

The Ontological Status of Essences in Husserl's Thought

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Abstract: Phenomenology has been defined by Husserl as "theory of the essences of pure phenomena," yet the ontological status of essences in Husserlian phenomenology is far from a settled issue. The late Husserlian emphasis on genetic constitution and the historicity of the lifeworld is not immediately reconcilable with the 'unchangeable' nature that is *prima facie* attributed to essences. However, the problem of the nature of ideality cannot be dropped from phenomenological accounts without jeopardizing the phenomenological enterprise as such. Through an immanent analysis of Husserl's meditation on essences a positive account of their ontological status is provided. Essences are interpreted as ontological thresholds, *primordially* rooted in our motivated confrontation with sensuous transcendence. Essences appear as emergent ontological features, which are not reducible to their particular realizations and which exhibit a fundamental continuity between consciousness and being. They manifest themselves as prospectively *a priori* (a precondition for further experiences), but retrospectively *a posteriori* (they are founded in experience). Finally, essences manifest the 'co-essential' nature of consciousness and sensuous transcendence: they are the way in which we are motivated and constitutively bound to articulate being, which in turn is apt to be thus articulated.

Keywords: Edmund Husserl; essences; phenomenology and ontology; emergent qualities

Phenomenology has been consistently defined over time by Husserl¹ as "theory of the essences (*Wesenslehre*) of pure phenomena,"² and, indeed, the notion of 'essence' (in its various verbal realizations as *Wesen*, *Essenz*, *Eidos*, *Idee*, *Idealität*, etc.) lies at the core of the phenomenological project; yet, to establish the ontological status of

¹In the following, with regard to Husserl's quotations, I will always refer to the original German versions, while offering the relevant excerpts in English whenever a published translation is available.

² Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*. Vol. 2, trans. J.N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 2001), hereafter cited as "LI 2," 343. -. *Logische Untersuchungen*. Bd. II. Teil I. Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1913, 336 (henceforth quoted as: LU II/1). See also Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 168. Hereafter cited as *Ideas I*. - *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie, *Husserliana III*, W. Biemel (ed.) (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), 172. Hereafter cited as "Hua III"

essences in Husserlian phenomenology is neither an easy nor an uncontroversial task. Even if the dispute over realism or idealism in Husserl's phenomenology is no longer as fashionable as it used to be, this does not mean that the ontological position of essences is a well-established issue. Although Husserl's writings after *Ideas I* decidedly contributed to fence off many of the accusations of 'idealism', which were at the roots of the 'phenomenological diaspora', still not everything is settled. While the stress of the late Husserl on genetic analysis and on the ontological role of history is up to most of the theoretical challenges raised by Scheler or Heidegger, such late developments are not straightforwardly reconcilable with the 'unchangeable' nature that is *prima facie* attributed to 'essences'. At the same time, it must be stressed that the problem of the nature of ideality is not a problem among others in phenomenology, but is decisive for the whole phenomenological enterprise.³ As we will see, Husserl very convincingly argues that there must be something like 'essences', but, as to how we have to conceive of their 'being', their explicit determination is more often negative than positive: essences are said not to be spatiotemporal realities, nor mere psychological data, nor Platonic hypostatizations. Yet, to grasp positively the being of essences is much harder, and this is the task that we will try to approach in the following pages.

§ 1. Essences, Truth and Facts

In the *Prolegomena zur reinen Logik* (1900) Husserl diffusely argues for the necessity to grant the existence of an ideal dimension irreducible to factuality. Among the various arguments that he produces, we want to concentrate on the one that seems to us to be the most basic and powerful: according to Husserl, to the extent that there is something like truth, there must be an ideal dimension irreducible to facts. To reach this conclusion we must first remember that whenever we produce a judgment, we require the existence of propositions verifiable in different times and contexts and by a plurality of different subjects. This requires the availability of general contents: no two actual horses are exactly the same, but we are able to make and share truthful judgments about horses in different moments and places. However, this does not establish ideal 'horseness' yet, but is just to say that we need to refer to something that preserves unity and identity while its determinations may change. At this point, the objection could be raised that the mentioned conditions for judgment (and truth) could just be anthropological or psychological facts, concerning the cognitive abilities of the human species, and that it does not involve any guarantee of the truly universal nature of ideas. In this sense, general contents or ideas could be just individual states of mind, factually present in the brains of a peculiar species. Consequently, some judgments could be true for a certain animal species, like *homo sapiens*, and false for

³ S. Rinofner-Kreidl, *Edmund Husserl: Zeitlichkeit und Intentionalität* (Freiburg [Breisgau], München: Karl Alber Verlag, 2000), 682.

another species, endowed with a different biological constitution⁴. The same could be actually said with reference to different individuals within the same biological species.

Yet, according to Husserl, if we regard ideas as mere facts pertinent to a specific biological constitution or to its accidental variations, we are taking a stance that is equivalent to a statement of radical scepticism: judgments claiming to be truthful become mere couplings of facts, in the brain and in the extra-cerebral world respectively, and since facts are individual determinations, their coupling would just be an individual determination in its turn. But by reducing truth to an individual determination, we have actually given up the concept of truth, which can no longer claim to be conducive to knowledge and reality. Truth as knowledge of reality requires a stable grasp of something endowed with universal validity, but, under the present presuppositions, truth turns out to be just an individual fact among other individual facts, irreducibly disjunct from each other. This means that the reduction of ideas to facts implies the sceptical assertion that there is no truth proper. But such an assertion falls under the classical criticism that applies to all skeptical theses (LU I, 119/ LI 1, 80): if there is no truth, you can neither assert nor conceive of the very content of the thesis 'there is no truth'. Even if we may have the impression of thinking something meaningful when we conceive of the skeptical thesis, in fact this cannot be but a delusional representation, since here there is no room for any representation 'true to the facts'. Any possible speculation about biological constitutions, evolutionary processes or pragmatist interpretations of cognition already presupposes the subsistence of a dimension irreducible to individual factuality. Thus, we do not really have any alternative to granting the existence of ideas that are not reducible to factuality, and this is what Husserl *prima facie* means by 'essences'.

Yet, does the refutation of the skeptic necessarily translate into a positive ontological thesis about essences? Not quite, since we need at least to clarify two orders of questions. The first one concerns the nature of the relationship between truth and reality (in the widest sense): the fact that, in order to conceive of truth, we have to grant that entities that are more than individual must exist does not tell anything about the capability of ideas (thought in general) to account for 'reality in itself', whatever this may mean. This position, in the absence of further specifications, is compatible with solipsism and absolute idealism, and, indeed, it is well-known that Husserl met with some difficulties when trying to clarify the relevant issues. The second point concerns the nature of the original opposition that primarily determines the ideal dimension: 'essence' is primarily what is not individual and not mutable, and that therefore enables factuality to be grasped, which is individual and mutable. This means that, in order to understand what the 'essential' character of

⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol. 1, trans. D. Moran (London: Routledge, 2001), 79. (Hereafter cited as LI 1). - Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*. Bd. I. *Prolegomena zur reinen Logik* (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1913), 117. (Hereafter cited as: LU I)

essence is, we must clarify as much as possible what its ‘opposite’ is. Let us dwell first on this second order of questions.

In *Logical Investigations* Husserl defines the ideal dimension by opposition to the dimension of facts (*Tatsachen*), which are said to be ‘individual’, ‘temporal’ and ‘empirical’. The ideal dimension turns out therefore to be non-individual, non-temporal (*unzeitlich*) (LU I 130/ LI 1 87) and super-empirical (*überempirisch*) (LU I, 64/ LI 1, 48; LU II/1, 26/ LI 1, 184/). These three requirements are partially, but not wholly, overlapping. In the wake of the argument that we have recalled in support of the necessary subsistence of essences, they must be regarded by definition as non-individual. Yet, the proper meaning of such non-individual nature can be understood only by clarifying also the super-empirical and non-temporal nature attributed to essences. And indeed essences can be regarded as super-empirical and non-temporal only under proper qualifications. Essences must be non-temporal in the sense that they must not be labile and changeable: essences are what allow identification across the volatile flow of facts. This however does not imply that essences must exist, as it were, in a dimension of ‘eternity’ parallel and foreign to the worldly existence (see LU I, 142/ LI I, 93). Indeed, Husserl does recognize a ‘material’ sphere of essences (LU II/1, 252; LI 2, 19), where we can speak, for example, of the essence of a house, which is a human artifact and does not easily fit into the picture of an eternal realm of ideas. Secondly, essences must be super-empirical in the sense that they cannot be conceived as something wholly adventitious, dependent on the peculiarities of factual experiencing. However, again, this does not mean that essences are entities foreign to the dimension of experience. This last point is a particularly sensitive one, since it is directly connected with the issue of idealism in phenomenology: according to how the relationship between essences and ‘sensuous reality’ is understood, Husserlian phenomenology can be considered more akin to Fichtean absolute idealism or to Kantian transcendental philosophy.

§ 2. Essence and Experience

Although, with the benefit of hindsight, the accusations of (absolute) idealism, which especially followed the publication of the first volume of *Ideas*, can be dispelled as a theoretical misunderstanding, a careful reading of both *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas I* may make comprehensible why such a misunderstanding was possible. When one reads the notorious § 49 of *Ideas I*, where Husserl writes that the being of consciousness would not be touched by the annihilation of the world of things (*Hua III*, 115),⁵ it is difficult not to think that this sounds like an unambiguous statement of absolute idealism. Still, one can object that many elaborate discussions, especially in the *Logical Investigations*,

⁵ “[W]hile the being of consciousness, of any stream of mental processes whatever, would indeed be necessarily modified by an annihilation of the world of physical things its own existence would not be touched” (*Ideas I*, 115/ 110).

should be counted as evidence that Husserl was not after a kind of idealism of Fichtean brand, where the absolute I creates nature (the non-I). Indeed, Husserl himself complains in the preface to the second edition (1921) of the VI Logical Investigation⁶ that some misunderstandings concerning Ideas I would have been avoided by paying more attention to his discussion about sensuous and categorical intuition in the last logical investigation.⁷ But, in fact, the wealth of arguments and reasons in both Logical Investigations and Ideas I gives much more the impression of a research in progress, with all the due fluctuations, than the idea of an established theoretical achievement, and this impression is confirmed by some significant self-critical remarks that Husserl produces in later works.⁸

According to Husserl essences are a priori, but this does not mean that they are ‘innate ideas’: we become aware of essences through a process of apprehension that is variously labelled. He speaks in Logical Investigations of Ideation, Wesensschau(ung), Ideenschau, and ideierende Abstraktion, which can be treated as synonyms, but then he also talks, as more specific notions conducive to the apprehension of essences, of kategoriale Anschauung, Idealisierung and finally (but thus named only in later works) of eidetische Variation. While the first group includes aspecific expressions for the process that leads to the apprehension of essences, kategoriale Anschauung (categorical intuition), Idealisierung (idealization) and eidetische Variation (eidetic variation) point at specific aspects of Ideation.

