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ON HUSSERLIAN EIDETIC VARIATION AND ITS DUPLICITY:
“CONTINGENCY-VARIATION”
OR “SIMILARITY-VARIATION”?

Daniele De Santis*

To V.

Whoever deals with the issue of *eidōs* in Husserl’s phenomenology cannot repress an uncomfortable sensation due to the fact that, if on the one hand the Husserlian *Denkweg* unfolds itself unitarily, at least at the level of a certain number of basic methodological acquisitions (and eidetic analysis is no number among these), on the other hand the emergence of eidetic variation marks a decisive passage within the Husserlian conceptuality and methodology. Passage that usually, however, seems to remain unperceived: not rarely the two terminologies – we mean “eidetic reduction” (*Ideas I*) and “eidetic variation” – are considered as two different expressions of just a unique method to obtain the intuition of essence. It is on the contrary our firm conviction that, if both reduction and variation aim to lead the phenomenological gaze to grasp the *eidōs*, they cannot be superimposed and taken in a synonymic way: if the task remains the same in fact, the second comes into play in order to offer a methodological response to what the former leaves without a truly suitable solution.

In such an investigation aiming at clarifying what eidetic variation should mean, our starting point (our only methodological assumption) will lie in those texts (mainly *Experience and Judgement*) where the eidetic variation openly appears: in this way we hope to

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preliminarily identify its inner structure. Once fixed all its constituting elements (I), only whose presence should authorize to think of it, (II) we will try to verify whether it is possible to speak of two different physiognomies of eidetic variation, of two different ways to conceive of variation and of what it is expected to vary.

I.

§ 1. *Remarks on the Eidetic Reduction in Ideen I*

Already in the introduction to *Ideen I* Husserl distinguishes phenomenology and psychology by presenting the former as “a science of essences (as an ‘eidetic’ science)” whose corresponding methodological instrument is a reduction: “The relevant reduction which leads over from the psychological phenomena to the pure ‘essence’ [...] is the *eidetic reduction*”¹. In § 2 he opens the reasoning by unfolding an inner overturning of factuality, that is by showing how “fact” cannot but reveal itself as “essence”. In the argumentative form this becomes particularly evident where Husserl makes use of the word *Wesen* (essence) to directly describe the *Tatsachen*, that is in the very moment in which he has not yet performed any reduction – in which, to say it better, he should not be yet able to speak of essence. Individuality means thus, “with respect to its essence [*seinem Wesen nach*]”, “something factually existing spatiotemporally, as something that is at *this* temporal locus” but that “could just as well have been at any other temporal locus”; “Individual existence of every sort is, quite universally speaking, ‘contingent’. It is thus; *in respect of its essence* it could be otherwise [o.i.]”². Husserl himself recognizes his strategy: “When we said that any matter of fact, ‘in respect of its own essence’, could be otherwise, we were already saying that *it belongs to the sense of anything contingent to have an essence and therefore an eidos which can be apprehended purely; and this eidos comes under eidetic truths belonging to different levels of universality*”. That allows him to assert that, phenomenologically, “Experiencing, or intuition of something individual can become transmuted into *eidetic seeing (ideation)* – a possibility which is itself to be understood not as empirical, but as eidetic”³.

1. Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologische Forschung. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*, hrsgg. von K. Schumann, Husserliana III/1, The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1976, p. 4; English trans. by F. Kersten, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, The Hague, Boston, Lancaster, M. Nijhoff, 1982, p. xx.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10; English trans., p. 7.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 10; English trans., p. 8.

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The Husserlian strategy consists in remarking at the same time analogies and differences between eidetic and empirical intuition. The result is that Husserl, not in spite of, but in light of these efforts, cannot conceive of eidetic intuition but on the model of the empirical one. The fact that he, in describing “factuality”, cannot but anticipate – to its being not yet intuitively grasped – the notion of *Wesen*, testifies, beyond all the appeals to the possibility of a “transmutation” of a fact into an essence, not simply to a lack of method, but to the fact that the question itself of the passage to the eidetic attitude does not appear as a problem altogether: the impression is that the eidetic intuition is consequence of a blunt change of attitude⁴ which cannot to be able to guarantee that what in such a way is obtained is really an essence and not the empirical generalization from the individually given right now.

Let us come back to the text. Husserl ends § 3 by remarking once again the reciprocal foundation between fact and essence, at the same time making a reference to the “consciousness of an exemplar” (as *Exempel*) that will be of fundamental importance in the method of variation:

Certainly its own specific character is such that intuition of essence has its basis a principal part of intuition of something individual [...]; certainly, in consequence of that, no intuition of essence is possible without the free possibility of turning one's regard to a “corresponding” individual and forming a consciousness of an exemplar [eines exemplarischen Bewusstseins] – just as, conversely, no intuition of something individual is possible without the free possibility of bringing about an ideation and, in it, directing one's regard to the corresponding essence exemplified in what is individually sighted.

