

Another Look at Husserl's Treatment of the Thing in Itself

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Abstract: It is a familiar story that, where Kant humbly draws a line beyond which cognition can't reach, Husserl presses forward to show how we can cognize beyond that limit. Kant supposes that cognition is bound to sensibility and that what we experience in sensibility is mere appearance that does not inform us about the intrinsic nature of things in themselves. By contrast, for Husserl, it makes no sense to say we experience anything other than things in themselves when we enjoy sensory perception. Kant's conception, then, by doing just that, is nonsensical. I argue that Husserl's account does not deliver on its promise. Things as they are in themselves are just as cognitively out of reach on Husserl's understanding of them as they are on Kant's. Further, the charge of nonsense Husserl raises against Kant's conception of things in themselves applies—indeed, with greater force—to his own.

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1 Introduction

Georg Lukács once argued that the problem, as we tend to think of it, of the thing in itself is not peculiar to Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism.¹ Lukács contends that all post-Kantian philosophy, or at least all of it ("bourgeois thought") that isn't anchored in the nascent self-consciousness of the proletariat, is plagued by the problem (Lukács 1972, 150). The troubling notion of the thing in itself, despite appearances, isn't overcome even by philosophies that aspire to do just that. It is, rather, disguised and relocated. I think something like this is true of Edmund Husserl's transcendental idealism. Setting aside Lukács's Hegelian-Marxian diagnosis for why post-Kantian philosophy suffers this way, I argue in what follows that Husserl does not really do away with what, by his own lights, is theoretically vexing about the thing in itself and that it reappears in his system.

Husserl is comfortable with speaking of there being "things in themselves" (Husserl 2019, 52/256),² so, this discussion isn't about whether he posits things in themselves. Husserl appreciates that what Kant wants to make sense of in talking about things in themselves is what he calls the "transcendence" of things, that is, their distinctness and separateness from conscious life. It isn't so much the concept as the conception of things in themselves, the attempt to explicate the notion and develop a theory about it, that is at issue. Below I review essential details about Kant's conception of things in themselves (§2) and Husserl's criticism of this conception (§3). I then present in outline Husserl's

¹ See Lukács 1972, "Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat," Sections II and III, especially pp. 114-115, 119-121, 125-126, 138, 150-151, 199.

² When citing English translations of Husserl's works that include embedded in the text or in the margins the pagination of the German source text, I will first cite the page numbers from the German source text, followed by a forward slash and the corresponding page numbers from the English translation.

attempt to recast the notion of things in themselves to avoid difficulties affecting Kant's conception (§4) and argue that he does not in fact avoid these difficulties (§5). Husserl accuses Kant of making nonsensical (technically, "countersensical") claims in elaborating his conception of things in themselves and I show that Husserl unwittingly ends up with the same result by other means in his own account. I conclude by anticipating and responding to a couple of possible replies to my critique (§6).

2 Kant's View

One of the aims of Kant's theoretical philosophy is to assess the limits of what we can know about reality as we encounter it in perceptual experience. He famously holds that we can only know about reality as it appears to us and not as it is in itself (Kant 1998, 111-112 [Bxxvii-Bxxii], 114-115 [Bxxv-Bxxvii]). Our faculties of intuition and understanding dictate the terms on which we encounter objects. And we have no reason to think that the way our subjective constitution conditions things' appearance lets the truth—or the full truth, at least—about them shine through. Because this limitation is rooted in how we relate to the world by way of sensible intuition, you might think the limit is surmountable by thinking deployed independently of sensible intuition. Kant further argues, however, that this tactic invariably results in illusion, i.e., in passing off what are only subjective necessities in thought as if they were objectively valid (Kant 1998, 384-387 [A293-A298/B249-355]).

We must modestly accept, Kant thinks, that we can know reality only as it appears to us in sensible intuition and not however it may be considered as it is in itself. Does this mean we should eliminate the concept of things in themselves? Even if you can only *know* (or "cognize") reality as it appears to you, Kant does allow that you can *think* beyond that limit. So, things in themselves are unknowable, yet thinkable. You *can* think them, for instance, when you succumb to the just-mentioned illusion. But Kant describes the situation in stronger terms: "we... *must* be able to think [of objects] as things in themselves" (Kant 1998, 115 [Bxxvii], emphasis added).³ To hold otherwise would amount to, he adds, the absurdity of supposing there are appearances but nothing that appears.