The most detailed discussion is devoted to categorical intuition, whose analysis, according to Husserl, should remove any doubt concerning the appropriate interpretation of the ideal dimension (LU II/2, iv/ LI 2, 179). Indeed, absolute idealism does not come out of the pages of the sixth Logical Investigation as a plausible option. Already in the Prolegomena Husserl was asserting that ideal meanings (ideale Bedeutungen) are obtained by a process of abstraction (ideierende Abstraktion) applied to singular empirical contents, and that precisely the fact that ideal meanings, including logical laws, are so obtained is a warrant of their applicability to empirical contents (LU I 101/ LI 1, 69). Abstraction, however, must not be understood as a process where part of an empirical content is extracted as a part from the whole, because this way of interpreting abstraction would not transcend the individual nature of empirical contents and could not account for the universal nature of ideas (LU II/1, 266-267/ LI 2, 42): the partial extraction of an individual content would give us just an impoverished individual content, not a general one. The crucial question, with which Husserl struggles, is the classical one of

⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*. Bd. II. Teil II. Elemente einer Phänomenologischen Aufklärung der Erkenntnis (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1921). Henceforth quoted as: LU II/2.

⁷ “Many misunderstandings of my Ideas Towards a Pure Phenomenology would not have been possible had these chapters [Ch. VI in LU II/2] been attended to.” (LI 2, 178; LU II/2, iv.)

⁸ Cf. Rinofner-Kreidl, *op. cit.*, 627-630.

the common nature that empirical facts and ideas must share in order for factual judgments to be conducive to truth and knowledge. The Berkeleyan solution, where ideas have the same particular nature of sensuous experience is shown by Husserl to be inadequate (LU II/1, 156-157/ LI 1, 270). But this rejection does not pave the way for any renewed version of Platonism either, since the Platonic hypostatization of ideas in a separate dimension is explicitly considered unacceptable (Ideas I, 48/41). All in all, the negative features are still much easier to discern than the traits of a positive solution.

It is clear to Husserl from the beginning that truth cannot be dealt with in terms of a direct match between words and things, which would be hopelessly heterogeneous. Evidence is fulfillment of intentional acts, but the fulfilling element is in turn an (intuitive) act, not a fact or a thing; and this makes the poles of the evidence-producing match homogenous. But how should we understand, then, the nature of intuitive acts? Perception, but also imagination and recollection are said to be intuitive acts, but perception appears to have priority. According to Husserl, categorical intuition is based on sensuous intuition, that is, on properly understood perception. Sensuous intuition is concerned with individual real contents and brings to light objects and states of affairs, which are expressed by perceptual judgments, on which sensuous concepts (e.g., 'house') and pure categorical concepts (e.g., 'relation') are founded (*fundiert*) (LU II/2, 184/ LI 2, 307). Every categorical (abstract) concept is said to presuppose sensuous intuition (LU II/2, 183/ LI 2, 307), even if categorical universal notions are apprehended only by means of reflective (founded) acts (LU II/2, 146/ LI 2, 282): this is the core of the process of ideation.

It is important to notice that the ideal dimension that thence emerges is not a full-fledged set of 'exact' laws and concepts. What is apprehended by direct 'ideation' belongs rather to a sphere of 'inexact essences', whereas exact essences, like geometrical conceptuality, can be obtained only through a process of peculiar idealization (*Idealisierung*) (LU II/1, 245/ LI 2, 15).⁹ Actually, all the laws of exact sciences are said to be the outcome of idealizing fictions (*idealiserende Fiktionen*) (LU I 72/LI 1, 52). This distinction between exact and inexact essences finds an alternative expression in later texts in terms of free and bound idealities (*freie und gebundene Idealitäten*)¹⁰. Still, in the light of the famous analysis that Husserl devoted to the origins of geometry in the *Crisis*, it is appropriate to emphasize that tracing the purest samples of the ideal dimension (e.g., geometrical laws) back to an idealizing process rooted in perceptual givenness does not represent at all a repudiation of the non-empirical nature of essences. No doubt, the emphasis changes from the

⁹ "The essences which direct ideation elicits from intuitive data are 'inexact essences', they may not be confused with the 'exact' essences which are ideas in the Kantian sense, and which (like 'ideal point', an ideal surface or solid, or ideal species of colour in the ideal colour-pyramid) arise through a peculiar 'idealization'" (LI 2, 15/245).

¹⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Edmund Husserl, Experience and Judgment*, trans. Churchill & Ameriks (Northwestern University Press, 1973), 267. Hereafter cited as EJ. - *Erfahrung und Urteil. Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik*, edited by Ludwig Landgrebe (Prag: Academia Verlag, 1939), 321.

early pages where Husserl writes that sensuous images are the presupposition for geometrical idealization, but just as aids to intellection (*Verständnishilfen*) (LU II/1, 65/LI 1, 208), to the late pages where Husserl recognizes the essential role of writing, drawing and field measurements for the very birth of geometry.¹¹ Still, Husserl underlines the non-empirical status of essences in the very pages where he recognizes perceptual experience as founding act for categorical intuition and acknowledges the need of a peculiar process of idealization to grasp free exact idealities. It seems that, what Husserl means is that essences do have intrinsic boundaries, but that such boundaries are not intrinsically 'exact', although they can be made exact through an idealizing process. And indeed, if we tentatively conceive of the essential boundaries as a kind of *differentia specifica* that defines conceptual areas, we should hold firm that the boundary between concepts cannot be but a further concept (not a 'line'), which has a general character in its turn. This means that the exactness of the ideal meanings of mathematics and logical laws, far from being the natural condition of essential meanings, can take shape only through an explicit definitional effort. Still, with regard to the nature of essences, the importance of the fact that such exact boundaries can be drawn must not be underestimated.

The claim that essences have a super-empirical status has a specific polemical target, which is the influential understanding of experience inherited from classical empiricism. Essences are non-empirical in the sense of empiricism; that is: perception cannot be understood as a causal process where individual facts in the external world produce impressions on the five senses, which in their turn would be just individual parts of an individual body. Although there is no doubt that we can provide descriptions of sensuous phenomena, inclusive of biological bodies, in terms of individual facts, this kind of description is necessarily inadequate to account for truth and knowledge in general: no knowledge can be sensibly said to emerge from the encounter of mere individual facts, since by definition individual facts are non-repeatable instances, which cannot account for object recognition, recollection, comparison, etc. By granting this conclusion we posit the very existence of epistemic facts as ground for a basic ontological conclusion: in order for knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*) (or at least its appearance) to be, there must be something more than mere individuals and therefore something like essences is required. In connection with this, it should be noted that to reach this conclusion it is not necessary to grant that knowledge be ever fully accomplished; indeed, we do not even need to admit that knowledge is 'actual' at all: the very fact that in the world there is something that claims to have knowledge implies that individual factuality is an ontological dimension insufficient to account for (the whole of) being. This recognition of the inadequacy of any conceptualization of being in terms of individuality (factuality,

¹¹ Edmund Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. D. Carr (Northwestern University Press, 1970), 24-27. Hereafter cited as *Crisis*. - *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, W. Biemel (ed.), (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954), 22-25.

causality) lies at the core of the two fundamental characterizations of phenomenology, as transcendental and eidetic science.¹² The epoché comes to light as a methodical procedure aimed at purifying knowledge from all the spurious solutions apparently offered by the reference to the dimension of individual factuality. In this sense the transcendental direction of Husserl's thought, which develops after the publication of *Logical Investigations*, depends on the recognition that there are essences. Under the epoché the question of the ontological status of phenomena is suspended, because the 'what' can eventually emerge only from the 'how' of what is given to consciousness. Reality (Realität), which is the set of all spatiotemporal determinations, cannot be posited at the beginning of a philosophical analysis, because such a set is precisely the realm of unrepeatable individuality, which cannot ground any knowledge. Still, as we will see, the very fact that the inaugural gesture of phenomenological investigation is the separation of individual reality from the estates of truth and knowledge implies that this dimension remains decisive for any determination of the full meaning of phenomenological results. The question of the ontological status of phenomena, and then of essences, cannot and must not be considered at the start of phenomenological investigations, but no phenomenological investigation is fully accomplished until that question is tackled as well.

Husserl extensively deals with the question of what appears to consciousness as existing beyond consciousness, and he names it transcendence. This discussion takes place especially, as is to be expected, in the context of his analyses of perception. Perception, we said, is founding for categorical intuition even if in perception there is a constitutive reference to individuality. Already in the immediate sphere of perceptual apprehension objects and states of affairs are given so that they can be recognized, compared, regarded as similar or dissimilar, recollected, etc. This means that, although only the founded acts of reflection bring to light categories proper, already at the perceptual level the synthesis of identification takes place, which leads to the apprehension of essences (LU II/2, 51, 149-150/ LI 2, 217, 284-285). When we perceive an object, we can direct our attention towards its individual irreducible determinations or towards its identity, which is preserved regardless of how many specifications we can explicate. It must be noticed that, strictly speaking, individuals are never given to consciousness as objects, since objects are by definition iterable, while individuals as such are unique. As has been noticed,¹³ it seems awkward to claim, as Husserl does, that we can grasp objective essences by experiencing sensuous individuals; however this is no mystery if we correctly understand the nature of perceptual individuality. Perception is a

¹² Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: an Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. D. Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1993, 71). Hereafter cited as CM. - *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, Husserliana I, S. Strasser (ed.), (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 106.

¹³ J.N. Mohanty, "Individual Fact and Essence in Edmund Husserl's Philosophy," in *Phenomenology and Ontology*, (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 152-162.

process in which individuality is signaled precisely by the developing horizon of possible specifications of the object, while each specification that we grasp already represents an identifiable object. What is properly individual is only that which cannot appear as self-identical more than once, and this means that at the level of perceptual experience the individual is manifest through the dimension of sensuous transcendence (Ur-Affektionen, Ur-Impressionen). Individuals are 'objects' before being apprehended as objects, they are unfolding affections that call for being objectified. From this point of view we can see that the traditional notion of individuality appears phenomenologically as a metaphysical fiction, since individual is properly never an object, but only the transcendent 'source' of emerging objectifications. Whatever I gather and acquire from sensuous intuition is always already an entity endowed with identity, even if I am unable to name such identity and even if I am completely unable to point out its boundaries. When we constitute spatial and temporal orderings, we can often characterize individuality by reference to spatiotemporal identification; this however, is not the original way in which individuality proper is given to us. (Indeed, we can say that a spatiotemporal determination is individual only after introducing the idea of objective time, where each position in time is absolutely unique.)