But if the intuition of essence is connected to the empirical one to such an extent that, without the empirical corresponding individuality the phenomenologist cannot turn his gaze towards an essence, hence we cannot obtain the essence if this latter is not already (and previously) realized into a single factual individuality. To say it radically, the phenomenologist has no possibility of

⁴. See “The Basic Problems of Phenomenology” in Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität. Texte aus dem Nachlass. Erster Teil: 1905-1920*, hrsgg. von I. Kern, Husserliana XIII, Den Haag, M. Nijhoff, 1973, p. 126; English trans. by I. Farin and J. G. Hart, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology. From the Lectures, Winter Semester, 1910-1911*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2006, p. 17: “One grasps the idea and the pure universality precisely in an attitude of its own, differently directed looking and intending. [...] To conclude, by our being in the a priori attitude, we grasp ideas, essences [o.i.]”. Also p. 151; English trans. p. 42: “And about all these things I have now made assertions, I have made perceptual judgments, and I constantly make new ones. That is the natural attitude. Now I change, as it were, my viewpoint. I achieve a new attitude [o.i.]”.

describing an essence whose realisation he has not yet empirically experienced, and on which performs eidetic reduction.

But what about phantasy? Husserl states at the beginning of § 4 that “The eidos, the *pure essence*, can be exemplified for intuition in experiential data – in data of perception, memory, and so forth; but it is equally well exemplified in *data of mere phantasy*”⁵: “In this connection, it does not matter whether anything of the sort has ever been given in actual experience or not. If, by some psychological miracle or other, free phantasy should lead to the imagination of data (sensuous data, for example) of an essentially novel sort such as never have occurred and never will occur in any experience”. It is amazing that “free phantasy should lead to the imagination of data [...] of an essentially novel sort such as never have occurred and never will occur in any experience” – but it is amazing too that this would be only due to “some psychological miracle or other”. The reference Husserl makes to phantasy does not come then in conflict with what we argued: it means on the contrary that it makes the phenomenological inquiry free from whatsoever *Tatsache* and *Aktualität* affecting perception, but it is conceived just as a possible starting point upon which the phenomenologist can develop eidetic considerations, the other starting point being obviously perception. It just furnishes material to submit to eidetic gaze, namely to the change of attitude.

Even if we suddenly switch to § 70, we cannot but repeat the just asserted: “It is of the universal essence of the immediately intuitive seizing upon essences that (as we have already emphasized) it can be effected on the ground of a *mere presentification* of exemplificative single particulars. *Presentification*, e.g., *phantasy*, however, as we have just explained, can be so perfectly clear that it makes possible a perfect seizing upon essence and a perfect eidetic insight [o.i.]”⁶. Here, again, phantasy is what makes possible, near to perception, “a perfect seizing upon essence and a perfect eidetic insight”; and in fact, considered as presentification, it is equated to whatever other form of *Vergegenwärtigung*. Of course, perception has a certain privilege due first of all to its giving in originality, but, as well-known: “There are reasons by virtue of which in phenomenology, as in all eidetic sciences, presentifications and, more precisely, *free phantasy* acquire a *position of primacy over perceptions*”⁷. At this very moment of the

5. Hua III/1, p. 12; English trans., p. 11.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130; English trans., pp. 157-158.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131; English trans., p. 158. “The popular concept of phantasy, however, does not refer just to the sphere of artistic phantasy [...]. At least, a *narrower* and, to be sure, very common concept of phantasy, which psychology has taken up under the title of *productive phantasy*, stands in close relation to this sphere. Productive phantasy is phantasy that gives from voluntarily; it is precisely phantasy in this sense that the artist particularly has to use. However, one must distinguish two further concepts here, one wider and one narrower, depending on whether or not one understands the voluntariness of the forming in the sense of free *imagining*

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reasoning Husserl evokes the model of the “investigative thinking of geometer” by comparing it with the phenomenologist. This latter

too can use the resource of originary givenness only to a limited extent. To be sure, in the mode of originary givenness he has at his free disposal all the chief typed of perceptions and presentifications as perceivable exemplifications for a phenomenology of perception, phantasy, memory, etc. [...] However, of course, he does not have examples for all possible particular formations any more than the geometer has sketches or model at his disposal for the infinitely many kinds of solids. Here, in any case, the freedom, of eidetic research also necessarily demands operating in phantasy⁸.

What the excerpt asserts is the importance of phantasy in order to extensively furnish material for an eidetic description. What Husserl immediately writes after the aforementioned passage reinforces our doubt concerning the being confined of every eidetic intuition to single factual perceptions: “It is necessary to exercise one’s phantasy abundantly in the required activity of perfect clarification and in the free reshaping of phantasy-data, it is also necessary, before doing that, to fertilize one’s phantasy by observations in originary intuition which are as abundant and excellent as possible”. That – to quote one of the most famous passages – “*‘feigning’ makes up the vital element of phenomenology as of every other eidetic science*”, it is due to the fact that what phantasy offers as material for eidetic considerations does involve no position: it is neutral. And on such a neutrality we can perform eidetic reduction. That does not exclude that, on the contrary, we might decide to just make use of the outcomes of perception, in such a way avoiding any intermediation by phantasy. Furthermore, whether the very vital element of the eidetic inquiry is phantasy, and whether this latter has to be continually exercised and fertilized by always new perceptions of the individual, the risk is that this sort of investigation cannot exhaustively and eidetically describe but what has been already given (even though just one time) as individuality.