The thing in itself, then, remains thinkable precisely as that which appears, even if we can't assert what we do of appearances also of things in themselves nor fathom what else might be true of the latter beyond what we can know to be true of appearances. How should we further and more positively characterize the relation between appearances and things in themselves? There is no consensus among Kant's interpreters on this question. Remaining neutral on their respective merits and without examining their textual support, let me offer a rough sketch of the lay of the land for these competing interpretations,⁴ which will allow me in a moment to locate Husserl's reading of Kant on the issue in relation to contemporary readings.

The major fault line dividing readings of the relation between appearances and things in themselves as Kant understands it lies between those on which appearances and things in themselves refer to two distinct metaphysical domains or "two worlds" and those on which appearances and things in

³ See also Kant 1998, A256/B311-312.

⁴ See Stang 2018.

themselves refer to the same metaphysical domain or world, but in different respects. The former view is sometimes called phenomenalist because it typically involves the idea that, for Kant, we only know things that turn out to be “phenomena” immanent to our own mental life, cut off from things beyond the mind.⁵ One-world (or “dual aspect”) readings, on the other hand, subdivide into those on which things as they appear just are things in themselves, distinguished only in terms of the kinds of properties we can and cannot know them to have,⁶ and those on which the two are again the same, but distinguished rather in terms of our epistemic mode of access to them.⁷

3 Husserl's Critique of Kant

It is well known that Husserl repudiates Kant's split between reality as appearance and reality as it is in itself. “Husserl obviously rejects the notion that there is a thing-in-itself behind the appearance,” notes Sebastian Luft (Luft 2011, 200). This much is both familiar and uncontroversial based on Husserl's own remarks as well as Iso Kern's careful and detailed exposition of those remarks (Kern 1964, 121-134). I'll now review the essential details.

3.1 Appearance and Thing in Itself

Husserl's dissatisfaction with Kant's conception of things in themselves has several sources. One relates directly to the point I was just reflecting on, namely, of how to understand the relation between appearance and things in themselves. On the one hand, Husserl credits Kant with improving on Hume's position by recognizing perceptual experience doesn't merely confront us with sense data, but rather “places things [...] before our eyes.” Nevertheless, Kant ends up holding that “the intuitively appearing world must [...] be a construct of the faculties of ‘pure intuition’ and ‘pure reason’” (Husserl 1970, 94). He makes the world we perceive and think about out to be “a subjective construct” which Husserl marks off as a distinct metaphysical domain in Kant's thinking from things in themselves (Husserl 1970, 95).

By speaking as if, for Kant, subjective construct is one thing and thing in itself another, Husserl thus appears to have a two-world or phenomenalist reading of Kant's view of how appearances and things in themselves are related. Yet, he thinks Kant misdescribes the nature of perceptual experience and does so in a way that obscures the true relation between appearance and reality. As Husserl reads Kant, we perceive objects and not sense data, but these objects are nevertheless equated with appearances or subjective constructs. Husserl supposes that if what we perceive is a subjective construct, then we do not perceive reality as it is in itself.

Husserl *agrees* with Kant that we experience appearances and that these are essential in perceiving the world (Husserl 2014, §41; Husserl 1977, §28). He *denies* that appearances are the intentional objects of perceptual experience or that there is any other object in addition to—lurking behind, as it were—the manifest intentional objects of perception (Husserl 2001b, 97-100; Husserl 2014, §§43, 90).

⁵ See Jauernig 2021.

⁶ See Langton 1998 and Allais 2015.

⁷ See Allison 1983.

Husserl states the point forcefully when he writes: “What Kant calls ‘appearance,’ the thing of experience, is a subjectively [...] interpreted thing, yet it [i.e., the thing of experience] is the one and only thing of which it makes sense to speak” (MS B IV 1, 76/77, cited in Kern 1964, 121, my translation).⁸ Appearance and appearing object aren’t opposed and handled as two distinct items, as he thinks Kant treats them. Appearances only rarely become objects of overt awareness retrospectively in reflection and in their normal functioning they make genuinely transcendent objects manifest to consciousness.