Still, even if we grant that this is the background of sensuous intuition where recognizable units first come to light, we must wait for reflective acts in order to properly identify such units. The procedure by which we can try to isolate the boundaries of essences is called by Husserl eidetische Variation: we vary in imagination the features of a represented object in order to explore the extent to which we are still prone to acknowledge the fantasized variations as traits of the same object; when we no longer think that the varied object is the same, from a certain point of view, we have reached an essential boundary. This procedure extracts from the object, as it was immediately apprehended, its essential features and allows us to obtain a categorical grasp of its essence. However, this procedure may seem dubious, since it depends integrally on a previously synthesized identity, which we have chosen to submit to eidetic variation. Thus, one could wonder if the eidetic variation is not merely bound to discover as what is essential in its object that which already was decided as belonging to the chosen object: what we recognize as 'the same object' would have to be rejected on the basis of our cultural and linguistic biases. In other terms: if we want to single out the essence of 'tree', are not we bound just to discover what our 'conventionally' shared understanding of 'tree' is like? In order to see the authentic scope of eidetic variation, we must realize that the task of such a methodical procedure is to be kept strictly apart from the classical task of reaching the true definition of a substance by genus proximum and differentia specifica. In order to recognize the subsistence of essential features, we need not *be able to univocally determine what the 'only true' essence of a commonly named entity is*. Cultural differences may well make us doubt what the most authentic definition of 'humankind' or 'house' is, but this sort of possible disagreement concerns just the most preferred label that

we are ready to assign: we may disagree whether ‘mankind’ is better identified by the ability to talk, the capacity to shape tools, the virtues of self-consciousness, etc. Eidetic variation does not aim at establishing which *differentia specifica* is the ‘true’ one, but it aims at discovering all the essential phenomenal thresholds. In the end we may well conclude that there is more than one appropriate definition of ‘humankind’, but this does not touch the ability of eidetic variation to discover the ‘conceptual discontinuities’ that are essential to the considered object. Even if the starting point of eidetic variation is a real entity, a sensuous individual, the features that take shape as essential are purified from all individual accidentality. One might object that the thus-found ‘essential’ thresholds merely mirror our interests: for instance, we consider ‘rationality’ more interesting as a threshold determining humanity than being a ‘featherless biped’. This is true, but it is no objection from a Husserlian perspective, insofar as we realize that ‘interested intentionality’ (motivation) need not be conceived as something arbitrary or accidental.

Although perception has a functional priority in the apprehension of essences, what counts in perception is not the reality (spatiotemporal actuality) of perceptual acts, but its ‘unreal’ component, which is also the one that we can grasp ‘virtually’ in the form of free imaginary variation. And indeed, Husserl observes that we could not have categorical intuition without the possibility to have the same ‘content’ in the same way also through imagination¹⁴ ¹⁵. Both the notions of perception and imagination undergo an extension of meaning in the *Logical Investigations*: in imagination we find, next to a merely virtual modality, a *thetic* (*setzend*) *modus*, which posits the imagined content as being; and in perception we find, next to a narrowly sensuous acceptance of perceiving, a wider dimension, which involves an imaginal component and allows categorical intuition. It is precisely because perception involves an ‘imaginal’ component that essences can be said to be directly perceived. In fact, the very expression ‘seeing of essences’ (*Wesensschau*) has been often criticized because of its Platonic flavor, which in the light of the later developments of Husserl’s thought, appears as a misleading trait.¹⁶ However, whatever the terminological preferences, something is clear in LU and remains true down to the latest developments: there must be essences, and they must be staged already at the immediate level of perception. Imagination, in the procedure of eidetic variation, is conducive to the isolation of essences since ‘imagination’ of a sort is always already involved in the acts of sensuous perception. In this sense, the vindication of the founding role of sensuous intuition for categorical intuition is enough to reject any suspicion of Platonic dualism, but is not

¹⁴ “It is clear, in any case, that the concept of imagination must be widened in correspondence with the concept of perception. We could not speak of something supersensuously or categorially perceived, if we could not imagine this thing, in the same manner’ (i.e., not merely sensuously)” (LI 2, 281/144).

¹⁵ Cf. R. Sowa, “Wesen und Wesensgesetze in der deskriptiven Eidetik Edmund Husserls,” in *Phänomenologische Forschungen*, 2007, 5-37, here 22 et seq.

¹⁶ Sowa, *op. cit.*, 6.

enough to dispel all suspicions of absolute idealism. After all, the fundamental role played by (productive) imagination in Fichte's idealism is well-known and crucial. The fact that sensuous experience is required for categorical intuition does not exclude in principle that perception could be actively 'manipulated' by something like the Fichtean version of productive imagination. In the end, the fundamental role of imagination seems to be confirmed by Husserl's remarks like the one where he writes that the realm of possible experiences necessarily includes the realm of actual experiences as a subset, at least regarding their essence (Ideas I, 349-350/ 341-342); this seems to imply that nothing that we could sensuously experience could ever trespass the boundaries of what is in principle imaginable. This may seem to imply that nothing essential could be ever learned from experience, since the a priori realm of the imaginable is fully self-sufficient with respect to the dimension of meanings.

At this stage, the ontological status of essences is still doubtful; yet, what we can take as established is that the ideal dimension can be said to be super-empirical from three points of view: 1) because it is irreducible to individual transcendent reality; 2) because it represents the permanence of self-identical items across the flow of ever-changing experiences, and 3) because it can be isolated with the contribution of purely fictitious procedures (eidetic variation, but also the idealizing fictions conducive to 'exact' essences). Nevertheless, the ideal dimension is rooted in perceptual experience. To put order in this question we have now to investigate the non-temporal character of essences, which requires a clarification of the relationship between experience and temporality.

§ 3. Essences and Time-consciousness

Objectivity means general validity in different times and for different subjects; in this sense objectivity characterizes the sphere of essences.¹⁷ In the same years in which Husserl extensively dwells on the issue of ideality, he also intensively deals with the question of time-consciousness, where the problem of the emergence of objectivity looms large. Since the objectivity of something implies that it remains the same while individual determinations change, it is plain that there is a constitutive connection between time-consciousness and the nature of objectivity (ideality). Husserl's analyses of time-consciousness are vast and complex, but a selective view guided by our focus on the question of essence should allow us to provide a compact account of the points of our concern. In light of the above mentioned order of foundation between sensuous and categorical intuition, we can start the analysis of time-consciousness from the constitution of perceptual units. The inadequacy of the notion of individuality in accounting for knowledge is manifest if we consider that

¹⁷ Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1893-1917), trans. J.B. Brough (Dordrecht, Springer, 2008), 10. Hereafter cited as CIT. - *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* (1893-1917), edited by Rudolf Böhme, (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 9-10. See also LU II/1, 8.

its experiential counterpart, which is an individual sensuous ‘now’, does not provide a sufficient basis for the apprehension of perceptual objects. If, with Husserl, we call sensation (*Empfindung*) an individual sensuous affection, we must admit that the apprehension of perceptual objects requires a diachronic synthesis, which goes beyond any individual present manifestation (CIT, 7-8/8). In *Lectures on the Phenomenology of Inner Time Consciousness* sensations are said to be data immanent in consciousness, whereas perceptual objects are said to be transcendent, which means that they appear as something that is never fully reducible to the experiences thereof (CIT, 6/6). A full perceptual presentation of the object turns out to be an impossible task, since only perspectival parts can be given to us in sensuous evidence;¹⁸ that is why Husserl says that we perceive objects always only by adumbrations (*Abschattungen*). This manifest impossibility suggests that any interpretation of the apprehension of perceptual objects that wanted to rely only on individual sensuous data is misplaced. Indeed, Husserl’s analysis shows that the perceptual present is no instantaneous ‘sense datum’, since it always displays a train of retained impressions, which is what allows our apprehension of perceptual objects to take place. We can recognize a current melody, even if we have each time in sensuous presence only a single note; analogously, we can recognize a present visual object, even if we can never have the sensuous evidence of all its parts from all its possible perspectives. The modifications of consciousness that track the just elapsed sensuous changes are called retentions, while protentions are the immediate ‘expectations’ concerning the next course of sensuous changes. Neither retentions nor protentions are present in the same sense in which actual sensuous impressions are present, however, as they are essential components of the perceptual present and no perception in act could take place without their aid. The condition for our recognition of the heard melody is not that the previously played notes are ‘simultaneously’ present together in a synoptic representation, because this would not account precisely for their being articulated in an order of succession: the previously heard notes must be ‘latently efficacious’ on the notes that are each time sensuously present, and in order to do so, they must preserve their relative positions in the unfolding of the melody.

It is important to note that this point cannot be treated as a mere psychological consideration, as if it concerned psychological abilities in time detection, to be dealt with in the mental sphere, while ‘time in itself’ would be available somewhere else regardless of subjective apprehension. The fundamental character of the analyses on time-consciousness consists in their presupposition for any further analysis of empirical or scientific nature. The point is that there is no way to derive from a set of available events their order of succession, unless there is retentional consciousness

¹⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, trans. A.J. Steinbock (Dordrecht: Springer, 2001), 42. Hereafter cited as APS - *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis. Aus Vorlesungs- und Forschungsmanuskripten 1918-1926*, Husserliana XI, edited by Margot Fleischer (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 3.

of their mutual relations. Whenever we start our analysis from a set of allegedly individual events, for instance mental events in an actual brain or material events in an instant of the universe, we miss the conceptual resources to draw from them temporal connections (among which are causal ones). Our only source of orders of succession is time-consciousness, which defeats the vision of being as individual present being, by showing how anything we apprehend, starting with perceptual objects, can subsist only in an originally temporal dimension where the presence of the individual appears only as part of a (latently efficacious) flow. At the level of time-consciousness epistemic and ontological traits cannot be disjoined.