Let us sum up the goals of this our brief commentary on *Ideas I* as follows:

(inventing). Certainly the historian also uses productive phantasy, phantasy that gives from voluntarily. But he does not invent. By means of form-giving phantasy on the basis of secured data, he seeks to outline a coherent view of personalities, destinies, eras – a view of realities, not of things imagined”, Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung. Zur Phänomenologie der anschaulichen Vergegenwärtigungen. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1898-1925)*, hrsgg. von E. Marbach, Husserliana XXIII, The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1980, pp. 3-4; English trans. by J. B. Brough, *Phantasy, Image, Consciousness and Memory (1898-1925)*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2005, pp. 2-3. The interesting point is here that the phantasy the historian makes use of is mainly characterized for its being a presentification offering a non-actual data, rather than for its inventions and productions.

⁸. Hua III/1, p. 131; English trans., p. 159.

- the eidetic intuition presents itself just as a mere and sudden change of gaze's attitude;
- in this way leaving up in the air the clear account for the relation connecting together 1) intuition of something individual 2) exemplarity and 3) eidetic consciousness;
- to phantasy is ascribed a role due to the way it neutrally offers something *for* an eidetic description;
- the physiognomy of eidetic intuition is not simply thought on the basis of the empirical one: more deeply, it suffers of the impossibility in catching an essence that has not been already individually perceived, in such a way running the risk of anchoring every eidetic investigation to what is previously and empirically given to the phenomenologist.

§ 2. *Remarks on the Eidetic Variation in Erfahrung und Urteil*

2.1. *The Methodological Role of Variation*

Among all the Husserlian texts we opt for *Experience and Judgment* (§§ 86-93) because it seems to offer the most organic and structured articulation of eidetic variation. The § 87 provides direct insights into the method of "eidetic seeing". The first section (a) is on "free variation as the foundation of essential seeing" and Husserl immediately asserts the necessity of preliminarily "freeing" the universality from the given contingency. This *Befreiung* is the "modification" of "an experienced or phantasied objectuality into an arbitrary exemplarity [*Exempel*]"⁹. The first transition is thus from *contingency* to *exemplarity*.

The *Faktum* is now valid as *Exempel*, as a leading *Vorbild* offering itself for a "reshaping by pure phantasy". And if the starting point is a *Vorbild*, what phantasy produces as variations in the course of the *Umgestaltung* are *Nachbilder*, that is "new similar images as copies", "phantasy-images" "which are all concretely similar to the original image" (*Ähnlichkeiten des Urbildes*). They are the "variations" that we produce "freely and arbitrarily" and that, contrariwise to what one can think, do not directly concern, as variations, the *eidōs*, but just the *Exempel*. We are in fact still in the realm of exemplarity, so that one should not speak of eidetic variation, rather only of exemplar variation (with reference to what is varied). While what appears as different in the course of the variation remains "indifferent" it arises a "unity running through this manifold" of variations, namely the

⁹. Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil. Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik*, hrsgg. von L. Landgrebe, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1972, p. 409; English trans. by J. S. Churchill and K. Ameriks, *Experience and Judgment*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1975, p. 340.

persisting of an “invariant” as “necessary and general form”: “This universal essence is the *eidōs* in Platonic sense taken in purity and free from all metaphysical interpretations”.

Naturally, adds Husserl in the following section (b), such a description of variation “does not imply that an *actual* continuation to infinity is required, an actual production of all the variants – as if only then could we be sure that the *eidōs* apprehended at the end is actually conformed to all the possibilities”. If it were so, there would be no distinction between the method of variation and the empirical generalities. In both cases we would be anchored to the factual individuality: “[...] just as each object has the character of *exemplary arbitrariness*, so the multiplicity of variations likewise has an arbitrary character”. What is obtained by consciousness is “that ‘I could continue in this way’”, “and so on, at my pleasure”: “Only in this way is given what we call an ‘infinitely open’ multiplicity; obviously, it is the same whether we proceed according to a long process, producing or drawing on anything suitable, thus extending the series of actual intuitions, or whether we break off prematurely”.

Switching to the third section (c) we realize that Husserl has still to show in what way we attain the *eidōs* right in the middle of the manifold of variations. He remarks that “In this multiplicity [...] is grounded as a higher level *the true seeing of the universal as eidōs*”. This is the second transition, the one from *exemplarity* to *essentiality*. Then comes the variation, described as a “transition” “from image to image, from the similar to the similar” in which “all the arbitrary particulars attain overlapping coincidence in the order of their appearance and enter, in a purely passive way, into a synthetic unity in which they all appear as modifications of one another”¹⁰. What here strikes is the equivalence Husserl settles on between image – and then variation as variation of images that at the same time are copies too –, and *Ähnlichkeit*, in this way arranging eidetic variation as a variation of similarities.

At the end of the process of variation we grasp “the *eidōs* as the ideally identical, which only is an *hen epi pollon*. [...] Only if we retain in grasp the earlier fictions [*Fikta*], as a multiplicity in an open process, and only if we look towards the congruent and the purely identical, do we attain the *eidōs*”¹¹. The passage confirms one point in particular: that along all the process of variation we have to take into account phantasy mainly with reference to the ontological status of the varied as *Fiktum*; this means that the *Fikta* plays the role of mediation between the starting point (*Übergang* from contingency to

¹⁰. *Ibid.*, pp. 413-414; English trans., pp. 342-343.

¹¹. *Ibid.*, p. 414; English trans., p. 343.

exemplarity) and the *eidos* (*Übergang* from exemplarity to essentiality).

