations. From this standpoint we have a system of conditional laws, one for each possible type of creature: if a conscious agent has this type of body and sensory apparatus, then their reality must be constituted according to these rules; if an agent has this other type of body and sensory apparatus, then their reality must be constituted according to these other rules, etc.

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completely irrelevant” and thus excludes (in the case of tones) any “secret stipulation” of “optional tones in the world, tones heard or able to be heard by human beings on earth.”

<sup>24</sup> See Kasmier (2010) for a review of the critical literature on free variation, as well as an attempted defense of the method against these criticisms.

I think this is a useful way of elaborating Husserlian phenomenology. However, it's not clear how it helps here. Even if we allow such a system of conditional laws, we can never study any but the ones that corresponds to our own contingent sensory limitations. Moreover, even if we somehow found a way to expand phenomenology to encompass non-human experience (e.g. using virtual reality tools like those described above), we could still not rule out the possibility of entities that cannot be experienced by any conscious agent at all. There could still be forms of reality that would be completely unexperientable. The point is difficult to say much about, for obvious reasons, but again, I think it is perfectly coherent possibility. I see nothing to preclude forms of reality that no conscious agent could access. Perhaps, as I suggested above, there is something about the nature of consciousness that prohibits it from access to certain kinds of entity. That may or may not be true, but who knows? Once we are in this kind of outlandish domain we obviously can't draw many conclusions. But I submit that even the most sophisticated reading of transcendental or eidetic phenomenology can't rule such a possibility out.

#### **4 Conclusion**

On my view Husserl has given us a good story about reality *as it is for us*, but he has not thereby done anything to dissolve classical metaphysical questions concerning ultimate reality. Despite the impressive structure of the human lifeworld and its constitution in conscious processes—a structure rich enough to fill over fifty volumes of detailed analysis by Husserl alone—there might still be more to reality than that. Our lifeworld is a kind of self-contained realm, the world available to us as conscious human agents.

Beyond that we can't say much, indeed we can't say anything with confidence, but we need not be silent.<sup>25</sup>

The picture of Husserlian phenomenology that results, with its emphasis on *C'*, is one where phenomenology is in the business of describing the structure and dynamics of consciousness but is officially neutral with respect to metaphysics (or more specifically, those aspects of metaphysics that go beyond consciousness). This does not mean that metaphysics has no relation to phenomenology. It simply means that one's metaphysical commitments should be determined independently of phenomenology. We can, from this point of view, think of one's phenomenological and metaphysical commitments as independently variable parameters. One "sets" their metaphysical commitments independently of their commitment to a particular theory of consciousness. Having settled on a particular combination of phenomenological and metaphysical frameworks, one can then do work at their intersection.<sup>26</sup>

I think this kind of division of labor between phenomenology and metaphysics resolves a number of confusions and could also facilitate surprising collaborations, e.g.

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<sup>25</sup> The nod to Wittgenstein highlights the fact that some of the discussion surrounding logical positivism and contemporary skepticism tracks Husserl on these points -- not surprisingly, given the direct linkages between the two, especially from Husserl to Carnap; see Haddock (2008). That which cannot be captured by observation sentences or verified in some way or otherwise be located in the web of human belief is, on many such views, nonsense. For example, "Quine has no room for the kind of scepticism which asks the following kind of question: even if our alleged knowledge, our science, is completely successful on its own terms, how do we know that it tells us the way the world really is?" (Hylton 2012). My response to such views would parallel my response to Husserl on these points. Contemporary discussions of skepticism, which trace their roots to debates between Moore and Wittgenstein on the proper response to skepticism, are also relevant. These are, of course, topics for separate analysis.

<sup>26</sup> A nice example of this kind of approach can be found in D.W. Smith (2013), who lays out a range of ways one might read Husserl's metaphysics, or in my terms, combine Husserl's phenomenology with a metaphysical system, from Berkeleyan idealism to a form of "transcendental relativity" which draws on Einstein's general theory of relativity. He concludes by developing his own view: "Let us assume a realism that finds us and our experiences in a world where our consciousness is dependent in various ways on physical and biological reality and in other ways on historical and cultural reality" (p. 400). That is, rather than taking his particular form of realism to follow from anything in Husserl, he simply assumes it, blends it with Husserlian phenomenology, and then develops the resulting account.

between officially opposed strands of Husserl interpretation. Showing in detail how the metaphysical neutrality of phenomenology supports these collaborations, and how the collaborations would work in practice, is delicate business, which I leave for future work.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Here is the basic idea. Suppose we have two bodies of Husserl interpretation  $H_1$  and  $H_2$  that oppose each other on metaphysical grounds (e.g. idealist and realist readings). If we separate out the phenomenological and metaphysical components of  $H_1$  and  $H_2$ , then the metaphysical opposition between the two readings can be set aside and their phenomenological contents can (assuming they are mutually consistent) be merged. In fact I think in several cases this could profitably be done.

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