This conclusion may seem to pull Husserl's account of the ontological status of essences again in the direction of absolute idealism. Indeed, the above mentioned idea that perception has a constitutive imaginational component has a counterpart in the analyses of time-consciousness, when, in the wake of Brentano's work, Husserl attributes to fantasy (*Phantasie*) a productive role as connective tissue of temporal representations (CIT, 11/12).¹⁹ Later on, Husserl will prefer to talk of such a connective function initially labeled as fantasy in terms of retentions and protentions, but the point remains the same: duration and succession come to being only with the active contribution of consciousness. However, in the very analyses of time-consciousness we find also the best reasons not to interpret the indispensable role of consciousness in terms of Fichtean productive imagination. Indeed, we see that the constitution of percepts requires reference to a transcendent dimension both as a starting point and as a target. Retention retains (and 'modifies') something, which is no perceptual object yet, but is not nothing either. This means first that, in the founding acts, 'fantasy' or, if we like, 'productive imagination' is constitutively operating on something that goes beyond itself (something transcendent): this is transcendence as the point of departure for the cognitive process. Secondly, when a perceptual object is finally apprehended, it is recognized as transcendent because it is always more than the sum of the retained experiences: this is transcendence as target of the cognitive process. The relevant implications can be expressed from two complementary perspectives. On the one hand, we are not entitled to say that our perceptual activity 'reconstructs' the object as it is in itself, because we are never in a position to state what something, regardless of its encounter with consciousness, is. This is especially significant with regard to orders of succession and therefore to temporality as such. On the other hand, we are not even entitled to conceive of impressional or objectual transcendence as something produced by subjectivity and dependent on it. If we are faithful to the phenomenological principle of acknowledging only what is presented within the limits in which it is presented (*Ideas I*, 52/44), we have to admit that transcendence signals an

¹⁹ "Phantasy thus proves to be productive in a peculiar way here. This is the sole instance in which phantasy creates a truly new moment of representation, namely, the temporal moment. We have therefore discovered the origin of the representation of time in the region of phantasy." (CIT, 11/12.)

original passivity that can be never legitimately posited as a creation by subjectivity. Nothing in phenomena can justify an interpretation of transcendence in terms of a kind of Fichteian Nicht-Ich, unconsciously produced by the subject. Even if the thesis of absolute idealism, strictly speaking, can be never refuted by phenomena, it is decisive to realize that it is never motivated by phenomena: what we experience bears witness to an original dimension of passivity, which we have no reason to discard in favor of an hypothetical antecedent unconscious activity. Yet, it is important to observe that the question that Fichte raised while criticizing the Kantian notion of ‘Thing-in-itself’ remains alive for Husserl. Methodologically Husserl teaches us to produce fundamental analyses under epoché, and therefore to suspend all questions concerning reality and causality of beings in themselves. However, it would be a misunderstanding to conclude that phenomenology is not concerned with ontology. Although it is improper to enroll Husserl in the ranks of traditionally understood idealism or realism, the issue of ‘real’ being is absolutely essential in his thought. Indeed, one should not be deceived by the treatment of ‘reality’ in terms of spatiotemporal Realität versus the dimension of immanent experiences (reell), since the point to look at in order to grasp the roots of the ontological question in Husserl is rather the notion of transcendence (which is a more comprehensive notion than both the reell and real spheres).

§ 4. Essence and Transcendence

In Husserlian terms, the transcendent is what is given to consciousness as irreducible to consciousness, which means that transcendence signals a subsistence that is beyond the powers of subjectivity, while not being wholly foreign to subjectivity. Across Husserl’s texts few phenomenal areas are explicitly named as full-fledged embodiments of the transcendent dimension: we will mention and briefly illustrate four such embodiments.

1) The first and most elementary instance of transcendence concerns the primal dimension of passivity in perception. Primal impressions (Urimpressionen), sensuous reliefs (Abhebungen), affections (Affektionen) are all expressions that signal the primal level of sensuous experience, whose original passivity points at an original ‘anonymous substrate’. This is the sphere that at first Husserl terms hylé. This term, however, involved sensations interpreted as ‘raw matter’ of intentionality, and sensations are still immanent data.²⁰ Therefore, Husserl did successively introduce and consistently use the term Ur-hylé, whenever he wanted to emphasize the ‘pre-cognitive’ transcendent character of the substrate of all sensuous experience.

2) Secondly, Husserl repeatedly asserts the transcendent nature of material objects. While the notion of object (Gegenstand) is primarily

²⁰ See L. R. Rabanaque, “Hyle, Genesis and Noema,” in *Husserl Studies* 19 (2003): 205–215, here 207-8; cf. Lotz, *From Affectivity to Subjectivity. Husserl’s Phenomenology Revisited* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 86-7.

used by Husserl to name the intentional object in general, that is, the correlate of consciousness a parte objecti, Husserl speaks of things (Dinge) or real (real) objects when he wants to refer to transcendent 'material' objects. The transcendent object is what is adumbrated by adumbrations (das Abgeschattete): whereas adumbrations are immanent sensuous data, their ever-elusive but constitutively intended reference is the real object as transcendent unit. Transcendent is now not just the shapeless pre-cognitive 'raw matter' of perception (hylé), but also the shaped unit that we intend as independently existent. In fact, real things as such are qualified by cognitive attributions, since they are, at least, recognized as existent in space, and the attribution of spatial predicates can take place only in the wake of sentient spontaneous bodily movements (Kinästhesen), which originally articulate space with reference to the orientation of our living body (Leib).²¹ In Ideas II Husserl shows that real things are constituted as unitary schemas or rules of change proper to possible manifestations (Regel möglicher Erscheinungen):²² such schemas are characterized by the fact that the parts of the thing belong together (according to a 'rule') when they are involved in common causal circumstances (Ideas II, 42-43/45-46). Husserl, however, clearly distinguishes two phenomenal dimensions in the constitution of the thing: on the one hand, there is the schema, which is the manifestation (Bekundung) of the identity of the thing; on the other, there is sensuous transcendence, which provides the original manifestation (Beurkundung) of the 'substantial reality' of the thing (Ideen II, 131/139). This distinction shows that the unity and identity of the thing, which appears through its 'adumbrations', relies, as to its 'substantial reality', on the reference to an aperspectival transcendent core. Such a transcendent core is precisely the same elementary instance of transcendence that we have previously mentioned (1). This does not mean that our experience of an actual thing separately displays these two constitutive levels: towards the spatial thing we are receptive in a more specific sense than we are towards mere sensuous transcendence, since we are perceptive of a spatial thing, which can be never fully given in sensuous presence, but is always apperceived on the basis of retained kinaesthetic experiences. In this sense the transcendent thing is transcendent as thing, that is, as something endowed with unity and identity while its sensuous adumbrations change.

²¹ Edmund Husserl, *Thing and Space: Lectures of 1907*, trans. Rojcewicz (Dordrecht, Springer, 2010), 131 et seq. Hereafter cited as DR. - Ding und Raum. Vorlesungen 1907, Husserliana XVI, edited by Ulrich Claesges (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 154 et seq..

²² Edmund Husserl, [Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book*, trans. Rojcewicz & Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989). Hereafter cited as Ideas II.; *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch. Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952), 86.

Against what has been often said, for example and authoritatively by Roman Ingarden,²³ the way in which transcendence is attributed to spatial objects does not conceal either a dualistic or an idealistic thesis (in the classical sense).²⁴ The fact that spatial determinations require the intervention of embodied consciousness in the form of kinaestheses does not make spatial determinations into something arbitrarily created by consciousness, because kinaestheses always deal with an irreducible alterity, which is passively given. True enough, such an irreducibly alterity is not to be conceived as a Kantian ‘Ding-an-sich’, wholly foreign to consciousness; but this does not oblige Husserl’s account to fall into the Fichtean alternative. As we will see better later on, the fact that we are affected by sensuous transcendence and are ‘called to respond’ through kinaesthetic ‘explorations’ manifests an essential affinity between consciousness and what transcends consciousness: that is why Husserl claims in the Cartesian Meditations that being and consciousness ‘belong together’ (CM, 117/84).²⁵

3) A third sphere of phenomena that Husserl considers exemplary of transcendence is the experience of the Others as Alter Egos. Although Alter Egos can be apprehended only through their bodily manifestations and therefore require the ability to apprehend transcendent objects in order to be properly perceived, they represent also a peculiar instance of transcendence, irreducible to the nature of things. Alter Egos are not experienced just as objects, but also as bearers of intentional experiences, i.e., as subjects. What is specifically transcendent in Alter Egos is not just the unitary completion of definite bodies, but also above all the spontaneous sphere of intentionality, which finds manifold perceptual manifestations that constitutively exceeds all its manifestations. When we perceive somebody as an Alter Ego, we perceive it as a perceiver, and the nature of intentional acts is never reducible to objectual manifestations. Even if Husserl occasionally mentions the perception of the Other (*Fremdwahrnehmung*) as the source of all transcendence,²⁶ he generally

²³ Roman Ingarden, *On the Motives which led Husserl to Transcendental Idealism* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 28-33.

²⁴ Ingarden does not seem to realize that Husserl’s ‘transcendental idealism’ is not just formally different from the Berkeleyan or Fichtean solutions, but is altogether different from anything that has come under the name of ‘idealism’ until now (so much so, that the very choice of the expression ‘transcendental idealism’ by Husserl may seem unhappy).

²⁵ “Transcendence in every form is an immanent existential characteristic, constituted within the ego. Every imaginable sense, every imaginable being, whether the latter is called immanent or transcendent falls within the domain of transcendental subjectivity, as the subjectivity that constitutes sense and being. The attempt to conceive the universe of true being as something lying outside the universe of possible consciousness, possible knowledge, possible evidence, the two being related to one another merely externally by a rigid law, is nonsensical. They belong together essentially; and as belonging together essentially, they are also concretely one, one in the only absolute concretion: transcendental subjectivity.” (CM, 117/84).

²⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität. Dritter Teil: 1929-1935*, *Husserliana XV*, edited by Iso Kern (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 560. Hereafter referred to as “Hua XV.”

recognizes and argues that we must encounter the otherness of the Others on the basis of our 'primordial' intentionality, which is the core of intentional consciousness before intersubjectivity comes on stage.²⁷ This means, among other things, that we can perceive Alter Egos only in the wake of our ability to apprehend material objects. Not everything is straightforward in this consideration, however, because Husserl's analysis also shows that objectivity can be grasped only with reference to an ideal (transcendental) intersubjectivity: whenever we judge that something has objective existence, we implicitly assume that it is something subsistent for any possible subjects. This seems to produce a paradox: we must be able to grasp objects in order to perceive other subjects, yet, we must already have cognizance of intersubjectivity in order to grasp objects. This issue, when it is treated in the framework of genetic phenomenology, as it is the case in the *Cartesian Meditations*, turns out to be a rather thorny one, and we cannot hope here either to follow Husserl's discussion or to offer a fully satisfactory interpretation of it. However a couple of observations are in order and should allow us to profitably progress in our analysis.