2.2. *On Similarity*

It is in § 44 that Husserl develops an accurate analysis of both *Gleichheit* and *Ähnlichkeit*; analysis which, even though offered on the ground of an account for the passive synthesis of receptivity, already anticipates the future meaning of its outcomes¹². Then a first description of the process of grasping similarities which recalls the one aiming at the essence: "The contemplative running-trough changes into a succession of single apprehensions, and in the transition from apprehension to apprehension there comes to prominence for observation [...] a foundation of similarity or likeness between this and that, as well as what is made dissimilar and unlike by contrast. The things which are common 'coincide', while those which are different separate". It is question of a "*coincidence in the objectual sense*". After such a preliminary, and common to both "similarity" and "likeness", characterization, Husserl switches to an account for what more directly differentiates the former from the latter. Here a long but very clear extract:

If the relation is one of mere similarity, then there is certainly still coincidence; the B-moment in question, which is perceived originally, coincides with the corresponding A-moment, still retained in the consciousness of the "still". But the feature of similarity of A which is seen through the feature of similarity of B, and "coincides" with it, has a "gap". The two moments are blended in a community; yet there also remains a duality of material separation, which is the separation and coincidence of what is "akin". They do not go together to form a "like" but to form a pair, where the one is certainly "like" the other but "stands off" from it. [...] the difference still remains extant, despite the continuous transition¹³.

Husserl goes on and explores the opposite case, the one of *Un-Ähnlichkeit*, the "*dissimilarity in pregnant sense*": "by this we do not mean a limited degree of similarity, a very slight of similarity, but the complete negation of similarity, which we will designate as *heterogeneity*. It occurs when an intention towards homogeneity has preceded and is disappointed, if, e.g., with the attempt at an overlapping coincidence, complete conflict takes place". Husserl hastens to add that he cannot but leave open the question "whether such complete heterogeneity is in general possible at all"; or whether, in any case, it does not suppose a previous "community" only wherein it could occur. If then "dissimilarity" and "heterogeneity" are them-

¹². *Ibid.*, p. 224; English trans., p. 189.

¹³. *Ibid.*, pp. 225-226; English trans., pp. 190-191.

selves modes of *Ähnlichkeit*, they too have to play a role in that process of variation that we must name "similarity-variation".

It is then task of the following paragraph (§ 45) to deeper penetrate the process along which we get similarities and dissimilarities and that in such a way offers a very concrete insight into the ways phantasy-variation proceeds. For the hitherto notions of similarity and likeness were "understood as *concrete similarity* and likeness, that is, similarity of concrete objects, as, e.g., a light red roof is similar to a dark red roof". Next to this "concrete" conception, there is the "*transferred similarity*", the one considered "with reference to similar parts, and not similarity of the whole object, not similarity pure and simple. It is a specific relation in which *concreta* and wholes participate in a similarity in consequence of a similarity of the subordinate moments to which the similarity belongs".

One can argue that, while *Gleichheit* means an extreme case of concrete similarity, the *Heterogenität* as *Unähnlichkeit* is an extreme case of transferred similarity so that they represent the two opposite poles of a whole spectrum of possibilities.

If the similarity is concrete, that is, such that the concreta are similar through themselves, through their total What, and "coincide" as concreta, then the similarity certainly also belongs to each moment which we can distinguish in the related concreta; more precisely, we can separate the two concreta into "corresponding" moments, and if these moments are put into univocal coordination, the similarity belongs to each corresponding pair. The concrete similarity is thus resolved into partial similarities. But here the wholes are not similar "in consequence of" the similarity of the parts¹⁴.

Husserl distinguishes a "primary" similarity of the *concreta* and a "secondary" similarity, the one through single moments belonging to the wholes: "We can also grasp this relation [secondary similarity] in such a way that we regard the similarity of the *concreta* as an actual similarity but as a similarity having a modified character, similarity 'based' on the similarity of a [single moment]". We have: "1. *Total similarity*, or *pure similarity* of the concrete wholes" and "2. *Partial similarity*, which is *pure similarity* of the parts but not *pure similarity* of the concrete wholes".

2.3. Difficulties of Similarity-Variation

We can turn back to § 87 and to its fourth section (d) devoted to the relation between intuition of essence and experience of individuals and where Husserl aims at clarifying the peculiar aspect of "essential seeing". He makes clear the first feature, its "freedom", by

¹⁴. *Ibid.*, pp. 227-228; English trans., pp. 192-193.

virtue of an opposition to the “wholly determined *commitment*” of individual experience as well of phantasy insofar as this is conceived as experience in the mode “as if”: “In the free production of the multiplicity of variations, in the progress from variant to variant, we are not bound by the conditions of unanimity in the same way as in the progress of experience from one individual object to another on the ground of the unity of experience”.

Husserl carries on the reasoning by a direct exemplification: “If, for example, we envisage to ourselves an individual house now painted yellow, we can just as well think that it could be painted blue or think that it could have a slate instead of a little roof or, instead of this shape, another one. [...] This house, the same, is thinkable as *a* and as *non-a* but, naturally, if as *a*, then not at the same time as *non-a*”. First remark: the example of the house is varied in the method of the concrete, or total, similarity-variation, that is according to the dissimilarity of just an abstract moment (the “color” or the “little roof”). The second remark concerns the formal limits of the variation, i.e., the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction, by Husserl implicitly mentioned: “if as *a*, then not at the same time as *non-a*”. By such a reference, it should be clear how Husserl, despite of what he is going to affirm, does not step yet over the boundaries of the variation in direction of an *eidōs*. If it were this the case in fact, being that principle the principle too of individuation, that would mean an extension of the *principium individuationis* on the realm itself of *eide*. And Husserl speaks in fact of something that “cannot be *real* while having each of them at the same time [o.i.]”. The discourse seems to still concern a reality.