Kant’s failing is descriptive: faithful description of experience rules out his conception of the relationship between appearance and thing in itself and compels us, Husserl holds, to acknowledge that if it makes sense at all to speak of things in themselves, meaning items that transcend consciousness and are distinct from it, then these are exactly what appear to us in perceptual experience as its direct, immediately given objects without any kind of subjective intermediary standing in for them.

3.2 Countersense and Thing in Itself

Husserl thinks Kant misconstrues the relationship between appearance and thing in itself due to his wrongheaded method. Kant is correct to see appearances as subjective accomplishments. What leads him astray is that he views appearances as the outputs of “hidden,” unconscious subjective operations (Husserl 1970, 94). Kant can posit these only by employing “a mythically, constructively inferring method” (Husserl 1970, 115). Hume may have erred in taking sense data to be the objects of perception, but he surpasses Kant in directing our reflection to conscious life itself as the site for further investigation concerning its function rather than trying to deduce its accomplishments *ex post facto* (Husserl 1970, 96-97).

Adopting instead a “thoroughly intuitively disclosing method,” Husserl reconceives the relation between appearance and thing in itself—a point I return to in §4—in a way that purportedly rules out the idea that things in themselves are in any sense unknowable (Husserl 1970, 115). His ultimate epistemic principle, the “principle of all principles,” requires that what can legitimately be known be traceable back to what is given with immediate intuitive evidence, and in such a way that what is thus given is evident only with respect to the peculiar manner in which it is given (Husserl 2014, 43-44/43-44). Based on this principle, Husserl maintains that “whatever really is [...] can come to be given” (Husserl 2014, 89/87) and, moreover, that “[w]hat things are [...] they are as things of experience” (Husserl 2014, 88/85; 97-102/94-99).

This last thought is not an epistemic point, like the principle of all principles, but a semantic one about meaning or sense. Husserl holds that things are essentially “things of experience” because “[e]xperience alone prescribes their *sense* to them” (Husserl 2014, 88/85; Husserl’s emphasis). Returning to Kant, positing a really existing object that can’t be given in intuitive consciousness—and this is what countenancing things in themselves means for Kant—is not false but meaningless (Husserl

⁸ The German source text reads: “Was Kant ‘Erscheinung’ nennt, das Ding der Erfahrung, das ist ein subjectivistisch (oder anthropologistisch) gedeutetes Ding, während es das eine und einzige Ding ist, von dem zu reden überhaupt Sinn hat.”

2014, 90-91/87-88). Whereas Kant accepts that things in themselves being thinkable but unknowable lacks sense (van Mazijk 2020, 26), for Husserl the idea is absurd. The expressions in which the idea is countenanced may be well formed syntactically. Yet, there is a “material absurdity” to them due to their illicit combination of concepts (Husserl 2014, §48).

Let's get clear about the nature of this material absurdity, following the train of thought in §48 of *Ideas I* and considering that against the background of the notion of countersense developed in other texts. Here Husserl doesn't express the difficulty using Kant's terminology. As he frames it, the difficulty lies in the notion of “a world outside our world,” which is a way of conceiving the “transcendence” or “being in itself” of the world. We can conceive the world we experience to be different in quite radical ways. For instance, it could operate according to different physical laws than those we are familiar with (Husserl 2014, 88/85). There are limits, though, to our ability to conceive of things being different. We run into one when we entertain the idea of things existing independent of any possible correlation with intuitive consciousness, that is, of things comprising a world outside our world (Husserl 2014, 88-89/86).

Running into this limit entails a material absurdity, an illicit combination of concepts, in short, a “countersense” (*Widersinn*). In the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl introduces a distinction between two types of meaningless thought. A thought can be meaningless by flouting logical syntax (Husserl 2001b, Investigation IV, §§12, 14). A thought like this—for instance, borrowing Husserl's example, “King but or like and”—is meaningless because it lacks sense altogether (Husserl 2001b, 71). This isn't due to the content of the relevant concepts. The terms employed in the pseudo-thought could be replaced with any term of the same logical-syntactical type (e.g., swapping out “King” for any other referring expression, e.g., “cloud”) and the ideas would necessarily fail to add up to a meaningful thought. To have a thought, ideas of the right formal-logical type must be combined.

A thought can also be meaningless by being countersensical, by combining concepts that, not due to their logical properties but rather due to their meaning or semantic content, cannot be thought together without committing what Gilbert Ryle calls a category mistake (Ryle 1938).⁹ Husserl illustrates the point with examples like the complex concepts “round square” and “wooden iron” or the thought “All squares have five angles” (Husserl 2001b, 67).

