

Husserl on Essences

A Reconstruction and Rehabilitation

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Abstract

The common thought that Husserl was committed to a Platonist ontology of essences, and to a mysterious epistemology that holds that we can ‘intuit’ these essences, has contributed substantially to his work being dismissed and marginalized in analytic philosophy. This paper aims to show that it is misguided to dismiss Husserl on these grounds. First, the author aims to explicate Husserl’s views about essences and how we can know them, in ways that make clear that he is not committed to a traditional Platonism, or a mystical epistemology. Second, the author argues that Husserl’s approach was an important source for Carnap in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology”, where Carnap tried to overcome the empiricists’ qualms about referring to abstracta. Finally, the author will argue that Husserl’s approach can be reconstructed in contemporary analytic terms by appeal to the idea of pleonastic transformations. By seeing both Husserl’s views and their influences on later analytic work more clearly, the hope is to build bridges and make clear that the approach is of lasting value and interest.

Keywords

Husserl – David Woodruff Smith – Carnap – Platonism – pleonastic – essence

Husserl is well known as a defender of essences, properties, and other ‘abstract’ entities. His acceptance of these entities forms a core part of his philosophical system—for pure phenomenology itself is to be a “science of the Essential Being of things” (1913, §18), an “eidetic science, as the theory of the essential nature of the transcendently purified consciousness” (1913, §60). But Husserl’s views on essences have led many to dismiss his work as committed to a Platonist ontology of essences and to a mysterious epistemology that holds

that we can ‘intuit’ them. As Rochus Sowa puts it, the identification of Husserl’s early phenomenology with the “doctrine of essences” and the method of “seeing essences”, “has given phenomenology the reputation of being unscientific, because it suggested a form of mysticism” (2012, 254).

The thought that Husserl holds a mysterious Platonism about essences has also contributed to the marginalization of Husserl’s work in analytic philosophy. For some who would come to be seen as prominent early figures in the analytic tradition ruthlessly criticized and ridiculed Husserl’s view of essences. Early on, Moritz Schlick (1910/1979, 58) criticized Husserl for offering what he takes to be an obscure Platonism about logical truths,¹ saying:

... Husserl ... believes he has sufficiently characterized their nature by ascribing to them an ‘ideal being’ ... But as to what the ideal in its objectivity actually is, we lack any positive account; it is something non-real, and beyond that the reader’s acquaintance with it is simply presupposed. The upholder of the independence theory speaks of these truths precisely as if it was a question of real things existing outside the subject, but has continually to explain in so doing that it is not in fact a matter of real existences.

Schlick also accuses Husserl’s view of epistemological obscurity—of providing just ‘words’, and no positive account of how these Ideal entities could be known. Gilbert Ryle, though offering a sympathetic reconstruction of many aspects of Husserl’s approach, mocks Husserl as being “bewitched by his Platonic idea that conceptual enquiries were scrutinies of the super-objects that he called ‘Essences’” (1962/1971, 180–181). Ryle also criticizes what he takes to be Husserl’s resulting view that “Philosophy is ... a sort of observational science (like geography); only the objects which it inspects are not spatio-temporal entities but semi-Platonic objects which are out of space and time” (1932/1970, 170).

The unfortunate consequences have been long-lasting. As David Woodruff Smith writes, “This doctrine of eidetic intuition has been widely misunderstood, producing a serious distraction from the phenomenology and ontology in *Ideas I*” (2007, 141). The distraction has been particularly damaging for Husserl’s reception among analytic philosophers. As Paul Livingston puts it, Schlick’s attack on Husserl’s reliance on Wesenschau “isolated a genuine point of difference between the two philosophers on a set of issues with precipitous consequences for the subsequent development of the analytic tradition and its

¹ For discussion of the Schlick/Husserl dispute, see Livingston (2002).

self-imposed alienation from phenomenology and its descendants” (2002, 241). Robert Solomon (1970, 378) expresses the point most strongly, speaking of the ‘disastrous effects’ of Husserl’s use of the notion of ‘essence’, writing:

[Husserl’s] talk of ‘essential Being’ and ‘essences as objects of knowledge’ has generated such antagonism among American philosophers that the formulation of an acceptable interpretation of Husserl’s philosophy has become an almost thankless task ... Husserl’s detractors have not found it difficult to dismiss all talk of ‘essences’ as an unwelcome remnant of a paradigm of philosophy long out-moded.

No one has done more than David Woodruff Smith in breaking down misconceptions, and helping to overcome the alienation of analytic philosophy from Husserl’s work, enabling analytic philosophers to see what is of relevance and of value in phenomenology. As Smith often puts it in discussion, he aims to ‘Make Husserl safe for analytic philosophy’. This paper takes on a small corner of this same project, aiming to make Husserl’s talk of essences more ‘safe’, understandable and even useful for analytic philosophers. I will undertake this work in three parts.

In Section 1 I excavate what Husserl actually says about essences and our knowledge of them, in ways that make it clear that he is not rightly accused of being committed to a metaphysical doctrine of Platonism or of failing to offer any positive account of how we can know essences. It is somewhat odd that Husserl should be accused of a mystifying Platonist view, when he often explicitly rejects this interpretation, aiming to ‘rigorously exclude’ “*all thoughts partially mystical in nature* and clinging chiefly to the concepts Eidos (Idea) and Essence” (1913, §3). As Smith has rightly insisted, “... Husserl resisted ‘Platonic realism’, the doctrine (in something of a parody) that Platonic ‘forms’ or eidos exist in a Platonic heaven beyond space and time” (2007, 141). But if Husserl does not hold a Platonic realist view of essences (and other abstracta), what view exactly does he hold? He discusses this issue both in the *Logical Investigations* and in the first volume of *Ideas*, arguing against nominalist, fictionalist, conceptualist, and even traditional Platonist treatments of essence. Looking back to those texts, I will argue, makes clear that his views are not properly characterized as a form of traditional Platonism and so should not be dismissed on those grounds. Instead, he can be seen rather as engaging in a non-metaphysical project of determining how we can come to think and speak of essences, on the basis of ordinary perceptual experiences, by making use of certain kinds of meaning-rules.