Husserl, however, deepens the reasoning and makes a step further to grasp the unity lying at the basis of what is real:

[...] if this identical something determined as *a* exists, then *a* belongs to it in the cancelled form [durchstrichenen Form] of *non-a*, and conversely. To be sure, the identical substrate, is not an individual pure and simple. The sudden change is that of individual into a second individual incompatible with it in coexistence. An individual pure and simple is an existing individual (or one capable of existing). However, what is seen as unity in the conflict is not an individual but a concrete androgynous unity of individual mutually nullifying and coexistentially exclusive: a unique consciousness with a unique content, whose correlate signifies concrete unity founded in conflict, in incompatibility. This remarkable androgynous unity is at the bottom of essential seeing¹⁵.

¹⁵. *Ibid.*, pp. 416-417; English trans., p. 345 [trans. modified]. We opt for “androgynous” instead of “hybrid” to better stress the underlying unity as well to recall a more Platonic language.

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The Husserlian words themselves reflect the status of the androgynous by attributing to it features that have immediately to be retracted, as the one of individuality. Husserl certainly states that “the identical substrate, is not an individual pure and simple”; but in accounting for this “concrete androgynous unity” he ascribes to it the same logic he usually makes use of in describing the classical phenomenon of a correction of an perception (“it is a human being”) by a second one (“it was just a mannequin”) which retentionally holds that former but only “in the cancelled form” (*durchgestrichenen Form*). If it were so, namely if Husserl were authorized to speak of “unity of individual mutually nullifying and coexistentially exclusive”, that means that what entails these coexistentially exclusive possibilities, is not yet a realm of “pure possibilities” – which should only mean ideal, i.e. non-exclusive, possibilities –, but just “real possibilities” in the course of variation (*hen epi pollon*)¹⁶. Only of real possibility (“alle realen Möglichkeiten betreffen Unverträglichkeiten in der Tatsachenwelt” (Ms. D 12, 83b)) one can assert what Husserl asserts here of what should be a pure *eidōs* (“This remarkable androgynous unity is *at the bottom of essential seeing*”): its being “unity of individual mutually nullifying and coexistentially exclusive”.

If, then, our account and doubt are right, that means that Husserl, in spite of his claim, is not able to furnish an *eidōs* which should not be a unity of real possibilities, but a pure possibility preceding (really) possible coexistence as well (really) impossible coexistence (“Freilich ist bei reinen Wesen Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit äquivalent” (Ms. D 8, 19a)).

Let us represent anew the above recalled rhythms of the variation as follows:

1) *Faktum* → 2) *Exempel*: reality as possibility¹⁷ → 3) *Fikta* → 4) *hen epi pollon*: underlying unity of real possibilities (*reale Möglichkeiten*) → 5) ideal possibility (*ideale Möglichkeit*)

At this point of the reasoning Husserl has not yet provided 5. It is to verify whether he is able to provide 4.

The very reason lying at the basis of the difficulty of catching an *eidōs* emerges properly speaking in § 93, where Husserl faces the

¹⁶. “Das konkrete Wesen ist das *en epi pollon* und zwar das vollständige Eidetisch-Identische der Mannigfaltigkeit individueller, kein weiteres Spezifisches ‘enthaltender’ Einzelheiten. Heben wir in diesem e{n, diesem konkreten Wesen, das ‘Quale’ heraus, so ist es für alle individuellen Einzelheiten absolut identisch. Es ist ein Wesensmoment, das in sich selbst absolut keinen Unterschied mehr enthält” (Ms. D 8, 27a).

¹⁷. Husserl, *Phänomenologische Psychologie. Vorlesungen Sommersemester 1925*, hrsgg. von R. Boehm, Husserliana IX, Den Haag, M. Nijhoff, 1962, p. 74: “eine Wirklichkeit wird behandelt als eine Möglichkeit unter anderen Möglichkeiten”.

problem that “the establishment of the exemplarity to be varied already demands an intricate method”¹⁸. The very problem is that, taking as starting point of the whole operation of variation “a thing intended in the exemplary initial intuition”, this thing owns “an open infinity” and “only implicitly includes these ‘infinities’ in its intention, and in fact in such a way that each of these infinities, moreover, is entwined in a multiplicity of *relativities*”. Variation itself has to operate on such a relativity to grasp “the course of possible experience productive of intuition”, but the question finally touches the manner in which we became aware of the essence (“every single thing has its *own essence*”) in the course of variation: at what point can we assert with certainty that variation obtains the essence?

This question may seem superfluous to whoever remembers that Husserl himself recognizes that it is not necessary a *real* and *actual* variation, but only a consciousness of *Beliebigkeit*. But, and here the problem arises anew, either in fact this consciousness of *Beliebigkeit* is sufficient at the very moment in which we attain the *Exempel*, in such a way rendering the operation itself of similarity-variation totally superfluous; or, to get the consciousness of *Beliebigkeit*, it is however necessary to operate variations (even if only one or two single variations), in such a way giving birth to the problem of where we have to locate the limit of these variations only whose achievement gives us the certainty of having obtained the *Beliebigkeit*¹⁹. But similarity-variation does entail no criterion to be certain of this fact and the consequence cannot be but the impossibility of being sure of having finally grasped an underlying unity, in this way switching from 3 to 4 – from continually different and divergent variations to the *hen epi pollon*.