What makes such combinations of concepts materially absurd? You could swap out the terms in these examples for others and produce a meaningful expression (e.g., “All pentagons have five angles”). The problem is not one of logical syntax. It is because nothing could conceivably correspond to such a countersensical thought (Husserl 2001b, 67, 72). That an item is round excludes necessarily that it is a square, and *vice versa*. We can only know, moreover, whether the content of a concept repels or admits of combination with another through intuitive experience of relevant exemplars (Husserl 1978, §§87-88).

Now we can see why Husserl would call the idea of a world outside ours, e.g., a world of Kantian things in themselves, a material absurdity. He explicates the idea of a world like this as one in which

⁹ Husserl is an important influence on Ryle's thinking concerning this notion. See Thomason 2002, §3.

there are things that can't be objects of conscious experience. There couldn't even be a path of epistemic confirmation leading to such things from what we can intuitively experience. There could be no informative correlation whatsoever between these objects and intuitive consciousness. For Husserl, though, the idea of a thing, of an object of consciousness, just is that of a correlate of intuitive consciousness: "What things are [...] they are as things of experience" (Husserl 2014, 88/85; 97-102/94-99). This isn't a formal logical ("analytic") truth about the notion of a thing. It emerges from eidetic analysis of the concept of a thing (Husserl 2014, §§41-46; Husserl 1960, §48). The notion of a thing repels being characterized as "outside our world."

4 Husserl's Account of Transcendence

4.1 A Tension

Kant's conception transcendence is unacceptable to Husserl. It rests on a failure to consult consciousness itself descriptively to determine the relation of appearance to appearing thing and relies on a constructive method that generates the countersensical idea of a thing standing in no possible informative relation to intuitive conscious experience. My contention is that Husserl's own approach to understanding the transcendence of worldly items fails no better, judged in light of his critique of Kant. His account of empirical items' transcendence, their distinctness and separateness from conscious life, likewise involves a countersense.

To show this it will be necessary first to reconstruct in outline Husserl's account of what it means for something to transcend consciousness.¹⁰ The charge that his account of transcendence is countersensical like Kant's will strike many readers as obviously mistaken due to remarks of Husserl's like the following, quoted twice already:

What things are—the only things that we make assertions about, the only things whose being or nonbeing, whose being in a certain way or being otherwise we dispute and can rationally decide—they are as things of experience. (Husserl 2014, 88/85)

If that's right, it is hard to see what limits there could be to the availability of worldly items to us in experience. Other remarks of Husserl's send a more mixed message:

It is [...] a fundamental mistake to suppose that perception [...] does not get at the thing itself, or to suppose that the thing is not given to us in itself and in its being-in-itself. So, too, it is fundamentally mistaken to suppose that it is possible in principle to intuit every entity simply as what it is, and, specifically, to perceive it in an adequate perception affording the thing itself in person without any mediation through "appearances." (Husserl 2014, 79/76)

He wants to maintain both that we intuitively grasp the intentional objects of perceptual experience in an immediate and direct way, *contra* Kant, and qualify that by admitting our perception of them is in a way inadequate by virtue of being "mediated" by appearances. Breaking down this pair of thoughts, about the mediating role of appearances and the resulting inadequacy of perceptual

¹⁰ See Fabbianelli 2014, §4.

experience, will enable me to then show that Husserl's conception of transcendence is as countersensical as he thinks Kant's is.

4.2 Appearance and Appearing Thing

Husserl thinks we perceptually experience things directly and immediately. We don't cognitively engage with the objects of perception by proxy, let alone by experiencing an image of them, like when we view a photo. And yet, the passage just quoted adds a wrinkle to the story. Perceptual experience is supposed to be both direct or immediate and at the same time mediated by appearances. The tension vanishes when we recognize there is a functional, "mediating" role for appearances other than being an image or serving as the intentional object of perceptual experience.