In Section 2 I will argue that the Husserlian approach explicated in Section 1 was an important source for Rudolf Carnap's views in "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology", where Carnap aims to calm the empiricist's qualms about referring to abstracta. This in itself is interesting and striking. For while Husserl's views are commonly dismissed as those of a 'Platonizing realist', Carnap's views are best known as an exemplar of metaontological deflationism. Seeing their commonalities more clearly might also lead us to reevaluate the standard characterizations and dismissals of Husserl's views as well as to alter our understanding of Husserl's legacy.

Carnap's views in turn form an important predecessor of contemporary 'pleonastic' accounts of properties and other abstracta, such as the view developed by Stephen Schiffer. In Part 3 I will suggest how we can reconstruct Husserl's views along these lines. By looking back at Husserl's views of essence through the lens of these more recent accounts that grew out of it, we can see a way of developing his view in contemporary analytic terms that make it evident that a view along these lines can be developed in a clear and plausible way—and a way that can contribute usefully to current debates.

The hope is, by better understanding Husserl's view, seeing its later influences on familiar analytic work, and reconstructing a view along these lines in contemporary analytic terms, we can continue the work of building bridges and reducing the alienation between Husserl and those analytic philosophers who are all too prone to dismiss him. In Section 4 I will come back to assess the sense in which Husserl should, and should not, be considered a Platonist, and try to make clear that his approach is of lasting value, in giving us the route to a plausible and underappreciated way of understanding our thought, talk, and knowledge of essences.

1 Husserl on Essences and Our Knowledge of Them

Husserl's view of essences unfolds in the first two chapters of the first volume of *Ideas*, which often recapitulates and builds on work from Volume 1 of the *Logical Investigations*. These chapters—before one gets to the *epoché* and the distinctively phenomenological work—are often neglected, though Smith (2007, Chapter 4) justly emphasizes their importance to understanding Husserl's comprehensive and innovative ontology. These chapters involve, *inter alia*, a defense of essences, as part of clearing the way for developing a conception of pure phenomenology as a science of essences, which was also to be foundational for the natural sciences ('sciences of fact') (1913, §18).

Husserl's discussion in Chapter 2 of *Ideas* is primarily directed at defending his notion of essence against empiricists who think of 'positing' essences as a mystifying bit of metaphysics. He begins by expressing sympathy with the empiricists, writing (Husserl, 1913, §19):

Empiricistic Naturalism springs, as we must recognize, from the most praiseworthy motives. It is an intellectually practical radicalism, which in opposition to all 'idols,' to the powers of tradition and superstition, to crude and refined prejudices of every kind, seeks to establish the right of the self-governing Reason to be the only authority in matters that concern truth.

Seen in this light, he praises Empiricists for their reliance on the authority of reason and for their commitment to being guided by 'the facts themselves'. Husserl (1913, §19) reconstructs the attitude of the empiricist in initially sympathetic terms:

"Ideas," "Essence" as opposed to facts, what else might they be than scholastic entities, metaphysical ghosts? To have saved mankind from such philosophical spooks as these is precisely the chief service of the natural science of modern times.

However, Husserl goes on to argue that, properly understood, his essences are nothing like metaphysical ghosts, and that empiricists give faulty grounds for rejecting essences. Husserl ultimately treats the empiricist's rejection of essences as arising from prejudice, writing, "all that the empiricist says here rests on misunderstandings and prejudices—however good or well-meant the motive which originally inspired him" (1913, §19). More strongly, Husserl also argues that empiricists fall into inconsistency and threaten the progress of science by denying essences (1913, §18).

We can approach an understanding of Husserl's view of essences by first examining what mistake he thinks lies behind the empiricist's *rejection* of essences and other abstract objects. He speaks most forcefully against this in §22 of *Ideas*, where he writes (Husserl, 1913, §22):

It has ever and anon been a special cause of offence that as "Platonizing realists" we set up Ideas or Essence as objects, and ascribe to them as to other objects true Being, and also correlatively the capacity to be grasped through intuition, just as in the case of empirical realities.

We here disregard that, alas! most frequent type of superficial reader who foists on the author his own wholly alien conceptions, and then has no difficulty in reading absurdities into the author's statements. If *object* and *empirical object, reality* and *empirical reality* mean one and the same thing, then no doubt the conception of Ideas as objects and as realities is perverse "Platonic hypostatization". But if, as has been done in the *Logical Studies*, the two are sharply separated, if Object is defined as anything whatsoever, e.g., a subject of a true (categorical, affirmative) statement, what offence then can remain, unless it be such as springs from obscure prejudices?

That is, those who criticize Husserl for his realism about essences, he thinks are (at least tacitly) conflating the claim that *there is such an object* with the claim that *there is such an empirical object or individual*, whereas, "*the positing of the essence ... does not imply any positing of individual existence whatsoever; pure essential truths do not make the slightest assertion concerning facts*" (1913, §4).

It would indeed be absurd to think of essences (whether explicitly or tacitly) as if they were (or were analogous to) empirical objects or spatio-temporal individuals. But Husserl's commitment to essences is nothing of the sort—nor (by the same token) should it be thought of as 'positing' essences as 'abstract entities' 'located' in Plato's heaven, and 'tracked' by a form of intuition analogous to normal sensuous experience or 'posited' in a quasi-scientific metaphysical theory. In short, in treating essences as 'objects', Husserl is only committed to their being objects *in a logical* (syntactic, formal) *sense*: as subjects of a true (categorical, affirmative) statement. (In being roughly a grammatical criterion, this conception of object is similar to Frege's conception of object as the correlate of a proper name (Dummett 1973, 69–70)).

Why have empiricists insisted on rejecting abstract objects? As Husserl reads traditional empiricism, it is because empiricists require that all knowledge be grounded in experience. However, as Husserl puts it (1913, §19):²

Genuine lack of prejudice does not call for the downright rejection of 'judgments foreign to experience,' except when the judgments' *own proper meaning demands* a grounding in experience itself.

² Smith (2007, 161) also suggests that Husserl treats the empiricist rejection of essences as arising from a category mistake.