That means that this variation, not only does not seem to furnish ideal possibilities (“ein absolut reines Eidos” (Hua IX, p. 74)), but rather, if we take a closer look, it is also not able to offer the *hen epi pollon*. The three phases are, respectively, similarity-variation offering a manifold of variations; the *hen epi pollon*, or “*eidos* as the ideally identical”, providing an underlying unity to all those variations; finally the pure *eidos*, whose unity would be a pure possibility²⁰.

¹⁸. Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, *op. cit.*, p. 437; English trans., p. 360.

¹⁹. In one passage from the manuscript A III 11, 30a Husserl asserts that by just repeating “two” times the same content we grasp the underlying “unity”: “Wie es zunächst scheinen möchte, bedarf es nicht der offenen Unendlichkeit mit der Form des Usw. Es genügen schon 2 Wiederholungen, um die Einheit zu erfassen”. Nevertheless, Husserl does not explain “why” that would be possible. He recognizes in fact that “[...] solange wir die einzelnen Gegenstände nicht im Bewusstsein der Beliebigkeit haben, im Bewusstsein des Exemplarischen, wir keine Selbstgebung haben”.

²⁰. Hua XIII, p. 215; English trans., p. 134: “There is a distinction to be made between the logically possible, the really possible and the factually possible under the given circumstances. [...] ‘What is logically possible’ is here the possible in the sense of the logic of nature, i.e., of the

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Our critique is structured in two moments:

- starting from what should represent the aim of the inquiry, namely the notion of “reines *eidōs*”, we stress the difficulty of accounting for it in terms of “real possibilities” as well in the way Husserl describes it according to the paradigm usually adopted for perceptual corrections;
- by moving backwards to “the *eidōs* as the ideally identical”, we raise the difficulty of also catching the unity of this latter (the *hen epi pollon*), in such a way coming out of the infinite process of variation according to a methodological criterion that however cannot be found in it.

On the basis of these critical remarks it comes into play the necessity of taking into consideration the second form of eidetic variation, the “contingency-variation” which, facing a limit under the shape of features that cannot be varied – under penalty of denying the ontological status of the object –, should be able to offer a methodological solution. It is for this reason that we cannot agree with D. Lohmar, who argues about the necessity of switching from “contingency-variation” to the one of similarity²¹. The disagreement has not only a theoretical reason – for it is the “similarity” to not offer a very, even if negative, criterion to halt variation –, but mainly textual: it seems to us that it is not possible to find the method of eidetic variation before *Phänomenologische Psychologie* (circa²²), that is before its being arranged as similarity-variation.

pure science of nature, of the ontology of nature, to which geometry itself belongs. This logic explicates what is contained *a priori* in the idea, the essence of nature, the idea of space, of time, of the spatial-temporal thing, and of the encompassing context of nature. One idea implies more ideas [trans. modified].”

²¹. Dieter Lohmar, “Die phänomenologische Methode der Wesensschau und ihre Präzisierung als eidetische Variation”, *Phänomenologische Forschungen*, 2005, pp. 65-91: pp. 80-81: “Husserls Vorschlag einer Ähnlichkeits-Variation des Ausgangsexempels soll also die Schwierigkeiten beheben, die in der offenen Frage nach der Begrenzung der Variation liegt. Prinzipiell kann ich jeden beliebigen Gegenstand in einen anderen verändernd überführen, wie ist die Variation als begrenzt? Husserls Vorschlag in der *Phänomenologischen Psychologie* fordert die Ähnlichkeit der Varianten mit dem Ausgangsexempel”.

²². See Roman Ingarden, *Einführung in die Phänomenologie Edmund Husserls*. Osloer Vorlesungen 1967, hrsgg. von G. Haeglinger, Gesammelte Werke 4, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1992, p. 190: “Später, viele Jahre nach den *Ideen I*, nämlich im Jahre 1925, hat Husserl eine [andere, in gewissen Sinne ergänzende Theorie dazugefügt]. Ich habe im Jahre 1927 ein Manuskript von ungefähr 30-40 Seiten gesehen. Auf dem ersten Blatt stand mit blauem Bleistift geschrieben: ‘Variation 1925’. Dieses Manuskript wurde später in das Buch aufgenommen, das nach dem Tode Husserls unter dem Titel *Erfahrung und Urteil* erschienen ist”. The 1925 manuscript in question could be the already quoted Ms. A III, 11 (*Ad Allgemeines. Ideation, Variation. Exzerpt aus Formale und transzendente Logik. In den Manuskripten über Verschmelzung etc. Zeitmodi und Urteilsmodi*). In this manuscript the universality is connected to similarity to such an extent to be said *ens similitudinis*. It is then worthy of mention that it is in Oskar Becker’s *Habilitationschrift*

If it were so, it would be the “contingency-variation” to come later, and not the contrary.

II.

§ 3. Conclusion and Doubts: Does “Contingency-Variation” exist?