Husserl often brings out the function of appearances by reflecting on and describing the experience of constancy in perceiving typical sensible properties.¹¹ Consider size. Across the office I see my bookshelf. I take a few steps in its direction, and, being reflectively alert, I notice a change takes place. I experience one and the same bookshelf persisting unaltered. On approaching, however, it fills up more and more of my visual field. How I experience its size changes, not the size itself. The change is in how things appear. That is part of my mental life, not things transcending it. Still standing, I turn and spot the box of tissues on my desk. Sitting down at the desk, I can again register a change as I keep my gaze on the box. When standing, the vertical side of the box facing me has a trapezoidal look to it that morphs into a squarish look as I seat myself. Again, I don't experience the object's property, its shape, changing. How I experience the property changes. The point generalizes (e.g., a tone of constant volume "sounds louder" as I near it).

In these examples, experienced change lies not in what is perceived, but how a thing is perceived. Ordinarily, the change goes entirely unnoticed (Husserl 1977, 152-153/117). The subjective change in experience reflects the fact that we necessarily perceive from a point of view (Husserl 1977, 157-158/121). Point of view and perspective are not themselves contents or objects of perceptual experience but are reflected in *how* we experience. That is essentially what appearance is, for Husserl: our manner of experiencing. Appearance, which he also refers to as adumbration (Husserl 2014, 75-76/73), is the joint upshot of an active and passive component. It involves taking things to be a certain way (engaging in "sense bestowal") while being affected in a certain way (experiencing "hyletic data") (Husserl 2014, §85). With the preceding examples, appearance makes perspectival experience possible insofar as in it varying sensory affection is joined with an unvarying take on what is being perceived.

Husserl thus holds appearances "mediate" our experience of things in perception. The mediation in question is a type of perceiving "by virtue of" something, but not a third thing. It is by virtue of the act of perception itself, by its manner of being executed, an essentially two-sided, yet unitary adumbration or way of taking the world to be while being affected by it.

¹¹ See, for instance, Husserl 1997, §71; Husserl 1977, §28; Husserl 2014, §41; Husserl 2004, 219-223.

4.3 Perceptual Inadequacy

The inadequacy of perceptual experience falls out of its mediation by appearances.¹² Part of what constitutes an appearance is that the perceptual act takes the world to be some way. In so doing, a meaning or sense is tokened that determines the experience's intentional object and how the object is taken to be, e.g., its size, shape, color, etc. (Husserl 2001b, Investigation V, §§20-21; Husserl 2014, §§88, 90, 97). Inadequacy concerns how this sense relates to the sensory affection that essentially co-constitutes perceptual appearance and how this relation establishes intuitive contact with perceived objects.

Husserl thinks the relationship between sense and sensory affection is loose. In the examples just discussed, the sense is constant despite varying sensory affection. Indeed, Husserl holds that there is no particular point of view on the perceived that gives the perceiver awareness of its "true" properties, in the sense that this point of view would be the right one and all others deficient with respect to it (Husserl 2014, 81-82/78-79; Husserl 2019, 33-34/237-238). To illustrate, the size seen up close is no truer than the size at a remote but still perceptible distance (Husserl 2019, 42/246; Husserl 1997, §66; Drummond 1979, 27).¹³

The relationship between sense and sensory affection is loose in a more significant way. Husserl thinks sense and sensory affection can come apart. There are elements of sense that may lack corresponding sensory affection altogether. How I take the scene before me to be in perceiving is only partly matched by my current state of sensory affection. Paradigmatically, when I visually take an item to be cuboid in shape, sensory affection falls short of matching this sense. No more than three of its sides can fall within my view, although the sense entails there are other sides not in view that I am nevertheless perceptually conscious of (Husserl 2001c, 4/40).¹⁴

Husserl makes sense of this aspect of perceptual experience by distinguishing within it empty and fulfilled intentions (Husserl 2001b, §§21-24; Husserl 2014, §136; Husserl 1997, §32), fulfillment being a matter of degree (Husserl 2001b, §§23-24). With the intention I take the world to be a certain way. The intention is fulfilled if there is suitable corresponding sensory affection. (For instance, I visually take the banana before me to be yellow and am sensorily affected in the way I am when visually presented with yellow items but not purple ones.) In that case, I intuitively experience the perceived immediately and directly. The intention is unfulfilled when suitable sensory affection is lacking, as with my perceptual awareness of the out-of-view sides of the tissue box on my desk. Without these intentions I couldn't perceive the cube as such, yet they can only be fulfilled in the subsequent course of experience. Further, an intention may be unfulfilled when paired with sensory affection. When I view the banana at dusk, I perceive it for what it is, although due to lighting conditions the sensory affection fails to fulfill the perceptual sense with full determinacy. The sense dictates that the object

¹² See Hopp 2020, Chapter 6, for a discussion and defense of Husserl's account of the inadequacy of perceptual experience. See also Bernet, Kern, and Marbach 1993, 126-130; Farber 1968, 133, 255, 338, 413, 442, 444-446; Ströker 1993, 32-33, 57-58, 82 (n. 46); McKenna 1981, 127-129, 130-132; Hopkins 2011, 127; and Cai 2013, 14-17.