That is, as Husserl often insists, objects of different material categories may place different demands on how we are to know them.³ There are (at least) two different senses of the term ‘object’: ‘object₁’ in the sense of a perceptually unified, trackable, spatio-temporal thing (sometimes called ‘Spelke-object’ after one of the psychologists who studies our ability to track these (Spelke 1990)), and ‘object₂’ in the quasi-grammatical sense of things we can say something true about. While ‘objects₂’ in the latter sense clearly include objects₁ (that is, Spelke-objects may be the objects of true atomic predications), the reverse is not the case: that is, there may be objects₂ that are not trackable spatio-temporal things. The empiricist requirement that judgments be grounded in (sensory) experience may be appropriate for judgments about objects₁ (‘individual objects of Nature’), but not for judgments about essences (which may nonetheless be objects₂). Those who ridicule accepting abstract objects might then be thought to be making the mistake of treating Husserl as if he is treating abstracta as objects₁, when he is only treating them as objects₂.⁴

On Husserl’s (plausible) view, judgments of different types, directed towards objects of different types, may require different sorts of grounding. It may indeed require grounding in experience to properly judge that there is a leopard or a centaur before me. However, judgments that 2 is less than 4, or judgments that beliefs are never colored, require no such grounding in sensory experience. A different epistemic route is appropriate to justifying judgments about objects of different types. As such it is entirely inappropriate—something like a category mistake—to reject judgments about abstract objects *because* they are not grounded in sensory experience, when they are not the sorts of judgments that *require* such grounding.⁵

This gives Husserl the means to reply to the empiricist’s accusation that accepting abstracta is on a par with believing in centaurs or demons. One can quite cogently reject claims of the existence of centaurs or demons (as requiring and failing to find adequate grounding in experience), while accepting the existence of essences, in good conscience. For judgments about the former but not the latter *require*, as part of their very sense, grounding in experience.

3 This parallels my arguments that the existence conditions for entities of different sorts may vary, giving us reason to reject all across-the-board criteria of existence, just as Husserl rejects the empiricist’s across-the-board criterion for knowledge. See my (2015, Chapter 2).

4 For more on different uses of ‘object’ and its relevance to ontological debates, see Thomasson (2009).

5 Carnap similarly accuses the empiricist critics of the use of abstract entities of overlooking the differences between cases in which empirical evidence is relevantly required (for certain internal statements) and those in which it is not (for ‘logically’ justified internal statements, and for external statements) (1950, 218).

But while Husserl does not think of essences as objects in the same sense as empirical objects, his is also clearly not a view that aims to demystify essences by identifying them with concepts. For Husserl (1913, §11), of course, is always insistent that we not confuse *meaning* and *objectivity meant*:

We add here this further remark, that by ‘categories’ we can understand, on the one hand, concepts in the sense of meanings, but on the other also, and to better effect, the formal essences themselves which find their expression in these meanings ... In the terminological interest one can expressly distinguish between *categorical concepts* (as meanings) and *categorical essences*.

Treating ‘ideal’ entities such as essences and numbers as concepts, as Husserl insists, goes against the very *meanings* of our thought about essence and number. We may come to grasp the concept of the essence of gold, but that is (according to the very meanings involved) distinct from what we are thinking *of* when we make use of this concept: the essence itself, what we think *about* when we use the concept.

Husserl also insists that we guard against a further hazard: those who aim to treat essences and numbers as concepts often go on to treat them as ‘mental constructs’—a view Husserl (1913, §22) rejects in no uncertain terms:

One may read in a treatise that the number-series is a series of concepts, and then a little farther on: concepts are mental constructs. Thus the numbers themselves, the essences, were being referred to at the outset as concepts. But, we ask, are not the numbers what they are whether we ‘construct’ them or not? ... [I]n saying this we have already (and how could we avoid it?) drawn a distinction; number-presentation is not number itself: it is not the digit *Two*, this unique member of the number series, which like all such members, is a non-temporal being. To refer to it as a mental construct is thus an absurdity, an offence against the perfectly clear meaning of arithmetical speech which can at any time be perceived as valid, and *precedes* all theories concerning it.

For essences, according to the very meaning of the term, are non-temporal beings, independent of our grasp of them: the essence of gold, one might say, has been and remains what it is, regardless of human thoughts about it. What is created in our thoughts about essence “is not the *essence*, but the consciousness of the essence” (1913, §23).

If essences, as objects of thought and knowledge, are distinct from the concepts we use to think of them, and independent of all mental states, how do we

come to think of, or know about essences? Husserl often speaks of ‘intuiting’ essences in ways analogous to sensory experience of spatio-temporal objects, speaking of “pure intuition, a mode of being presented in which essences are primordially given as objects, just as individual realities are given in empirical intuition” (1913, §21). So it is tempting to think of these as parallel processes, involved in tracking spatio-temporal objects through observation, or in ‘tracking’ ideal objects in a Platonic heaven.

The epistemological worries that this picture presents are the central element of Schlick’s critique of Husserl’s ‘Platonistic’ view that logical truths exist independently of the mental activities of knowing subjects. As Schlick (1910/1979, 59) puts it:

The independence theory [of Husserl] does not succeed ... in positively defining or making intelligible the real nature of truth; it falls, however, into far greater difficulties still, when obliged to explain how truth is actually *known*. And everything clearly comes down to that.

Of Husserl’s claim that the apprehension of truth is “given in an act of Ideation based upon an intuition”, Schlick writes, “I am afraid that it is in no way possible to absolve this statement from the unpleasant reproach that it offers nothing but—words” (1910/1979, 59–60).

The epistemological problem Schlick identifies comes precisely from presuming that there must be an analogy between intuiting logical truths and perceiving sensible objects (Schlick 1910/1979, 61):

Perception comes about through the medium of the senses, which react to real impressions—but what, in the knowing of truth, takes over the function analogous to the action of the senses? What and how can truths affect, belonging as they do to the realm of Ideas?

But despite Husserl’s occasional rhetoric, it would be a mistake to interpret Husserl’s view as one on which we ‘see’ essences in a process parallel to seeing material objects.⁶ As Sowa puts it, “the use of the term ‘*Wesenschau*’ [seeing of essences] has been disastrous, because it triggers totally false associations and obscures an unprejudiced view of Husserl’s eidetic doctrine, and the method of a priori research he conducted” (2007, 78).