When we, as single subjects in the primordial sphere (i.e., abstracting from anything of intersubjective origin), perceive an objectual entity (a thing), we apprehend something that can be said to be 'akin to' an objective entity, while not being properly objective yet. When we perceive a material thing, we grasp something as permanent across a succession of impermanent impressions (adumbrations). The fact that, regardless of verbal categorization, we can recognize the same object or similar ones in successive moments shows that we have memory of that perceptual unit. This step can be regarded as the primal passive moment in the process of ideation, leading from sensuous to categorical intuition. But Husserl repeatedly argued also that the fact that we have memory of a perceived object implies that the object is potentially available for a plurality of subjects, insofar as it is available for my very self over time (Crisis, 188-189/184-185; Hua XV, 332-333). This consideration seems to open the way towards an apprehension of intersubjectivity and objectivity already in the primordial dimension.²⁸ However, this is no full-fledged objectivity yet, but is rather its primordial presupposition: we have to do with an object endowed with lasting identity, but it is an 'inexact' identity, which cannot raise claims of validity for ever and everybody. The ability to apprehend objects at the primordial level of perception seems to be a presupposition for the intuition of intersubjectivity in three distinct senses. First, because we could not perceive Others if we were unable to perceive their bodies as objectual units; second, because the stable apprehension of percepts in memory is

²⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. D. Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 241. Henceforth cited as FTL.- *Formale und transzendente Logik. Versuch einer Kritik der logischen Vernunft*, Husserliana XVII, edited by Paul Janssen (Dordrecht: Springer, 1974), 213. See also CM, 140/110.

²⁸ Cf. D. Zahavi, *Husserl und die transzendente Intersubjektivität. Eine Antwort auf die sprachpragmatische Kritik* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 44.

the basic presupposition for any intersubjective agreement or disagreement; finally, because the primordial ability to grasp objects endowed with identity motivates the pursuit of intersubjective validity (objectivity), when the recognition of Alter Egos takes place: since we naturally obtain stable beliefs on what there is, we do not want them to be shaken by Others (when we recognize them as bearers of claims and beliefs in turn), and this means that we must go for an upgrade of our primordial beliefs in the direction of intersubjective validity. All that said, the sphere of intersubjectivity can be fully accessed only in the wake of a specific *Fremderfahrung*, which manifests also the irreducible kind of transcendence pertaining to other subjects.

4) The last ‘sphere of phenomena’ to which Husserl explicitly and eminently attributes transcendence is, somewhat surprisingly, the very sphere of essences. Essences are said to be transcendent because they are not an actual part of our mental contents (cogitationes);^{29 30} and indeed we intentionally address essences precisely as transcendent entities (Ideas I, 85/78), that is, we discover them and do not have them in our power. At first, the transcendent character of essences may seem surprising, if we focus on sensuous transcendence as a model, because essences are said to be something that we cognitively grasp, while transcendence seems to signal something that constitutively escapes our grasp. But, in fact, we must pay attention both to the specific way in which essences are ‘grasped’ and to the way in which transcendence ‘escapes our grasp’. To begin with, we must resist the temptation to think of the transcendence of essences in Platonic terms, in the wake of the classical examples concerning logical and mathematical truths. Mathematical truths are a valid exemplification of the transcendence of essences, but may turn out to be a misleading one, because it could make it seem that thus-understood essences are to be catalogued next to *Ur-hylé*, material things and Alter Egos, in a rather heterogeneous list of transcendent spheres. On the contrary, it is important to note that essences are not to be treated on the same plane as the previously mentioned spheres, since clearly *Ur-hylé*, material things and Alter Egos all have essences in their turn. In which sense, then, are essences transcendent, granted that they are cognitively graspable?

Let us put some order in the characterization of essences so far. In one account, Husserlian essences must be taken to refer to an indefinitely vast set of entities, since literally anything that can be conceptualized, preserving identity while its experiential props change, has an essence. From this perspective the interpretive option that sees essences as mere abstractions from plural accidental experiences could seem compelling, insofar as the alternative seems to be the assumption of infinite

²⁹ Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. L. Hardy (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 45. - *Die Idee der Phänomenologie. Fünf Vorlesungen*, *Husserliana II*, edited by W. Biemel (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 56.

³⁰ John Brough, “Consciousness is not a Bag: Immanence, Transcendence, and Constitution in *The Idea of Phenomenology*,” in *Husserl Studies*, 24 (2008), 177-191, here 187-188.

universalia ante rem referring, for example, to each conceivable artifact. From this point of view Husserl's realm of essences could seem either implausibly overcrowded or threatened by accidentality. In the first case, we would be required to imagine a realm of essences where all conceivable objects (included artifacts) are ab aeterno heralded. In the second, we should conceive of essences as outcomes of a selective abstraction from individual experiences. Thus, we are apparently pulled in two directions, both unpalatable and both denied by Husserl: on the one hand, we are prompted to assume that our experiences are guided by essences understood as separate pre-existent ideas of the objects to be grasped; on the other, we are prompted to abandon the a priori nature of essences and fall back on psychologism (psychological abstraction). Granted that Husserl rejects both options, we must ask whether in the available conceptual framework there is a third option, compatible with Husserl's account.

We can begin to approximate a solution by examining the constitutive relation connecting the nature of essences with the sensuous dimension of transcendence, which we have found at the roots of *Ur-hylé*, material things and *Alter Egos*. In Husserlian terms, the issue of transcendence is coextensive with the traditional issue of ontology: transcendence names the problem of what subsists beyond the powers of consciousness (while being given to consciousness). In this sense, transcendence must be 'grasped' by consciousness, but as something signaling an irreducible 'excess of content' against what is, each time, immanently present. From this perspective a family resemblance between transcendence and essence becomes evident: essences are posited as being, but at the same time they are always presumptive as to their embodiment. When we realize through visual perception that something is a tree, we grasp an objectual essence in the wake of a train of sensuous experiences. More precisely: regardless of any contingent definition of 'tree', the point of our pre-verbal grasp of the essence of the visual tree is that we can immediately follow its resemblances and differences, that we can recognize it and recall it over time. This is no full-fledged ideation, no clear-cut grasp of the essence tree, but rather its pre-reflective basis.

Now, the grasp of the essence of the tree through perceptual acts implies that we posit the percept as being, but also that our actual sensations are never an exhaustive warrant that the grasped essence is really (corporeally) there. Thus, we must draw the following partial conclusion: essences, when they are primarily intuited, are something like constitutive postulates concerning transcendence. Transcendence and essence are, in a sense, different emphases on the same: transcendence signals that something subsists beyond the powers of consciousness, while essence signals that beyond the powers of consciousness something subsists. Essences are what transform the 'enigma' of transcendence into ontological claims. One could object that essences, interpreted in these terms, could be regarded as mere hypotheses or fantasies produced to account for sensations; but such an interpretation would make the mistake of psychologizing cognition. By psychologizing cognition we would

interpret it in terms of individual facts present to the factual mind (brain), which is untenable. Husserl's point is rather that, on the one hand, we do not have the latent parts of the perceptual object imaginatively co-present with the sensuously given parts; on the other, there is nothing in the sensuously given parts that compels us to conclude that we are in front of a unitary thing (DR 56-57/46-47). This means that any possible talk of hypothetical or imaginative 'complements' of perception must anyway make reference to an 'ontological thesis', a constitutive claim that posits the substantial nature of what is sensuously given across changing experiences. Essence is a name for such a constitutive ontological claim.

§ 5. The A Priori Nature of Essences

If this perspective makes sense, some specifications of our general understanding of the notion of essence must ensue. Whenever we identify an essence through full-fledged ideation (with eidetic variation) we can discern a meaning-determining component and a being-bestowing component. This is compatible with the schema content-apprehension (Inhalt-Auffassung) that Husserl argues for in the Logical Investigations; however that schema is not really enlightening with regard to the ontological status of essence. Essence is primarily intuited in categorical intuition when the meaning-determining component (Bedeutungsintention) is fulfilled by fulfilling acts (erfüllende Akte): this is what happens, for instance, when we first perceive a tree as a tree. As Husserl writes, the essence relevant for knowledge (erkenntnismäßiges Wesen) in objectifying acts is given by the synthesis provided by the fulfillment of the meaning act (which is articulated in two components: Qualität and Materie) (LU II/2, 96-7/LI 2, 245-246). With regard to the essence of 'tree', this (approximately) means that we grasp it when we are 'disposed' to perceive a tree and when the train of sensations (among which are kinaesthetic ones) that is actually given to us can be considered fulfilling the 'disposition'. Once we have obtained the categorical intuition of the essence 'tree', we can refine it into a definition or maybe formalize its notion for semantic purposes, but these developments are extrinsic to the intuition of the essence.

Now we have to ask: what is a priori in the thus-grasped essence of 'tree' and in what sense is it a priori? As we are going to see, there is a plurality of senses in which we can talk of the a priori dimension with regard to the intuition of essences. To begin with, in a sense, we might say that both the signitive intention that looks for intuitive fulfillment and the relevant fulfilling entity are 'a priori'. The signitive intention is a priori only in the sense that it is given before the intuitive experience (e.g., of an empirical tree), so that it can lead to the intuition of 'tree'. In the light of the developments following Ideas I, the notion of horizon (Horizont), on which we will dwell next, becomes the protagonist of this pre-intuitive moment: horizons (like signitive intentions) pre-delineate experience. In this sense, the relevant signitive intention is only prior to

its fulfilling experience, but is not prior to experience as such, since the ‘horizontal intentionality’ is also shaped by previous experience.

On the other hand, the fulfilling entity that we will eventually identify as tree, is a priori only in the sense that it is experienced as subsistent before (and independently of) our cognitive apprehension of it. This does not mean that the essence of the tree was waiting ab aeterno for our consciousness to apprehend it, since the traits that enter in the meaning ‘tree’ belong to a culturally determined horizon, that we have no reason to ‘eternalize’. But beyond the culturally shaped horizons conducive to the intuition of ‘trees’, there is something that can be more strictly considered a priori: it is the ontological positing of the relevant essence as a transcendent ‘thing’, endowed with identity. This is, as it were, the ‘essence of essences’, which is operant within each pre-delineating horizon: it is the general thetic intention that posits what is transcendent as being endowed with an identity, and ‘looks for it’. As we will see, there is something remarkable and metaphysically unusual in this dimension of the Apriori.