¹³ We do come to form preferences, and a perceptual norm emerges from this (Husserl 1973, §93(a); Husserl 1989, §18(b); Husserl 1997, §36; Drummond 1983, 182-183; Steinbock 1995, 138-143). But the norm is relative to our practical interests.

¹⁴ See Husserl 2019, 42-43/246-247; Husserl 2001b, 283-284; Husserl 1977, §34; Husserl 1950, §19.

is yellow, but the sensory affection, though not exactly colorless, does not afford me awareness of the yellow coloration.¹⁵

The adequacy of perceptual experience amounts to complete fulfillment of every facet of perceptual sense in exactly the specified degree of determinacy (Husserl 2001b, Investigation VI, §29; Husserl 2014, §44, §138, 288-289/285-286; Husserl 2019, 32-33/237). The experience of the cube is inadequate and likewise my experience of the banana at dusk. According to Husserl, these cases are representative of perceptual experience. Perceptual experience is inherently inadequate and it is inadequate radically, through and through. Neither at a given time nor over time can perceptual experience ever be adequate with respect to its perceptual sense or any aspect of that sense (Husserl 1997, §§34-35; Husserl 2014, §44; Husserl 2019, 33-34/237-238 Bernet, Kern, and Marbach 1993, 129-130).

This is because, very roughly, every perceptible item has an infinite number of determinations that experience, necessarily perspectival, can only present partially and incompletely (Husserl 1997, 135/112). The sense of the experience prescribes possible fulfillments in the ongoing course of experience (Husserl 2014, §§130-132, §150; Husserl 1950, §19). My awareness of the out-of-view sides of the cube may motivate me to bring them into view and my awareness of the obscured yellow of the banana may motivate me to bring it to better viewing conditions. Perceptual sense, in fact, prescribes an infinite number of possible experiences gradually approximating the total sense in all its specified determinacy better and better in something like an asymptotic manner (Husserl 2014, §144). There is, Husserl holds, “[n]o possibility of absolute saturation,” i.e., adequate fulfillment, because “[e]very saturation,” i.e., every fulfillment, “leaves open [...] the possibility of further saturation” (Husserl 1997, 131/109). The perceptual sense can, therefore, function to guide experience toward adequacy, but adequacy can’t be realized in principle. It functions as a regulative ideal or an “idea in the Kantian sense” (Husserl 2014, §143).

5 Husserl’s Lapse into Countersense

I move now to show that, due to this way of spelling out the idea of empirical items’ transcendence, Husserl’s critique of Kant’s conception of transcendence applies with equal force to his own. That is, his understanding of transcendence, the distinctness and separateness of empirical items from consciousness or their status as things in themselves, is just as countersensical as Kant’s.

Let’s return to the point where my treatment of perceptual inadequacy left off in the preceding section. Husserl remarks:

In appearances as such there resides no termination in limits which can count as limits of complete givenness, as if, once these limits are actualized, the full thing, or even only one of its determinations, would be given conclusively, as if thereby an appearance for itself could

¹⁵ In ideal viewing conditions, my experience of the banana’s color would rule out it being, say, purple. In the dusk lit condition its ambiguous coloration does not rule this possibility out. I offer this remark to clarify the peculiar lack of determinacy I mean to highlight here.

produce givenness in the adequate sense, be it only with respect to the same ever so small objective moment. (Husserl 1997, 135/112)

With that, Husserl states unequivocally that no item whatsoever can be experienced such that the sense determining what the experience is of is fulfilled completely and without qualification. This is because there is no upper bound to the determinacy of what is intuitively experienced. Whatever degree of determinacy the fulfillment of an experience may have, there is a possible intuitive presentation exceeding it in determinacy (Husserl 1997, §§35-39).