6 See also Livingston, who notes that “Husserl’s treatment of *Wesenschau* is no mysterious or mystical doctrine of the ‘seeing of essences’, but rather a sophisticated and ramified theory of abstraction and of the epistemological relation of particularity to generality” (2002, 250).

Husserl actually has a much subtler view of how we can think of, and come to know, essences (and other abstract objects)—a view that puts him more in the company of those who (with Stephen Schiffer (2003) and me (2015)) think of talk of properties and other abstracta as *pleonastic* than with those who think of them as *Platonistic*. Examining his account and its relations to these later views will help clarify how we should understand Husserl's ontology of essences, and give a reasonable account of how we know them—one that does not (*pace* Schlick) offer mere 'words'.

On Husserl's view, the process of sensory observation and the process of intuiting essences are not separate, parallel processes. Instead, "*Empirical or individual intuition* can be transformed into *essential insight* (ideation) ... The object of such insight is then the corresponding *pure* essence or *eidos*" (1913, §3). Or, as he puts it later "It belongs to the general and essential nature of immediate, intuitive essence-apprehension ... that it can be carried out on the basis of *the mere present framing* of particular illustrations" (1913, §70). That is to say, we can begin with ordinary sensory observation of some concrete thing, say a red house. Beginning by observing this concrete thing, with "the same sense-contents" given (1906, Investigation II, §1), we may, however, undertake two different kinds of acts: we may think of the individual, this spatio-temporal red house. Or we may think of the species, the type, "we mean not this aspect of red in the house, but Red as such" (1906, Investigation II, §1). This second kind of act is derivative, 'founded', "a new mode of apprehension has been built on the intuition of the individual house or of its red aspect, a mode of apprehension constitutive of the intuitive presence of the Idea of Red" (1906, Investigation II, §1). As Jitendranath Mohanty puts it, "awareness of the essence is founded on a prior perception of the individual fact while empirical perception on its own part is not so founded, it being the absolute first!" (1959, 223).

Once we have acquired the idea of Red through such founded acts, we can go on to say true things about it. As Husserl (1906, Investigation II, §1) puts it:

... as the character of this mode of apprehension sets the Species before us as a universal object, so too there develop, in intimate connection with such an object, formations like 'red thing' (thing containing an instance of red) 'this case of red'

That is, once we take essences as the 'objects' of our thought, we can go on to have propositional thoughts them, e.g. 'this Red is the same as that', or 'red is a color' or 'to be red is different than to be green'.

Our intentional states in these new modes of apprehension are directed towards new objects: not concreta such as houses, but rather abstracta, so that

expressing the contents of these judgments “will require new expressions” (1906, Investigation II, §2). As we introduce the ability to speak of these essences in the formal/syntactic role of objects, a species “really becomes an object in knowledge, and ... judgements of the same logical force are possible in relation to it, as is the case with individual objects” (1906, Investigation II, §2). That is to say, we can introduce judgments with the force of categorical, affirmative assertions, taking essences in the object₂ role. But ‘object₂’ in this quasi-grammatical sense should not be confused with ‘object₁’ in the Spelke-object sense, of a perceptually unified, independently mobile, material thing.

The claim that there are essences, then, for Husserl derives from the claim that we can attend to the world around us in these ways—where we shift from observing some empirical thing, to focus on the universal, the species—taking this as the ‘object’ of our attention, and coming to think and say things *about* these generalities placing them in the formal/logical role of subject of predication (1913, §3):

... [E]ssential intuition is the consciousness of something, or an ‘object,’ a something towards which its glance is directed, a something ‘self-given’ within it; but which can then be ‘presented’ in other acts, vaguely or distinctly thought, made the subject of true and false predications—as is the case indeed with every ‘object’ *in the necessarily extended sense proper to Formal Logic*.

Every intuition of an individual “can pass off into essential intuition”, where it is directed towards “*The essence (Eidos) [which] is an object of a new type. Just as the datum of individual or empirical intuition is an individual object, so the datum of essential intuition is a pure essence*” (1913, §3). Put in the earlier terminology of the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl speaks of an “essentially new mode of presentation” that “makes us aware of a new sort of singulars, i.e. Singular Species” (1906, Investigation II, §16 (c)). We can also arrive at judgments that treat essences as objects by beginning from judgments of a *general form* such as “a colour in general is different from a sound in general” (where these are also taken as indifferent to the real existence of instances of color or sound) and transforming them, in accord with essential rules of meaning, to claims that objectify essences, e.g., “The essence (the ‘genus’) Colour is other than the essence (the ‘genus’) Sound” (1913, §5).

There is, however, another important difference between an act directed at an individual red house, and that directed at the essence Red, other than the object of attention. That is, the *grounds for* the judgments in each case: judgments of the latter kind (unlike the former) are not *grounded in* experience of a world. That is, even if (even though) we come upon the idea of Red by

observing particular real red houses, tomatoes, and so on, all of our judgments about the *essence* Red could stand, even if our individual experiences turned out to be illusory—or even if we ‘bracket’ the question of their veridicality. Essential intuition “does not, to be sure, presuppose any apprehension of the individual or any recognition of its reality”, and so can be considered equally well in imagination (Husserl, 1913, §4):

... [W]ith the aim of grasping an essence itself in its *primordial form*, we can set out from corresponding empirical intuitions, *but we can also set out just as well from non-empirical intuitions, intuitions that do not apprehend sensory existence, intuitions rather ‘of a merely imaginative order’.*

So, unlike the case of standard perceptual judgments, judgments concerning essences can be equally well justified by beginning from perceptions, illusions, or even acts of ‘free fancy’ (1913, §70).⁷ As Sowa puts the point, “Eidetic-descriptive phenomenology must indeed use individual examples, but these can also be sheer fictions” (2012, 256).

So understood, Husserl should not be seen as defending a metaphysical doctrine according to which we should ‘posit’ the existence of Platonistic essences or other ideal objects. Instead, he introduced the problem via concern with a logical/phenomenological question: how can we come to be conscious of, and say true things about, essences—making them the objects of true predications, and objects of knowledge? (1906, Investigation II, §1–2). The story he gives us has to do with transforming first-order judgments about particulars perceived in accord with rules of meaning to judgments in which essences (or essence terms) take the objectual (or noun) role, so that we are entitled to think or say things ‘about essences’ and other abstracta. As Husserl puts it, he keeps “to the straight sense of the meaning-forms in question” and avoids an “erroneous side-slip into ... metaphysical trains of thought” (1906, Investigation II, §16(c)). This is very much along the lines of the story we get later with both Carnap and Schiffer.