The difficulty of raising the question of when the method of phantasy-variation as eidetic variation appears in Husserl, is due to the necessity of understanding whether we can claim to find it before the thematic emergence of the conceptual plexus eidetic variation. According to our analysis, this is not possible; or, better, it should not be possible if one does not want to run the risk of anticipating and superimposing later Husserlian reflections upon single appearances of “phantasy” or of “variation”. We are not allowed to do it for the simple reason that the method of “variation” as well the gnoseological and epistemological value of “phantasy” are not something peculiar to Husserlian phenomenology as such. We cannot then proclaim its presence in front of each of their textual appearances. Properly Husserlian is phantasy-variation, neither variation nor phantasy. (That does not mean that Husserlian employment or account for them both is irrelevant or not peculiar).

For what concerns the phantasy, the question seems to be easier for it is Husserl himself to recognize that we can find a direct evidence of it in the work of the geometer.

With regard to the variation the fact is more complicated, mainly for a mathematical background of the concept of variation that here we are not able to directly follow (we just remind of the title of Husserl’s Ph. D. work, *Beiträge zur Variationsrechnung*). Beyond of this tradition, and even by just remaining within the limits of the two poles representing to a certain extent the Alfa and the Omega of the *Logical Investigations* – we mean Carl Stumpf and Bernard Bolzano –, we can already find technical employments of the method of variation. It is present in Bolzano’s *Wissenschaftslehre* (notably § 147) as well in Stumpf’s *Über den psychologischen Ursprung der Raumvorstellung*.

(defended in Freiburg in January, 1922) that we can find the first public emergence of the method at stake. Here the passage: “Wir binden unsere Phantasie durch die Annahme (den ‘Ansatz’) gewisser Merkmale und lassen dann die übrigen Merkmale frei variabel. Dabei stellen sich dann als unveränderlich, von der Variation nicht mitbetroffen finden, sind nämlich diejenige Merkmale, die mit den zunächst angesetzten notwendig mitgesetzt sind, deren Negation also zum Widersinn (materialer Art) führen würde. Das so entstehende Gemeinsame ist das ‘Eidos’ oder ‘Wesen’”, Oskar Becker, “Beiträge zur phänomenologischen Begründung der Geometrie und ihrer physikalischen Anwendungen”, *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, 6, 1923, pp. 385-560: p. 399.

This latter is of particular interest: for it is in fact right in the middle of probably the most quoted pages of this book where Stumpf introduces the well-known distinction between *self-subsistent* and *partial contents*, that he appeals too to the method of variation as “alteration” (*Veränderung*) of the absolute contents of a representation. Stumpf argues that, in the case we succeed in separating two contents, it is sure that such contents are self-subsistent – but the contrary case is not true. Such inseparability could be due to a mere psychological incapability or to an associative habit to take them together as unity. We need for a more accurate verification: “We must not merely confine ourselves to consider the contents together and that they do not *exist* independent of one another; but also to the way they *change* [*sich verändern*] and act. It is evident that there exists here a way to take a decision”. Stumpf provides a direct example of relation between color and extension: “It is true in general that they change independent of one another [*sich unabhängig verändern*], namely that the extension can change while the color remains the same; and the color can change while the extension remains the same. Nevertheless the quality shares to a certain extent the change of the extension”²³.

In spite of the peculiar Husserlian attempt to attain, rather than a mere psychological analysis, purely ontological outcomes, the inheritance is undeniable²⁴. Unlike what Husserl does in the Twenties, when *Variation* is distinguished from the notion of *Veränderung*, in both *Philosophy of Arithmetic*²⁵ and the *Third Investigation* he makes on the contrary use of *Variation*, *Veränderung* and *verändern* in a synonymic way.

If variation as method is not something peculiarly characterizing Husserl, then – and even just for an interpretative prudence – one cannot hastily claim of having evidence of the eidetic variation by simply facing the word phantasy or variation. It is thus reasonable to assert that the eidetic variation appears in the course of the Twenties

²³. Carl Stumpf, *Über den psychologischen Ursprung der Raumsvorstellung*, Leipzig, Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1873, p. 112.

²⁴. A comparison with Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen. Zweiter Teil. Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis*, Halle, Max Niemeyer, 1901, p. 228, makes clear how Husserl directly quotes Stumpf. The following manuscript from the Göttingen time shows the way Husserl employed this Stumpfian methodological principle to establish the independence between “change of quality” and “temporal-spatial shapes” to make clear the possibility of pure analysis, like the geometrical one: “Die Unabhängigkeit der idealen raumzeitlichen Vorkommnisse vom Wechsel der Qualitäten. Die Dauer, die Raumgestalt etc. bleiben absolut identisch bei Variation der Färbung etc. Diese Independenz ermöglicht eine reine Geometrie, Phoronomie, Zeitlehre. Die Independenz der Färbung von einer identisch festgehaltenen Figur. Die Möglichkeit eines Apriori in dieser Sphäre vermöge dieser Independenz: ideelle Reduktion auf den Limes: den reinen Farbenpunkt etc.” (Ms. D 13 II, 49b-50a).

²⁵. Husserl, *Philosophie der Arithmetik. Mit ergänzenden Texten (1890-1901)*, hrsgg. von L. Eley, Husserliana XII, The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1970, p. 71.

and in first instance in the shape of similarity-variation. This latter, further conclusion, would precede the one of contingency.

The truly question is now: what should “contingency-variation” phenomenologically mean? One usually asserts that it varies the so-called contingent features of an object up to the impossibility itself to further vary them, in such a way facing an invariable and essential feature²⁶. Here too we cannot but raise two orders of objections, textual as well as theoretical.