At this point, we are ready to notice that the specific essences that we grasp in intuition can be regarded as ‘a priori’ in a third sense, which has nothing to do with their alleged subsistence before the founding acts of sensuous intuition take place: once we have grasped the essence ‘tree’, this specific essence acquires potential eternity, since we can recall it, replicate it in imagination and even transmit it to others as a stable acquisition (Erwerb) through multiple individuations. In this sense specific essences can be said to be ‘emergent’ entities: even if we do not have reasons to grant that the stable content obtained in the wake of sensuous intuition was existent ‘somewhere’ before being experienced, its emergence establishes its universal nature from now on. In this last sense essences can be regarded as transcendent because and insofar as they have obtained objectivity.

All essences are not at the same level: they can be more or less specific and the process of specification has a history, rooted in the passive syntheses of the constitution of percepts. Essences were defined from the start with reference to temporal change as what resists variability, first at the level of sensuous intuition and then at the level of full-fledged ideation. But what stands firm while individual experiences unfold can represent the stable basis for the apprehension of further stable features. If this is the case, we must now try to clarify what the nature of the essential constraints in this genetic process is. Yet, this path leads to a second more general question: if essences are not pre-given to the subject once and for all, but receive specification, and if, on the other hand, essences can be neither subjectively imposed on reality nor abstracted from individual experiences, how should we finally understand their paradoxical nature as developing but persisting entities?

§ 6. Essences and Transcendental Genesis

In a static analysis of the constitution of objects a specific essence like ‘tree’ appears as a specification of the most general ontological region of ‘things’. In an analytic process performed by means of eidetic variation, we can examine specific worldly beings and judge what can be imaginatively varied without them changing nature, thus recognizing their essence. This process can discern manifold essential thresholds, which can coincide with settled verbal classifications, but does not necessarily have to. In this sense, we can be interested in the essence of ‘table’ or ‘tree’, and we can find a plurality of qualifying thresholds that allow us to determine what is essential in the relevant examples. If we proceed with eidetic variation up to the highest level of generality we find that both ‘table’ and ‘tree’ are specifications in the region of ‘things’. In Husserl’s classification of regional ontologies ‘things’ and ‘conscious beings’ represent the two fundamental regions of being, which are positioned at the highest level of generality that we discover by applying eidetic variation to the real world (nature) (EJ, 435/357). Things and conscious beings are said to be the most basic ontological regions, but Husserl grants that they are the most general spheres only if we remain at a level still endowed with material content. If we lift their residual specificity, we can recognize them as belonging to a most general ontological region, which can be designated as ‘something in general’ (Etwas überhaupt) and is considered as the basis for formal ontology. Now, if we recall the three fundamental exemplifications of transcendence that we have previously mentioned, that is, Ur-hylé, material things and Alter Egos, we can recognize in them, under partial terminological disguise, the just mentioned ontological regions: ‘something in general’, things and conscious beings.³¹ Of course, the partially different labels are not without importance in the conceptual contexts in which the relevant notions are developed, but here such differences can be disregarded. Not surprisingly, we see that the fundamental regions of being substantially coincide with the most general spheres of essence and with the instantiations of transcendence par excellence.

Now, however, if we move from the classificatory intentions of static analysis towards the dynamic order of genetic analysis, we can remark that Ur-hylé, things and Alter Egos can be considered as three steps in genetic constitution. Indeed, as we said, we must be able to perceive something in general in order to grasp things, and we need to be able to grasp material objects in order to perceive Others. This suggests that from

³¹ It should be noted that there is an important sense in which conscious beings and Alter Egos are to be conceptually kept apart: the regional ontology of conscious beings can be determined by opposition to things, because the focus is on ‘consciousness’ as *differentia specifica*. On the contrary, when we assume a genetic point of view we stress the experiential continuity between Alter Egos and material objects, since the first can be grasped only in the wake of the second. This point explains why in terms of regional ontologies things and conscious beings are put at the same level, whereas we can put material objects and Alter Egos in an order of genetic foundation, where the experience of the first grants access to the second.

a genetic point of view we could organize the relations between essences, even the most basic ones, in dynamic terms. The emphasis on a plurality of separate essences, which is quite justified in static terms, can make room for a greater attention to laws of essence (*Wesensgesetze*) that rule over the genetic constitution of spheres of being, like spatiotemporal reality or intersubjectivity. From this perspective we must pay more attention to the process that makes possible the characterization of newly constituted entities as essential. Indeed, if we browse through Husserl's work after *Ideas I* we can notice that in comparison with the earlier work the lexical preference for the substantive form *Wesen* recedes in favor of its attributive forms (*wesentlich*, *Wesensgesetze*, *wesensmäßig*, etc.). This plausibly signals Husserl's growing caution in using terms that could make think of a substantialization of essences, whereas a vision of essence as a characterization of being gains momentum. More precisely, genetic analysis, which completes (without replacing) static analysis, suggests a vision where essences must be conceivable as 'moments' in a developing process. This is of course no easy theoretical option for entities that are primarily defined in terms of a priori stability versus empirical change. In order to explore this view, we must pay attention for a moment to the general traits of transcendental genesis, as Husserl brings them to light.

Let us come back to the primal level where sensuous experience coalesces into unitary percepts endowed with identity. In the first pages of the *Lectures on Time-Consciousness* Husserl notices, with reference to the constitution of percepts, that not everything fits into the scheme content—apprehension (*Inhalt-Auffassung*) (CIT, 6/6). The point is that the schema content—apprehension is not up to the task of explaining the constitution of temporal objects.³² The active role played by apprehension in the constitution of meaningful perceptual units gives partially way to a passive process of association, governed by essential laws of genesis (APS, 336/624, 338/627).³³ According to Husserl, the retained experience

³² "Die Empfindungsdaten sind *nicht* 'sozusagen fertige Gegenstände', sondern in genetischer Konstitution erwachsene synthetische Einheiten. - Nach dem klassischen Konstitutionsschema werden formlose Stoffe, hyletische Daten, durch eine Form oder Morphé, eine Auffassung oder Apperzeption, beseelt und damit zu Repräsentanten von intentional vermeinten Gegenständlichkeiten. Die Zeitanalysen ergaben, dass diese schematische Konzeption von im Bewusstsein vorfindlichen formlosen, d.h. in erster Linie zeitformlosen Stoffen, die zur Strukturierung allererst von sinngebenden Akten aufgegriffen werden müssen, zu ausweglosen Widersprüchen führt." E. Holenstein, *Phänomenologie der Assoziation. Zu Struktur und Funktion eines Grundprinzips der passiven Genesis bei E. Husserl* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), 107-8.

³³ "This 'history' of consciousness (the history of all possible apperceptions) does not concern bringing to light a factual genesis for factual apperceptions or factual types in a factual stream of consciousness, or even in all factual human beings; thus it is not at all similar to the development of plant or animal species. Rather, every shape of apperception is an essential shape and has its genesis in accordance with essential laws; accordingly, included in such an idea of apperception is that it must undergo a 'genetic analysis'. And what is given is not the necessary becoming of the particular, single apperception (when it is understood as a fact); rather, the mode of genesis is only given with the genesis of essence; in this mode of genesis any kind of apperception of this type must have arisen originally (...)" (APS, 338-339/627)

‘motivates’ the horizon of expectations directed toward the experience to come: retention motivates protention.^{34 35} The associative process that takes place at the primal level of passive synthesis brings forth temporal ordering as well as perceptual units. This notion of association must be carefully understood, since it is more specific than the classical notion promoted by ‘associationist psychology’. The most elementary level of association, which is mere temporal ordering, accounts for the labile sense of association that we find whenever something contingently suggests something else: I have simultaneously, or in close succession, perceived this smell and that image, and now the smell suggests me the image. However, some associations acquire a structural resilience that ordinary contingent associations do not have. We can undo any Pavlovian conditioning with relative ease and substitute it with another association, but we cannot with similar ease undo expectations concerning how three-dimensional bodies appear or how harmonic sequences unfold. In order to distinguish contingent and essential associations Husserl speaks with regard to the second ones as apperceptions: the formation of apperceptions is regulated by laws of essence (*Wesensgesetze*) and the very essential configurations of apperception are outcomes of genesis (APS, 338-339/627). Apperceptions, which are constituted in the wake of retained experiences, are said to motivate further experiences. For Husserl the notion of ‘motivation’ covers the semantic area of all ‘causality by consciousness’ (*Ideas II*, 216/227): whenever something has efficacy with regard to ‘mental events’, this efficacy can and must be described in terms of motivation, never in causal terms (which is pertinent in the sphere of spatiotemporal events). However, the term ‘motivation’ is somehow ambiguous when it comes to deal with the idea of a genesis according to laws: the connotations of motivation effectively grasp the ‘telic’ character of experiential synthesis, but they do not account for another essential trait of genetic constitution: previous experiences provide conditions of possibility for further experiences. In genetic constitution some experiences are the precondition in order for specific other experiences to be accessible: remembering presupposes perceiving, like reading presupposes speaking or running presupposes walking. Not all experiences can be apprehended at any moment, but some layers of experience must have been apprehended in order for some other experience to be possible.

As we said before, intentionality changes over time and experience: intentionality is not just the presupposition of experience, but is also constituted by previous experience.³⁶ Previous experience pre-delineates horizons of possible experiences, and this means that it also excludes

³⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Die Bernauer Manuskripte über das Zeitbewusstsein* (1917/18), ed. by Rudolf Bernet and Dieter Lohmar (Dordrecht: Springer, 2001), 18.

³⁵ T. Kortooms, *Phenomenology of Time. Edmund Husserl's Analysis of Time-Consciousness* (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer, 2002), 179.

³⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Späte Texte über Zeitkonstitution* (1929-1934). *Die C-Manuskripte*, *Husserliana Materialien VIII*, ed. by D. Lohmar (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 394. (Hereafter cited as: *HuaMat VIII*.)

other experiences, which turn out to be currently inaccessible; as Husserl writes, the free play (Spielraum) of possibilities is to be tracked back to the universe of actual sedimented experiences.³⁷ In order to suggest together both that a layer of experience is a settled acquisition and that it defines a range of possibilities, Husserl introduces the term *Vermöglichkeit*, which is both an inherited asset (*Vermögen*) and a room of possibility (*Möglichkeit*):³⁸ our whole life is life through *Vermöglichkeiten*, that is, through directions of intentional synthesis that are generated in settled experience and produce acts determining new horizons of possible experience (Hua XV, 203).³⁹ *Vermöglichkeiten* are not just formal possibilities, but living possibilities, primarily embodied by kinaestheses, which pre-delineate certain configurations of experiences rather than others.