2 The Carnapian Development

The Husserlian view of essences, I want to suggest, can be seen as the original source for the Carnapian and (later) pleonastic view of properties. While Husserl is more directly concerned with intentionality than language, Carnap

⁷ Indeed, Husserl there emphasizes that there are certain advantages in working from ‘free fancy’ rather than observation.

develops a similar story in a linguistic guise in “Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology” (1950). Seeing the ways in which these views are in concert can be very helpful—not least for changing the way we see Husserl. For while Husserl is often presented as the poster-child for heavy-duty realism about essences, Carnap is well known as a meta-ontological deflationist. Yet, as we will see, their views run in parallel—and non-accidentally so. Both begin from the same goals, diagnose the empiricist’s mistake in rejecting abstracta in similar ways, and develop much the same solution to how one can think and speak of abstract entities without being a Platonist.

The parallels in Husserl’s and Carnap’s projects and responses are surely not coincidental—Carnap attended Husserl’s lectures in 1924–25 (Smith 2007, 411). Just as Husserl’s original goal was to respond to the empiricists’ rejection of abstracta, Carnap famously opens “Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology” (1950) by noting that “Empiricists are in general rather suspicious with respect to any kind of abstract entities like properties, classes, relations, numbers, propositions, etc.” (1950, 205). Paralleling Husserl, Carnap (1950, 218) goes on to discuss the way empiricists have treated abstracta as ‘philosophical spooks’:

Some nominalists regard the acceptance of abstract entities as a kind of superstition or myth, populating the world with fictitious or at least dubious entities, analogous to the belief in centaurs or demons.

But, like Husserl, Carnap thinks these qualms are misguided, and aims to help those who appeal to abstract entities in their work in mathematics, semantics, etc. to “overcome nominalistic scruples” (1950, 206). Carnap also, like Husserl, emphasizes that the very way in which empiricists liken the acceptance of abstracta to the acceptance of centaurs or demons shows where empiricists go wrong: “This shows again the confusion mentioned, because a superstition or myth is a false (or dubious) internal statement” (1950, 218), which (in this case) would be one that can be shown false by *empirical* means. But this is not the case for statements about the existence of numbers and other abstracta.

So while both Husserl and Carnap are broadly sympathetic with the demystifying goals and respect for science found in empiricism, both think the empiricists’ rejection of abstracta is ultimately itself a needless (and potentially harmful) prejudice. Just as Husserl treats the empiricists’ rejection as resting “on misunderstandings and prejudices” (1913, §19), Carnap treats the qualms of empiricists about using linguistic forms that apparently refer to abstracta as “dogmatic prohibitions” based on “prejudices” (Carnap 1950, 221). And where Husserl accuses scientists who reject essences of falling into inconsistency, Carnap emphasizes the difficulties faced by both mathematicians and

physicists who aim to “avoid reference to abstract entities” (1950, 205). As we have seen above, Husserl attributes the empiricists’ error to their claim that *all* knowledge must be grounded in experience, whereas, by Husserl’s lights, this is a category mistake when applied to knowledge of abstracta, as knowledge of these does not require empirical grounding. This is again a point we see Carnap make, as he accuses the empiricists of a ‘misinterpretation’, insisting “In fact, of course, the semanticist [who refers to abstracta such as propositions] does not in the least assert or imply that the abstract entities to which he refers can be experienced as immediately given either by sensation or by a kind of rational intuition” (1950, 220).

Similarly, as Husserl insists that it is mistaken to treat him as a ‘Platonizing realist’—although he accepts that there are essences and regularly speaks of them—, so Carnap aims to show that using a language referring to abstract entities “does not imply embracing a Platonic ontology but is perfectly compatible with empiricism and strictly scientific thinking” (1950, 206). Carnap insists that his own view, on which we are enabled to legitimately refer to abstract objects, “must not be regarded as implying a metaphysical doctrine concerning the reality of the entities in question” (1950, 214).

Carnap is most directly concerned, not with how we can come to *think of* and *know about* essences, but rather with the parallel linguistic problem of how we can come to legitimately *use* terms to refer to them, and *quantify over* them. Nonetheless, Husserl’s and Carnap’s accounts of how we come to think of or refer to abstracta again run in parallel. As we have seen, Husserl speaks of our observation of an ordinary sensory thing, and our ability to move from there to a ‘founded’ act with a ‘new mode of apprehension’ enabling us to think of objects of a new (abstract) kind, and enabling us to introduce new expressions for these objects of predication. In Husserl’s terms, we have a new ‘mode of apprehension’ that is founded on old ways of experiencing individuals: “[A] new mode of apprehension has been built on the intuition of the individual house or of its red aspect, a mode of apprehension constitutive of the intuitive presence of the Idea of Red” (1906, Investigation II, §1).

Paralleling this, but in the linguistic mode, Carnap speaks of our use of a thing-language for describing ordinary sensory things, onto which we may add a new, founded, linguistic framework, entitling us to refer to things of a new (abstract) kind (1950, 211–212):

The thing language contains words like ‘red’, ‘hard’, ‘stone’, ‘house’ etc., which are used for describing what things are like. Now we may introduce new variables ... for which those words are substitutable, and furthermore the general term ‘property’. New rules are laid down which admit

sentences like ‘Red is a property’, ‘Red is a color’, ‘These two pieces of paper have at least one color in common’

In general, on Carnap’s (1950, 213–14) view, one can introduce reference to new entities by taking two essential steps:

First, the introduction of a general term, a predicate of higher level, for the new kind of entities, permitting us to say of any particular entity that it belongs to this kind (e.g., “Red is a *property*”, “Five is a *number*”). Second, the introduction of variables of the new type. The new entities are values of these variables; the constants (and the closed compound expressions, if any) are substitutable for the variables. With the help of the variables, general sentences concerning the new entities can be formulated.

And in that way, property terms take the object position in sentences—making them the subject of true, affirmative, categorial statements—and thus making them count as ‘objects’ in Husserl’s sense.