The difficulty I am raising is one to which Husserl himself is sensitive. He concludes what is to my knowledge the most thorough discussion of perceptual experience's inadequacy with some aporetic reflections:

Things [...] are never given conclusively and never can be. They come to givenness only in an infinite progression of experience. Does knowledge not then become an aimless undertaking? [...] Naturally, if the task lies in the production of absolutely complete givenness, then it is a priori unsolvable; it is an unreasonably posited task. (Husserl 1997, 138/114-115)

The concern is that, because of its inherent and radical inadequacy, the central aim operative in all perceptual experience, to get at the perceived as it truly is, can't be realized and so appears vain. A decade and a half later, Husserl reiterates the same paradoxical point: "External perception is a constant pretension to accomplish something that, by its very nature, it is not in a position to accomplish." (Husserl 2001c, 3/38)

Where is the countersense in this thought? Husserl deems Kant's position countersensical insofar as, according to it, perception presents us with objects that we may think of but cannot encounter intuitively. This is a countersense because the very presentation and thinkability of an object is essentially tied to possible givenness in intuition. An unintuitable object has the same cognitively null status as a square circle. Consider again Husserl's just-quoted remarks. The sense corresponding to any object or property indicates a path leading to possible fulfillment. Yet, there is no final intuitive fulfillment in which sense and intuitive presentation perfectly correspond. Less technically, *we never intuitively encounter things as they truly are in perceptual experience*. When all the details are on the table, it is apparent that, strictly, the way we perceptually take things to be is never, "be it only with respect to the same ever so small objective moment," how they actually appear (Husserl 1997, 135/112). Things in themselves are for Husserl just as inaccessible as Kant makes them out to be.¹⁶

For Kant, appearances can't reflect empirical things' true natures because the contingent form of human sensibility colors how they appear to us. For Husserl, appearances can't reflect empirical things' true natures because of their inherent and radical inadequacy with respect to empirical objects. The end result is essentially the same for him as for Kant. And this despite the major reconceptualization Husserl undertakes of the notion of appearance in perception and his aspiration

¹⁶ Emanuela Carta and Emiliano Diaz have raised what strikes me as basically the same difficulty for Husserl. See Carta 2022, 192. She mentions the problem in passing and remains neutral about the justice of the charge. And see Diaz 2023, 3. Where Carta remains neutral Diaz dismisses the concern. I will return to Diaz's response in §6 below.

to do justice to the seemingly direct encounter with the real as it is in itself. If we accept Husserl's view that "what things are [...] they are as things of experience" (Husserl 2014, 88/85, then any talk of empirical items' natures over and above their inadequate appearance to us in perception must be countersensical.

In Husserl's case, countersense proliferates. The instance I have highlighted already, inspired by Renaud Barbaras (2006, 39-40), is, described in general terms, virtually the same as the one Husserl finds in Kant. It is the countersense of perceptual experience being directed toward something that can't in fact be experienced for what it is. For Husserl, a thing just is something that can be so experienced.¹⁷ To put a finer point on it, the notion that becomes countersensical is that of fulfillment. According to Husserl, when things go well, the sense dictating what worldly item my experience is about and how things stand with this item is fulfilled. My direct sensory encounter with the item in some sense matches or measures up to the perceptual sense, a sense that antecedently I am aware of empty in something like a perceptual anticipation.

Were the match perfect, the fulfillment would be adequate (Husserl 1950, 98/63). Husserl thinks this form of fulfillment can never be instanced. The decisive question is: how can perceptual sense be fulfilled and yet the experience still count as inadequate? Fulfilment and inadequacy stand in tension. Combined, they are countersensical. Fulfilment refers to a match between sense and sensory encounter and inadequacy refers to a mismatch between these. It would be a mistake to think that the match and mismatch involved in inadequate fulfillment obtain in different respects, since adequacy simply is perfect fulfillment and not a match in some other respect.

Husserl does claim that there are several dimensions along which fulfillment may vary (Husserl 2001b, 238-239; Husserl 1997, §38). Two of them—"richness" and "reality content"—concern the possibility of complex perceptual sense having unfulfilled partial senses (for properties and objects, respectively).¹⁸ These elucidate the idea of degrees of fulfilment in terms of incompleteness, in terms of components of perceptual sense that are not fulfilled at all (Husserl 2001b, 238). Due to a lack of richness, I might see an object as red without the experience satisfying the further partial sense of being crimson. Due to deficient reality content, I may see one side of an object, but not another. Such experiences would be inadequate, but not with respect to what is fulfilled. They are thus not relevant to our concern, which is with experience that is both fulfilled and inadequate. The third, "liveliness," is about the degree to which the intuitive, in our case sensory, encounter "resembles" the perceptual sense. This would account for sense that is fulfilled inadequately.