Now, it must not escape our attention that the notion of ‘possibility’ is close and akin to the notion of essence, and indeed Husserl himself in *Ideen I*, in the context of the determination of the characterizing features of essences, was quoting with approval the old theory that the knowledge of possibilities has priority over the knowledge of realities (*Ideen I*, 194/190).⁴⁰ Yet, later on, the experience-bound notion of *Vermöglichkeit* is actually used by Husserl to explain what possibilities, in the framework of a theory of knowledge, properly are: the horizon of open indeterminacy that circumscribes the realm of actual experience (*Erfahrung*) is a realm of possibilities tied to what is already experientially acquired.⁴¹ All

³⁷ “[D]er Spielraum der Möglichkeiten ist zurückbezogen und gebunden durch das Universum der geltenden ‘Wirklichkeiten’ – das wir als Universum der Bekanntheit bezeichnet hatten. Dieses Universum des Seinsgewissen ist natürlich ‘beweglich’. (...) Wir haben in der jeweiligen Bekanntheitssphäre also schlichte Gewissheiten und Gewissheiten aus Überwindung von Modalisierungen, aus Entscheidungen. (...) Die Seinsmöglichkeiten des Unbekanntheithorizontes sind durch die bekannte Welt sozusagen vorgezeichnet als unbekannte Bekanntheiten, vorgezeichnet als Seiende oder Nichtseiende im ‘Fortgang der Erfahrung’, der von uns aus vermöglich zu dirigierenden; vorgezeichnet als in der Raum-Zeitlichkeit als Form vermöglicher Zugänglichkeit aufweisbar oder mit Aufweisbarem streitend etc.” Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Ergänzungsband. Texte aus dem Nachlass 1934-1937, Husserliana XXIX*, edited by Reinhold N. Smid (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1993), 64-65. Hereafter cited as “Hua XXIX.”

³⁸ *Vermögen* primarily means just ‘being able’ or ‘being capable’, but it seems that in the term *Vermöglichkeit* the first connotation is drawn from *vermöglich* (wealthy), which suggests a metaphor based (also) on the ‘patrimonial’ acceptation of the term.

³⁹ “Mein Leben ist durchaus Leben in *Vermöglichkeiten*, durchaus ein Leben intentionaler Synthesis, einer passiven Synthesis, die vielfältige Fortgangsrichtungen hat, in jeder Richtung, die verwirklicht wird, urzeitigend ist im urphänomenalen Strom. Diese passive Verlaufsstruktur <ist> aber vom wachen Ich, dem der Aktivitäten bzw. *Vermögen*, aktiv dirigiert, wobei aber alle Aktion ihren Horizont der *Vermöglichkeiten* hat” (Hua XV, 203).

⁴⁰ “The old ontological doctrine that the cognition of *possibilities* must precede the cognition of actualities is, in my opinion, insofar as it is correctly understood and made useful in the right ways, a great truth” (*Ideen I*, 190/194).

⁴¹ “Therefore, the horizon of open indeterminacy which surrounds the realm of actual experience is itself a realm of possibilities subject to variation, though restricted in this, that they are real possibilities. They are continuations of the experientially familiar into the unfamiliar, which however does have partial predelineation by experience, and on

experience (Erfahrung) of objects involves apperception, which is guided by a horizon that pre-delineates the experience to come, and such a horizon has the character of a *Vermöglichkeit* (Hua XV: 94).

The picture that emerges from these remarks is the following: intentionality can change over time according to the sedimentation of experience, which pre-delineates horizons of possible objects and determines their constitution. This process conditions the intuition of the specific essences in the hyletic-material sphere (hyletisch-sachhaltige Wesenssphäre), which are even labeled by Husserl with the apparent oxymoron ‘contingent Apriori’ (kontingentes Apriori) (FTL, 25-26/29). Essences like ‘tree’, or, at a more general level, ‘red’ are stable acquisitions, irreducible to individual experiences and intersubjectively transmissible; however, they also depend on experiences and on their temporal sedimentation.⁴² In this sense, we could say that (at least these) essences are ‘*prospectively a priori*’, even if they are ‘*retrospectively a posteriori*’. The hyletic-material sphere of essences is fully entitled to its essential characterization, because its genetic constitution does not entail any reduction either to individuality or to causality: each sedimentation of experience is a motivating possibilization, which prompts further experiential acquisitions and pre-delineates a range of possibilities; but the ensuing acquisitions are neither caused by, nor logically deduced from the previous steps.

§ 7. The Co-essentiality of Consciousness and Being

As we previously noticed, we can read the static order of foundation between essences in genetic terms; for instance, the experience of Others (Fremderfahrung) presupposes the experience of material objects, which in turn presupposes the experience of something in general. We must be warned at this stage against the temptation of considering essences as something quietly residing in the mental sphere.⁴³ As we said, the fundamental regions of being indicate both the most characteristic instantiations of transcendence and the most general level of essence. If transcendence is a borderline concept signaling what is given to consciousness as subsistent independently of consciousness, essences are what we grasp in the sphere of transcendence as endowed with stable identity. This means that essences are the ‘graspable contents’ that emerge from our confrontation with the irreducible ‘untamed’ sphere of

occasion an incompletely determined anticipation.” Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenological Psychology*, trans. J. Scanlon (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), 67. - *Phänomenologische Psychologie. Vorlesungen Sommersemester 1925*, Husserliana IX, edited by Walter Biemel, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962, 89.

⁴² “With each new kind of object constituted for the first time (genetically speaking) a new type of object is permanently prescribed, in terms of which other objects similar to it will be apprehended in advance” (EJ, 34-35/38.)

⁴³ When Husserl wants to thematize general notions by staying on the cognitive level, without ontological implications, he makes use of the term ‘Typus’ rather than ‘Wesen’. Indeed, in German, the term *Wesen* has usually also ontological connotations, since it is used as a synonym for ‘being’ in expressions like ‘*menschliches Wesen*’ (human being).

transcendence. This confrontation takes place primarily at the level of the passive syntheses of perception, where originally time and space are articulated and sensuous transcendence coalesces into perceptual units. At this primal level of experience we can conceptually distinguish three protagonists, which are however inseparable in act; we must have a motivational aspect, a transcendent moment and an essential synthesis of both.

As to the first two elements: it is clear that at first we must grant that our primal confrontations with sensuous transcendence have a fundamentally 'telic', motivational character. Something can be said to be transcendent only insofar as there is a motivation to 'subject' it, and such motivation meets 'resistance' of a kind. Although the intentionality of consciousness is to be conceptually separated from the intentionality of volitions, this must not conceal the fact that intentional acts have also a 'telic' ('interested') component, even if they are passively enacted. In the texts of the '30s Husserl makes more and more often reference to the 'instinctual' character of our drive to apprehend sensuous transcendence.⁴⁴ We are constitutively oriented towards sensuous alterity, which prompts our kinaesthetic activity aimed at consolidating sensations into perceptual fields and perceptual units (HuaMat VIII, 226, 272-273). What affects consciousness awakens a transcendental 'instinct of curiosity' (HuaMat VIII, 323), which manifests a sort of drive towards objectivation (HuaMat VIII, 330). It is of the utmost importance to take note of the fact that, regardless of the details of the description of how such 'meeting' between transcendent reality and primal motivation takes place, their co-essentiality must be granted a priori. Without something that 'tends towards' (Streben), nothing can appear as autonomously given. This fundamental motivating factor (the striving toward explication and objectification) remains steady throughout the genetic process. At the same time, transcendent reality must be such that it can meaningfully affect the subject.

Still, this originary encounter between a living intentional act and a resisting and affecting alterity requires a third element in order to become object of cognition: the anonymous transcendence must be interpreted as a unitary 'something', that is, as an entity endowed with identity. What is primarily given as anonymous transcendence must be posited as a self-contained determinable entity. This is the conceptual locus where the notions of essence and horizon overlap, and we can provide a chosen exemplification of it by looking at the notion of 'the world', which is simultaneously both motivating horizon and transcendent being. The world-horizon openly manifests the constituting claim that what is anonymously given must have unity. Indeed, the world is always already

⁴⁴ "Interesse an Sinnesdaten in Sinnesfeldern - vor der Objektivierung Sinnesdaten als Kern von Begehungen nach Nahrung - dieser Instinkt als erster in der Ordnung der instinktiven Aktivitäten hat keine Objekte als thematisch zu verwirklichende. - Sollen wir als zweiten Urinstinkt (nach der Ordnung der Verwirklichung auf dem Weg lebendig begehrender Intention und Erfüllung) den Instinkt der Objektivierung setzen?" (HuaMat VIII, 258).

passively given as a determinable whole, which can be indefinitely articulated into material objects without ever having itself the character of a thing (Crisis, 146/142): the world is always all-embracing never-actualized horizon. In this sense, the world-horizon exhibits a constitutively teleological nature (Hua XV, 595, 600), since it is like a steady demand for fulfillment and a claim for being. The transcendental primal instinct (Ur-instinkt) that directs us towards the affecting transcendence also teleologically pre-delineates its essential character.⁴⁵ This means that we turn towards what is passively given while being always driven by the core belief (which is also a want) that graspable units there are and that anonymous transcendence can be articulated into stable beings. Here there is no room for any opposition between an epistemic and an ontological dimension: the world is real and is endowed with essence even if this can never be the outcome of an exhaustive fulfillment; and indeed such non-exhaustivity will be the case in genetic progression for each thing in the world as well. At the most general level of the world, intentionality of horizon and essence overlap: they are both constitutive (non-arbitrary) claims of being. At more particular levels, when the articulating process of specification and judgment unfolds, identified essences can be said to prompt horizons, and horizons can be said to allow essences to be grasped, but the notions of horizon and essence diverge. The genetic process, from the earliest pre-categorical sedimentations to the most specific constitution of objects, consists of steps where specifying explications become stable acquisitions, which motivate and pre-delineate further acquisitions. Such further acquisitions require novel experience, which demands to be consistent with the settled acquisitions, but is neither caused nor deduced from them; therefore each genetic step has an exploratory character that is not pre-determined by its presuppositions.