We can understand along these lines Husserl’s thought that, beginning from observing an empirical thing, we can build on that a new form of awareness that takes the essence as the object of the presentation. Husserl himself notes the connection between approaches in the phenomenological and linguistic modes, writing “... to make an object of something, to make it a subject of predications or attributions, merely differs in name from having a presentation of it” (1906, Investigation II, §14, italics mine). According to Carnap, once terms are introduced in this way, one is entitled to say (as an internal claim, using the extended linguistic framework) that there are properties, owing to the very meaning-rules that constitute the linguistic framework. As such, Carnap’s insistence can be seen as a clear development, in the linguistic mode, of the Husserlian idea that by introducing new modes of apprehension, which enable us to think of the essence, we are entitled to introduce new expressions for essences and say true things about them. The two thus give parallel solutions to the problem of how we can legitimately think about and say true things about abstracta, without taking a ‘metaphysical’ or ‘Platonizing’ stance.

3 ‘Pleonastic’ Reconstruction

The Carnapian approach to justifying our talk of properties and other abstracta finds its contemporary development in the pleonastic approach to abstracta developed by Stephen Schiffer (1996, 2003). Like Husserl and Carnap, Schiffer

hopes “for an existence-affirming alternative to heavy-duty Platonism” (1996, 153). Schiffer argues that (subject to certain technical reservations)⁸ we can undertake what he calls ‘trivial transformations’ that take us from a sentence like

(1) Fido is a dog

to infer:

(2) Fido has the property of being a dog.

Since (2) is intuitively redundant with respect to (1), Schiffer calls these ‘pleonastic transformations’. From there, we can go on to use the introduced singular term ‘the property of being a dog’ in affirmative statements such as ‘the property of being a dog is different from the property of being a cat.’⁹ These trivial inferences are the correlates of what Husserl would have called essential laws connecting meanings of different types. Once introduced, that singular term is (as Schiffer puts it) apparently guaranteed to refer. So, as Schiffer puts it, such terms have a ‘something from nothing feature’ in that “From a true sentence containing no singular term that refers to an entity of the kind in question [e.g., (1) has no term that refers to a property], we get a singular term that does refer to an entity of the kind in question” (1994, 304). We can also go on to say true things about it (such as ‘the property of being a dog is different from the property of being a giraffe’)—making the property of being a dog the subject of true, categorical, affirmative predications, and so treating it as an object in Husserl’s sense.

This formulation provides a clear contemporary way of understanding the Husserlian/Carnapian approach to abstract entities and our knowledge of them. The Schifferian pleonastic account brings the advantage of showcasing the simple rules that introduce talk of abstracta into our language: for example, “if *x* is *P*, then *x* has the property of being *P*”. It also has the virtue of making evident their harmlessness by pointing to their apparent redundancy.

Schiffer also emphasizes a point alluded to by Carnap: that, apart from what these rules entail, there may be no more to be said about the natures of such

⁸ To avoid cases such as deriving terms for being a non-self-instantiating property. See Schiffer (1996, 164–165).

⁹ Those who are concerned about the shift from talk of essences to talk of properties might be reminded that, in Husserl’s use, “The essence ... of an entity ... comprises the properties that make it ‘what’ it is, that is, its species, qualities, and relations” (Smith 2007, 254).

properties, and other abstracta to which we introduce reference in a similar way. Carnap (1950, 210) writes:

Any further explanations as to the nature of the propositions (i.e. the elements of the system indicated, the values of the variables) ... are theoretically unnecessary because, if correct, they follow from the rules.

This is a point Schiffer emphasizes in noting that the abstracta to which we come to refer via these pleonastic transformations are ‘shallow’. As he writes (Schiffer, 1996, 153):

[W]e needn’t hold that properties and propositions are potential objects of language-independent discovery in the way that islands and quarks are, and consequently we needn’t hold that they, like islands and quarks, have ‘hidden and substantial nature[s]’ for a theory to uncover.

Both of these further developments suggest an important way of responding to Schlick’s early objection that Husserl has not “sufficiently characterized [the] nature” of Ideal beings or given any “positive account” of them (1910/1979). That is, the thought that such ideal entities (if there are any) should be characterizable in terms of an account of their positive ‘nature’ is itself based on mistakenly thinking of them in old-fashioned Platonist terms—as if they were the discoverable residents of another ‘realm’. Thinking instead of our ability to introduce talk and thought of abstracta in accord with *meaning-rules* makes it clear that it is misguided to demand further descriptions of their natures, in ways that might be thought to parallel the kinds of descriptions we hope to get of empirical realities.

We also get in Schiffer’s formulation a way of reconstructing Husserl’s idea that there are different *grounds for* sensory judgments versus for judgments about essences, and that judgments about essences (including about the existence of essences) remain valid regardless of the veridicality of the original experience. That is to say, in experiencing this house as red, that experience could go on to be undermined if I find I was subject to some illusion (there is, in Smith’s (1979) sense, an ‘explosion’ of the perception and I find that it was only a façade, or that the house was subject to odd lighting, or that I was dreaming). Nonetheless, none of that undermines the truth of the corresponding judgment about essence, made in the new mode of apprehension: for example, that there is an essence of Red, that the essence of Red is different from the essence of Green, and so on. In Husserl’s terminology, we can bracket all worldly experience, and yet retain knowledge of essences.

This again fits in parallel with the pleonastic view, and can be reconstructed in the linguistic guise. The rules of use introducing the new concepts or expressions (for essences) entitle us not only to make the transition from 'The house is red' to 'The house has the property of redness' and finally to 'There is a property (essence) of redness', but also ensure that the conclusion remains true, independently of the truth of the original statement ('The house is red'), and indeed independently of the truth of any empirical, factual statement. As Schiffer puts the point, "The sentence 'Fido is a dog', *whether or not it is true*, also yields the singular term 'the property of being a dog', which we are assured of referring to the property of being a dog" (1994, 304). Even if we were mistaken, and Fido turns out to be a strange looking cat, the inference we make to the existence of the property holds good.