The first is that all the texts usually quoted in order to support the idea of such method do not seem to offer a whatsoever proof in favour of it. Be it the *Fourth Cartesian Meditation* or § 98 of *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, our impression is that this so-called “contingency-variation” does not appear altogether. And it cannot appear at all. Considering for example the corresponding pages from the *Logic*, where Husserl certainly does not mention the role of similarity but where he does not mention too any form of “contingency-variation”: he undeniably asserts the factuality of the starting point of the operation, but also its validity as *Exempel* and thus of the consciousness of exemplarity itself only on which that variation can be performed²⁷. In § 34 of the *Fourth Meditation* Husserl explicitly refers to the necessity of moving into “the realm of unrealities” from a starting *Exempel* of perception of a table; he makes no reference to the role of similarity, but it is the phenomenological meaning of the *Exempel* that we have to stress²⁸.

For – and this concerns on the contrary the second order of objections – it is by virtue of such *Exempel* that the idea itself of a “contingency-variation” has phenomenologically no sense: at the very moment in fact in which we switch from the starting consciousness of something individual to the one of exemplarity, we have already left the ground only on whose basis whatever discourse on the notion of contingency has sense. In the realm of possibilities disclosed by the *Exempel* (a possibility among others) and by its corresponding consciousness of *Beliebigkeit* the contingency is already set apart. It remains on this side of the *exemplarisches Bewusstsein*²⁹.

²⁶. Paolo Volonté, *Husserls Phänomenologie der Imagination. Zur Funktion der Phantasie bei der Konstitution der Erkenntnis*, Freiburg, München, Verlag Karl Alber, 1997, notably pp. 276-287: “Die Methode der Variation besteht nun darin, daß wir unsere empirische Erfahrung ganz willkürlich nach allen möglichen Gestalten variieren, bis wir die Grenzen finden, jenseits deren es nicht mehr möglich ist, von einer Wahrnehmung zu sprechen”.

²⁷. Husserl, *Formale und transzendente Logik. Versuch einer Kritik der logischen Vernunft*, hrsgg. von P. Janssen, Husserliana XVII, Den Haag, M. Nijhoff, 1974, pp. 254-255.

²⁸. Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, hrsgg. von S. Strasser, Den Haag, M. Nijhoff, 1950, p. 104 and p. 107.

²⁹. Ms. A III 11, 31b: “Jetzt ist dieser Tisch da charakterisiert als *Exempel*, ihm haftet diese *Beliebigkeit* an, er ist als dieser da bewusst, aber gleichgültig [o.i.]”.

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If this interpretation is right, if then we are not allowed to speak of two different physiognomies of eidetic-variation and if there exists only a unique method of variation (aiming at the *eidos*), the one of similarity, that entails two consequences:

1) one cannot propose an interpretation of eidetic-variation (in terms of “contingency-variation”) as “falsification”³⁰. Not that the idea of falsification cannot play a very important role; the problem arises when we pretend to save the “contingency-variation” – because of its eventual ambiguities and difficulties³¹ – by interpreting it as falsification: for it is the idea itself of a “contingency-variation” that we are questioning here;

2) but if there is no “contingency-variation”; if there exists only a unique method of variation (similarity-variation) which does entail no inner criterion to point out its *terminus ad quem*, we face, methodologically and according to the hitherto reasoning, a certain impossibility of *eidos*.

In one of his loose notes Fink reports a question on variation asked Husserl by a student, Walter Sachs, during a seminar in Freiburg: Is not the outcome already anticipated by the starting point? [...] If at the beginning I have not already conceived of the outcome, is not the universality that I provide through variation an empirical universality?³². The alternative seems once more to lie between the anticipation of the *eidos* – which would render the whole operation simply superfluous – and its impossibility under the shape of a mere empirical generality.

Unfortunately, Fink does not report the Husserlian answer.

³⁰ As recently argued by R. Sowa, “Essences and Eidetic Laws in Edmund Husserl’s Descriptive Eidetics”, *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, 2007.

³¹ See Ingarden’s remarks on the *Fourth Cartesian Meditation*: “die Möglichkeit des Übergangs von einer empirisch gegebenen Einzelheit, z. B. einer ganz bestimmten Perzeption, setzt bei der Methode der Variation voraus, was wir als ‘konstant’ und was ‘variabel’ nehmen sollen [...]. [E]he man zu einer eidetischen Analyse mittels der Methode der Variation herantritt, muß man, um überhaupt die möglichen Untersuchungsrichtungen bestimmt zu haben, zunächst auf die erste der ‘essentialen Fragen’, d. h. auf die Frage: ‘Was ist das?’ eine bestimmte und richtige Antwort haben. Aber gerade auf diese Frage ist dann am schwierigsten zu antworten, wenn man von dem zu untersuchenden Gegenstand doch nichts Eidetisches weiß, das heißt, wenn man noch keine eidetische Analyse durchgeführt hat”, Roman Ingarden, “Bemerkungen zu den *Méditations Cartésiennes*”, in *Schriften zur Phänomenologie Edmund Husserls*, hrsgg. von W. Galewicz, Gesammelte Werke 5, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1998, pp. 89-90.

³² Eugen Fink, *Phänomenologische Werkstatt. Teilband 1: Die Doktorarbeit und erste Assistenzjahre bei Husserl*, hrsgg. von R. Bruzina, Freiburg, München, Verlag Karl Alber, 2006, p. 98, p. 14.