How Realist is Husserl's Notion of Truth?

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Outline

The Promise of Realist Phenomenology

- there has been new interest in spelling out phenomenology as not only a method for philosophy, but also a metaphysical picture
- A long-standing debate is the question of metaphysical realism, but this debate takes place largely independently from the analytic realism debate (Dummett, Wright, Tennant)
- I suggest that the semantic dimension of realism deserves more attention - in particular, the phenomenological notion of truth.

Preamble: Comparative and Absolute Realism

- Realism is easier to use as a comparative notion:
  - a theory that emphasizes independence from thought/culture/ etc. is the more realist option
- Realism in the Absolute sense:
  - Ontological dimension: The world (or the domain of objects $\mathcal{D}$) exists.
  - Epistemic Dimension: We are sometimes epistemically successful.
  - Semantic dimension (1): Truth is independent of our capacities to recognize it.

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Brentano against Truth-in-Themselves

- Husserl "artfully combines" Brentano's and Bolzano's notions of truth (Simons 2006)
- Brentano argued against states of affairs and attempted to explain truth in terms of *correctness of judgement*, i.e. a property of the judging act.

Bolzano's propositionalism

- Bolzano on the other hand develops a theory of truths in themselves (Bolzano [1837] 2014)
- Against Brentano, and with Bolzano, Husserl explains the truth of propositions by reference to states of affairs (Husserl [1901] 1984, esp. §39)

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Brentano on Evidence

- By emphasizing evident judgement, Husserl stays with Brentano
- In a late manuscript, possible evidence seems to even become definitive of truth:
    Truth pertains to the judgement [...] of one who asserts what the person whose judgements are evident would also assert. (Brentano [1930] 2009, 82)

Outline

Ideal Verificationism

- Ideal Verificationism spells out the core metaphysical commitment of phenomenology that is often called "correlationism".

- A defender of such a realism is Hardy. On truth, he writes:
  "p is true if and only if it is ideally possible that the state of affairs corresponding to p be given to some [ideally] possible consciousness." (Hardy 2013, 100)

- Hardy takes this to be a realist, correspondence theory of truth. But he also offers the alternative formulation:
  "p is true if and only if it is ideally possible that p is evident" (ibid.)

  This equivalence of truth and an epistemic condition would be expected for anti-realist notions of truth.

- Ideal verificationism does not refer to transcendental idealism. Is it compatible with a realist metaphysics? Hopp seems to think so:
  "no form of ideal verificationism [...] entails or even motivates idealism or antirealism." (Hopp 2020, 129)

The Verificationist Tradition and Ideal Verificationism

- Hardy's formulation of correlationism suggests that Husserl could fit into the tradition of verificationist philosophers

  "p is true if and only if it is ideally possible that p is evident" (ibid.)

- What unites an otherwise very diverse verificationist tradition of Logical Empiricism, Piercean Pragmatism, Dummett's antirealism, is the commitment to such forms of an anti-realism about truth. (Misak 1995)

- But Husserl indeed seems sometimes more realist than this

  What is psychologically impossible may very well be ideally possible. The solution to the generalized '3-body problem' [...] may exceed any human cognitive capacity, but the problem has a solution, and the inner evidence which relates to it is therefore possible. (Husserl [1900–1913] 1975, §50)

The Realism Debate in Phenomenology

- Contemporary interpreters argue whether Husserl's correlationism requires only the *ideal* possibility of evidence, or a narrower *motivated* possibility (Zahavi 2017)

- But even for the *comparatively* realist position, these might be in the semantic component of realism: can ideal possibility turn an epistemic into a realist notion of truth?

Outline

Ideal Possibilities as Logical Possibilities

- We want to take ideal possibilities to be as permissive as possible.
- But logical possibilities seem to be too permissive: it is not a matter of (formal) logic that "this car is red all over and green all over" is impossible.
- Typical phenomenological claims are about the necessary structures of conscious experience: for example, physical objects are given perspectivally.
- That a house is given without hidden sides remains logically possible, but the phenomenological analysis is a commitment to the idea that it is ideally impossible.

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Ideal Possibilities as Metaphysical Possibilities

- the right answer seems to be that ideal possibilities are "metaphysical possibilities"
- In addition to formal logic, they are also constrained by the "natures of things", their essential properties
- on this account: our finite consciousness exemplifies the same essential properties as any ideally possible consciousness. This is how we can know that "even for a god" the house would have to be given in adumbrations
- This is an ambitious claim: beyond the logical challenges to the knowability of all truths, we have to assume that exactly the right kinds of experiences are possible and impossible

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Generic Problem: The Logic of Knowability

- The paradox of knowability is a general challenge for knowability claims, independent of which reading of ideal possibility we would adopt Williamson 2000 Salerno 2009

- What ideal evidence could there be for a proposition "the number of blossoms on this tree last spring was n, but nobody ever knew this"?

- Standard answers invoke e.g. intuitionist logic - but Husserl is committed to the Law of Excluded Middle and double-negation elimination (Husserl [1901] 1984, §§34-5)

- From this it follows that all true propositions are, were, or will be *in fact* known by someone - which might be fine for an idealist?

Specific Problem: counteracting desiderata for ideal possibilities

- there is a more specific phenomenological problem with ideal possibilities.
- Remember the duality of necessity and possibilty:
  - That is something is necessary means that it is impossible that it is not.
    ($\Box A \Leftrightarrow \neg \Diamond \neg A$)
  - That something is possible means that it is not necessarily not $\Diamond A \Leftrightarrow \neg \Box \neg A$

This creates a tension in the interpretation of ideal possibilities:

- On the one hand, ideal possibilities
  - cannot be too liberal, because otherwise phenomenological claims are not necessarily true
  - cannot be too narrow, because otherwise, correlationism fails.
- To have realism with ideal correlationism, we both need to assume that there sometimes *are* ideally possible experiences that we cannot imagine - to make sense of verification-transcendent truth
- But we also need to be confident that some experiences we cannot imagine are ideally impossible - to make sense of the necessity claims of phenomenological analysis

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