It is this feature, of the independence of the truth-value of the statement concerning properties from the truth of the original world-oriented judgment (and indeed from any world-oriented judgments, or judgments about the existence of language or mental states) that lies behind the traditional Platonist claims that such entities are mind- and language-independent. As Schiffer (1994, 280) puts it for the case of propositions:

... [W]hat ... is the nature of this thing, *that eating fish increases intelligence*, which is the referent of the that-clause singular term? Well, that eating fish increases intelligence is *abstract*, in that it has no spatial location: it is not in Sicily or anywhere else. It is *mind-and-language-independent* in that it exists in possible worlds in which there are neither thinkers nor speakers. It is also language-independent in that it cannot be said to belong to any language ...

But this, for Schiffer, Carnap, and Husserl alike, is not a matter of discovering some property of odd occupants of another realm, but rather a simple consequence of the meaning-rules that introduce certain ways of thinking and talking.

4 In What Sense is Husserl a Platonist, and in What Sense is He Not?

Viewing Husserl's treatment of essences in juxtaposition with its later Carnapian and Schifferian developments not only enables us to understand the view and its historical heirs better. It also enables us to better evaluate the ontological consequences of the view. With all this behind us, we can better address the question: What exactly are the differences between Husserl's view

of essences and those of a ‘Platonizing realist’—or, let us just say ‘traditional Platonist’?

Like the traditional Platonist, Husserl does clearly insist that there are essences, that these are distinct from the concepts of essences, and that they are mind- and language-independent, indeed independent of the whole material world. So, is Husserl a Platonist? On the one hand, if all one means by ‘Platonism’ is the view that there are essences, and that these are independent of empirical reality, mind, and language: sure he is. For there are perfectly valid inferences that entitle us to say that there are essences, that these are ‘objects’ in the quasi-syntactic sense. Moreover, it follows from the very meaning-rules that introduce the relevant terms and concepts that we are entitled to speak of essences independent of all minds, language, indeed of all empirical reality. For the truth of the conclusions that enable us to think and speak of these as objects are independent of the truths of the empirical statements (or veridicality of sensory experiences) we begin from in making the trivial inferences.

Yet despite these commonalities with traditional Platonist views, Husserl excoriates those who accuse him of being a “Platonizing realist” (1913, §22), and as far back as the *Logical Investigations* he suggests that “we may leave aside, as long disposed of, the misunderstandings of Platonic realism” (1906, Investigation II, §7). Although he affirms the existence of essences, Husserl (1906, Investigation II, §14) at the same time attempts to clear away old Platonic misunderstandings and misconstruals of them:

Expressions such as ‘universal object’, ‘universal presentation’ certainly arouse memories of old, burdensome errors. But, however much they may have been historically misinterpreted, they must still have a normal interpretation which justifies them

We can then lay bare both the errors and the normal, justifying interpretation.

What are the errors Husserl attributes to his empiricist critics in thinking of him as a Platonist—in the sense of Platonism they disparage and reject? As we have seen, ontologically, one such error would be to think of Husserl as suggesting that essences are *empirical realities*, or *factual*, or (*like*) *spatio-temporal objects*. On the contrary, as we have seen, Husserl emphasizes that he is merely treating essences as objects in the sense of being subjects of true categorical affirmative statements: things we can introduce noun terms for, attend to as objects of thought, and go on to say true (positive) things about—which are guaranteed to remain true regardless of the truth of all empirical claims. Nonetheless, Husserl insists that there remains a unified sense in which empirical objects and these mere objects of predication may have predicates applied to

them; this is “the most universal sense of being, or of an object, as such” (1906, Investigation II, §8). The ‘normal, justifying interpretation’ of saying that there are essences—that essences are ‘objects’—is thus just to say that they can be the subjects of true, affirmative, categorical judgments, that they are the correlates of the syntactic category of objectual terms.

In the contemporary analytic context, we can see another error it would be easy to fall into, which it is crucial to avoid. Husserl is certainly not properly classified as a Platonist (or ‘heavyweight realist’ about abstracta) in the sense of ‘positing’ such entities as part of a ‘best metaphysical theory’. Contemporary Platonists in analytic metaphysics typically think of essences and other abstract entities as ‘posits’, where accepting them is ‘justified’ by their forming parts of the best ‘total theory’, or by adding ‘explanatory power’ to our ‘theories’. (And opponents of Realism about abstracta typically argue against a form of Platonism like this.) Such a metaphysical approach, however, is totally antithetical to Husserl. Essences and other Ideal objects, for Husserl, are not metaphysical ‘posits’, nor do they form part of a metaphysical theory (still less one that is to be weighed up in ways analogous to scientific theories). Instead, what Husserl gives us is simply a story about how thought and talk about essences is introduced in such a way that they are able to become objects of true predications and of knowledge, and where (given the epistemic rules that introduce that talk) that is insulated from the kinds of failings that can plague empirical beliefs.

Epistemologically, the error is thinking that Husserl takes such essences to be known through some special process of quasi-observation paralleling sensory observation.¹⁰ As we saw above, Smith interprets Husserl as treating the empiricists’ mistaken rejection of essences as a matter of seeing it as something like a category mistake. It is a category mistake to think that, in saying that there are essences, Husserl is suggesting that they are empirical realities, or that they are known through a form of intuition analogous or parallel to the kind of sensory tracking suitable for knowledge of empirical reality. It is, accordingly, also a category mistake to think that knowledge of essences must be grounded in experience. For, as Husserl (1906, Investigation II, §8) clearly puts it in the second *Logical Investigation*:

10 Although, as Husserl notes, the process of intuiting essences is analogous to sensory perception insofar as both are (by contrast with acts of imagination) subject to error and revision (1913, §23). For we may, for example, engage in “false geometrical thinking” and err in our judgments about essences.

... we do not deny but in fact emphasize, that there is a fundamental categorical split in our unified conception of being (or what is the same, in our conception of an object as such); we take account of this split when we distinguish between ideal being and real being; between being as Species and being as what is individual.

Husserl makes clear that the path he lays out for coming to know of essences does not involve anything like a quasi-perceptual seeing of a Platonic realm, but rather involves following certain meaning-rules that entitle us to introduce new objectual expressions via a new 'mode of apprehension' founded on ordinary sense experience. This idea that there is this path to knowledge has been further clarified and demystified by Carnap and by the pleonastic view of how we come to refer to (and know of) abstract entities. Thus, to say that we know essences through intuition is not to posit some mysterious quasi-sensory faculty. Instead, knowledge of essences takes a very different route, which begins by transforming ordinary world-regarding experience and engaging in a new 'mode of apprehension' that enables us to introduce new expressions for essences and to say true things about essences. (We could make the point in the linguistic mode by suggesting that we may begin by making trivial inferences from ordinary world-regarding sentences, and introducing new singular terms for essences that enable us to say true things about them, and quantify over them).