In this conceptual framework, at the roots of the living and knowing process there is a structural co-essentiality between the transcendental and the transcendent spheres. In a paradoxical sense, we could say that even transcendence (before the transcendental reduction) has a transcendental character, insofar as what is transcendent is condition of possibility of all constitution and of the apprehension of essences as much as intentionality is. What transcends consciousness prior to the reduction is conducive to the genetic constitution of objects and to the grasp of essences no less than consciousness is. The transcendent and the transcendental dimensions belong together, and this necessarily suggests a

⁴⁵ “Nur bedenke ich aber, dass in der Rückfrage sich schliesslich die Urstruktur ergibt in ihrem Wandel der Urhyle etc. mit den Urkinästhesen, Urgefühlen, Urinstinkten. Danach liegt es im Faktum, dass das Urmaterial gerade so verläuft in einer Einheitsform, die Wesenform ist vor der Weltlichkeit. Damit scheint schon ‘instinktiv’ die Konstitution der ganzen Welt für mich vorgezeichnet, wobei die ermöglichenden Funktionen selbst ihr Wesens-ABC, ihre Wesensgrammatik im voraus haben. Also im Faktum liegt es, dass im voraus eine Teleologie statthat. Eine volle Ontologie ist Teleologie, sie setzt aber das Faktum voraus. Ich bin apodiktisch und apodiktisch im Weltglauben. Für mich ist im Faktum die Weltlichkeit, die Teleologie enthüllbar, transzendental” (Hua XV, 385).

kind of ‘monistic ontology’. Yet, none of the classical monistic ontologies can do: absolute idealism is excluded because there is no reason to regard transcendence as a subjective creation, but also naturalism (objectivism, physicalism) is excluded, because it does not make room for the non-bypassable and indispensable function of subjectivity. Now, the combination of genetic analysis and of the static description of essences can give us an important theoretical alternative. To recapitulate: genetic analysis shows how the past can provide regulatory conditions and qualified motivations to the present reality, without pre-determining it. Each genetic step is a possibilization (*Ermöglichung*) where motivational traits and transcendent aspects produce novel syntheses. But then, the fundamental condition for such novel syntheses to be possible is the sphere of essences, which, however, are not entities waiting in a parallel dimension for consciousness to grasp them: they are obtained through temporal experience, while not being reducible to individual experiences. And essences are not mere ‘mental events’ either, even if they are properly captured through a process like eidetic variation, which seems to demand nothing more than ‘mental experiments’ of a sort. In fact, eidetic variation does have an ontic tie, which is provided by the freely chosen examples, from which the imaginational variation starts. Such examples (included fictional ones) necessarily belong to the vast sphere of settled cognitive acquisitions: all elements occurring in fictional examples, like spatial and temporal determinations, forms and colors, trajectories and transformations, primarily emerge from our sensuous confrontation with transcendent ‘matter’. The phenomenal thresholds that we can detect by eidetic variation, and that allow us to identify essences, are always already the outcome of a process which is not ‘reproductively drawn from sensuous experiences’, but is rooted in our confrontation with sensuous transcendence. What is essential in essences is that they represent ontological thresholds separating (from a certain embodied and sedimented point of view) what is individual and transient from what is stable and therefore ‘truly existent’. From a genetic perspective essences do not appear as free ‘products’ of consciousness since the thresholds that characterize them are discovered over time and experience, and we cannot freely modulate them. However, essences do emerge from temporal experience, and they do it in a sense somehow akin to so-called ‘emergentist ontologies’: they are novel ontological features, which are not reducible to their particular realizations and which exhibit a fundamental continuity between consciousness and being. Furthermore, essences are prospectively a priori (they represent a precondition for further experiences) even if they are retrospectively a posteriori (they are founded in experience).

Should one be tempted to say that essences are novel just with regard to how we apprehend them, but not in themselves, we should reply that this opposition of epistemological and ontological dimensions is phenomenologically nonsensical: essential thresholds that allow us to apprehend unitary entities endowed with identity are originally experienced at all experiential levels, and we do not have any special

access to an ontology that bypasses experience. From a phenomenological perspective ontology is signaled by transcendence, which is a way of givenness (Gegebenheitsweise) proper to experience.

As to the analogy with ‘emergent properties’, it must be noticed that essences could never be considered, as emergentist theories customarily express themselves, ‘emergent properties of matter’, because matter itself is already an essential acquisition requiring constitution. Essences cannot be said to exist either merely as ‘thought’ or as ‘matter’. What we can say is that, if we look at essences a parte objecti, they are primarily given as ontological thresholds, quanta, as it were, provided that we do not think of them as intrinsic features of matter. If we look at essences a parte subjecti, they are theses concerning transcendence that posit the existence of self-contained units (the world, natural things, etc.). But then: a parte subjecti, essences have no power to coerce the affecting transcendent alterity into beings, and a parte objecti, essences do not impose themselves on ‘unmotivated’ subjects. The fact that neither pole of intentional experience can ‘coerce’ the other implies that they must be conceived as ‘co-essential’. Thus, if we attempted to depict together essences a parte objecti and subjecti, we should say that essences are the way in which we are motivated and constitutively bound to articulate being, which in turn is apt to be thus articulated.

Should we conceive of essences, or laws of essence, in terms somehow akin to ‘laws of nature’? In the first place, it is important to recall that the necessity of essences and laws of essence is not floating in an alleged world of ideas. More precisely, essences are doubly tied to a paradoxical kind of contingency, that is, to the primal facts of hylé (Urfakta der Hylé) (Hua XV, 385) and to transcendental (inter)subjectivity as an Urfaktum (Hua XV, 386). This means that essences depend on ‘*the fact that something is given*’, which is factual in a paradoxical sense: it is the absolute fact (absolute Tatsache)⁴⁶ that cannot be properly considered more contingent than necessary. Such a doubly determined absolute Tatsache manifests the co-originality of consciousness and being, truth and reality, ‘thought and matter’. If we remember how the subsistence of essences was initially argued for, that is, as something necessarily required by the very nature of truth, we can discern now the ontological limits of that argument: if there is truth, we said, there must necessarily be reality endowed with graspable essences and related laws; yet, no truthful judgment can predicate the necessity of Urfakta. Essences are ontological constraints insofar as they are examined with reference to the given all-embracing field of phenomena: we cannot experience states of affairs that violate laws of essence (e.g.,: we could never accidentally meet an unextended color or a material thing without adumbrations, etc.). This,

⁴⁶ “Bauen wir im systematischen Gang die transzendente Konstitution der vorgegebenen Welt von unten auf, so ist zu beachten: Natürlich ist gegenüber der Wesensform das Faktum des wirklichen Gehaltes in seinem strömenden Bestande in der je zu leistenden ‘Aufklärung’ vorausgesetzt. Das gilt ebenso selbstverständlich für das ‘Absolute’, die transzendente Intersubjektivität überhaupt. Das Absolute, das wir enthüllen, ist absolute ‘Tatsache’” (Hua XV, 403).

however, does not mean that essences constrain being ‘from without’, as a cause constrains its effect. In this sense, laws of essence cannot be read as laws of nature, since we are never in a position to express laws ruling over nature ‘in itself’ (‘trans-experiential’ being). Essences tell us how the world articulates into emergent units, provided that the original emergence of consciousness and transcendence that we call world is there (cf. Hua XV, 149).

Finally, we must directly raise the question of the kind of ‘efficaciousness’ that can be attributed to the sphere of essences. In *Ideas II* Husserl suggests how to look at this question, when he says that the spirit (*Geist*) is efficacious on nature, although it is not efficacious in the sense of efficient causality.⁴⁷ This means that we should not look for the efficaciousness of the essential sphere in the realm of natural facts, as if we had to point out a joint in the web of ontological connections where the ubiquitous working of efficient causality abdicates somehow in favor of a *sui generis* efficaciousness of essences. This kind of view assumes that it is more or less known what efficient causality is and how it works, and thus we are left with the task of discovering a special kind of efficaciousness irreducible to efficient causality, in order to make room for the ontological efficaciousness of essences. Yet, Husserl warns us that the efficaciousness of the spirit (or of the mind) is enigmatic precisely as much or as little as ordinary causality is (*Ideas II*, 259-260/271-272). In other words, Husserl reminds us of the Humean lesson, according to which there is no such a thing as a unitary model of causation:⁴⁸ it is an illusion to think that we have a clear-cut and well-known picture of what efficient causality is, with a residual enigma concerning non-physical causes. On the contrary, we must keep in mind that causality has no intrinsic features beyond the features of the ‘causing’ event and the ones of the ‘caused’ event. All substantial features of causality, that is, all traits that allow us to say ‘how something produces something else’ or ‘what produces what else’ are conspicuously absent from any usual representation of efficient causality, which is expressed in terms of succession, regularity, contiguity and the like. From this point of view, we can see that in the framework provided by the Husserlian analysis, the primal way in which essences can be considered ‘efficacious’ has nothing to do with efficient causality. Insofar as the sphere of essences can be represented in terms of fundamental phenomenal thresholds, we could say, with some approximation, that essences are primarily efficacious in

⁴⁷ “As joined to Body, the spirit ‘belongs’ to nature. In spite of this association, however, this linkage, it is not itself nature. The spirit has ‘effects’ in nature, and yet it does not exercise there any causality in the sense of nature. Causality is a relation between one reality and its correlative surrounding realities. But the reality of the spirit is not related to real circumstances residing within nature; rather, it is related to real circumstances that exist in the ‘surrounding world’ and in other spirits: this, however, is not nature.” *Ideas II*, 283/296. For a more detailed discussion on causality and motivation see A. Zhok, “A Phenomenological Reading of Anomalous Monism”, in *Husserl Studies*, 27 (2011), 227-256.

⁴⁸ Cf. N. Cartwright, *The Dappled World. A Study of the Boundaries of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 104 et seq.

the world as 'selective principles' that articulate how the world can be. Such articulation is transcendental, not causal: essential thresholds are conditions of possibility for the World to be, and they are conditions that do not belong either to consciousness or to 'transcendent matter' taken separately, but to their irreducible and original mergence. We are free to entertain the metaphysical speculation that there could be, or could have been, endless universes where consciousness (and therefore a World) could not subsist, but the substantial point is that, if a transcendent world is given, whatever it may be, it is bound to be originally articulated by essences. The point in the efficaciousness of the essential sphere is not to discover where spirit turns into matter and efficient causality (or the other way round): no such transition is on display. The point is that events and states of affairs in the world emerge by taking shape and their form (their essence) establishes how they can affect and be affected. In this 'how' is included all we need to make room for the efficaciousness of essences: should we be tempted by an interpretation in classical terms, we could say that here there is room for a qualified recovery of the venerable notion of 'formal causality', which should be understood as irreducible to, and more originary than, efficient causality.