On my view, such views are best understood as beginning with functional pluralism and ending with a simple realism. That is to say, the *function* of talk of essences, properties, etc. is very different from the function of talk of individual trees, tables, and ways they are. The former does not serve a function of tracking elements of empirical reality or reporting on them. Moreover, as both Husserl and Schiffer make clear, it does not require the same sort of justification—the epistemological grounds for talk of essences is different from that for talk of empirical objects. On the back of our ordinary 'thing language', or concepts employed in experiencing empirical reality, we can introduce new ways of thinking and speaking, through trivial conceptual/linguistic inferences, that entitle us instead to speak and think of essences, properties and the like. Once we can do that, take them as the 'objects' of our thought and of predication, we can go on to say true things about them—to make judgments about essences. Given the rules that introduce the relevant concepts and terms, these judgments are not subject to the same rules of justification that govern empirical claims—the demand that these, too, be empirically grounded is out of place, and the judgments can survive even if the original world-oriented experiences or judgments turned out to be faulty.

Schiffer aims to make good on the claim that this is an “alternative to heavy-duty Platonism” by suggesting that the existence of such entities (when we derive reference to them through something-from-nothing inferences) should be treated “in a suitably deflationary, or minimalist manner”, giving us a “cheap ontology” (1994, 304f.). Such entities, he suggests, are—in a sense—“language or mind created” existing somehow “as a result of a manner of speaking” (1996, 153). I have argued elsewhere (2001 and 2015, Chapter 3), however, that this is mistaken. And indeed Husserl’s own remarks against the view that essences are mental constructs give us the basis for seeing why it is mistaken. For given the very meanings of our essence and number thoughts (and terms), the number or essence we think of is distinct from the concepts we have of them, and the numbers and essences “are what they are whether we ‘construct’ them or not” (Husserl 1913, 81). Otherwise put, the very idea one sees in Husserl and Carnap, which makes introduction of terms (or concepts) for properties (or essences) seem non-problematic, is the idea that we can introduce these new meaningful terms (or concepts) in such a way that the constitutive meaning-rules guarantee that the terms introduced refer (and do so regardless of all empirical facts). But if that is *constitutive* of what it is for *there to be* properties or essences, the right conclusion to draw is simply that there *are* properties (and essences) *in the only sense these terms have*—not that they exist in some ‘cheap’ or ‘ontologically deflated’ sense. Put in my terms (2015, 145–157), Husserl should be understood as a ‘simple realist’ about essences (and other abstracta)—saying simply that there *are* essences (and other abstracta) in the only sense that makes sense.

On the other hand, this is a form of realism about essences, and a view of the epistemology of essences, that enables Husserl to at the same time diagnose the mistakes of traditional Platonism—or at least, the mistakes that led empiricist critics to dismiss what they *thought of as* traditional Platonism. For these essences should not be thought of as “Platonic ‘forms’ or eidos [that] exist in a Platonic heaven beyond space and time” (Smith 2007, 141). They are not analogous to empirical realities but in a special heaven. They are neither things we *ought to be able to* know about through empirical methods (so that empiricists are right to reject them), nor things we *do* get to know about through some process of intuition that is *analogous to* perception and enables us to inspect this alternate reality.

Moreover, just as it would be a mistake to insist that we be able to know of the existence of essences empirically, so would it be a mistake to think of essences as ‘posits’ of a metaphysical theory, to be evaluated by its position of ‘theoretic virtues’ in parallel with the evaluation of scientific theories. Husserl’s anti-scientism is as relevant today as ever—perhaps even more so. In

the contemporary context, thinking of Husserl as a Platonistic realist, ‘positing’ essences as parts of a ‘best metaphysical (or overall) theory’ (evaluated using criteria suitable for evaluating competing empirical theories) leads us completely astray, not only from understanding Husserl’s position on essences and their epistemology, but from grasping his overall approach to philosophy—an approach that clearly distinguishes the work of phenomenology from any scientific conception.

Instead, Husserl holds the simple view that, on the basis of ordinary world experience, we may develop new modes of apprehension, thought and talk, that entitle us to introduce ways of speaking and thinking—including speaking and thinking about essences. What we have is a non-mysterious, pleonastic form of realism about essences, combined with a sensible and non-mysterious view of our knowledge of them—not a deep or mysterious metaphysical view ‘positing’ a special Platonistic realm. As we have seen, Husserl aims to avoid any “erroneous side-slip into ... metaphysical trains of thought” (1906, *Investigation II*, 16(c)), and in this he again parallels Carnap, who insists that the acceptance of abstract entities in this (internal) sense “must not be regarded as implying a metaphysical doctrine” (1950, 214). That is to say, while both accept the truth of simple, affirmative statements about essences,¹¹ for neither of them are essences or other abstracta ‘metaphysical posits’ to be thought of on the model of discovering empirical objects or positing scientific theoretic objects. On the contrary, both rigorously sought to avoid such metaphysical speculation.

Once we can see things in this light, and see the close commonalities between the well-known deflationist, Carnap, and the supposed Platonist, Husserl, the temptation to dismiss Husserl as a “Platonizing realist” about essences should dim. As the above historical excavation aims to show, Husserl’s views on essence place him more in the company of Carnap and Schiffer than of Plato or of many contemporary Platonist metaphysicians. Even more importantly, the historical work that takes us through these three figures enables us to see the route to developing a clear and plausible view that vindicates our talk of (and phenomenology’s study of) essences, without thinking of that as requiring what would traditionally be thought of as a deep metaphysical commitment to a realm of Platonic entities. If we can see the way to developing such a view out of Husserl’s work, that will not only help rectify historical mistakes, but also help us see the way to better resolving metaphysical and epistemological problems that have played a central role in both the analytic and phenomenological traditions.

11 In Carnap’s case, at least provided they are taken as ‘internal’ statements.

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