¹⁷ I therefore disagree with Michela Summa's assessment that in Husserl's thinking "no place is left for a thing in itself, as that which withdraws from all possible displaying" (Summa 2014, 48).

¹⁸ To elaborate briefly, "richness" refers to how determinately a property is presented and "reality content" refers to the how many of a perceived object's properties are presented in direct sensory encounter with that object. For both, the relevant sense is complex, in terms of the range of determinacies or the scope of properties it includes, and fulfillment varies based on how the much of the range or scope finds its match in the direct sensory encounter with the perceived object. It mistaken but tempting to think richness captures the sense in which Husserl thinks perceptual experience can be fulfilled and inadequate. Suppose I see an object as red and my experience indicates its redness is further determined as crimson, yet I can't presently make out the crimson. The experience is lacking with respect to richness. The sense corresponding to crimson is not fulfilled and thus renders the experience inadequate. But the sense for red is fulfilled and the lack of richness doesn't point to any mismatch between the partial sense specifying red and the sensory way the redness is directly encountered.

Whereas Husserl introduces these three variables together in the 1901 work *Logical Investigations* (Husserl 2001b), he considers only the first two in the 1907 lectures gathered in *Thing and Space* (Husserl 1997). Faustino Fabbianelli (2014) argues that Husserl comes to reject the sort of resemblance relation he posited to account for this liveliness in the *Logical Investigations* by the time he was preparing the *Thing and Space* lectures. But let's say, *arguendo*, that the notion of resemblance involved in liveliness is intelligible, since otherwise we have exhausted the resources Husserl provides for removing the countersense from the idea of experience that is fulfilled but inadequate. If sensory presentation resembles sense, but only to a degree, that is presumably because there is an imperfect similarity, as when an orange resembles an apple to a degree, both being fruit and spherical, yet differing in other respects.¹⁹ Now, either resemblance works like this, and the experience *is adequate* to the degree that the sensory presentation is similar, i.e., qualitatively identical, to the sense or what it represents, or resemblance doesn't involve such similarity and devolves into countersense (i.e., resemblance without similarity or likeness). In running through these possibilities I hope to have made clear why the idea of a fulfilled but inadequate perceptual experience is countersensical.

A second, more straightforward countersense lies in the aspect of the difficulty Husserl emphasizes, namely, that perceptual experience's defining aspiration is one that is in principle impossible to achieve. The function of a goal is to be a norm of success or failure. It sets the target for an act. Yet, perceptual experience can never, not even approximately, satisfy its goal of adequacy. If the goal can't be satisfied, there is no meaning in saying it guides the act (i.e., is a goal).²⁰ Consider the thought from a different angle. The Kantian idea mentioned earlier, which governs perceptual experience and guides it towards adequacy, prescribes an open, endless series of experiences with increasing perfection. There is nothing resembling an end to the series. So, it is not as if, with the advance of perceptual experience, I get "closer" to the ultimate goal. I am in a position analogous to Achilles in pursuit of the tortoise in Zeno's motion paradox. I never get started.

The final countersense has to do with the notion of appearance.²¹ Through appearances, we are supposed to experience what things are, in the good case, really like. If perceptual experience is radically inadequate, then appearances don't do this. This point is tied to the one about fulfillment being countersensical. When fulfillment becomes unintelligible, so does appearance. Even in the degree of determinacy to which we can experience things in perception, experience is inadequate. Inadequacy is not just about what is intended but not intuitively encountered (e.g., out-of-view sides). It is also about what is intuitively encountered in perceptual experience. So, appearances are supposed to present things as they are, yet cannot do this. It is hard to resist the conclusion that, like he alleges of Kant, appearances as Husserl understands them are subjective constructs.

¹⁹ Or, to give another example, the way the color orange and the color red are similar as colors and as warm colors but differ in respect of their particular hues. They have a degree of similarity.

²⁰ Kant's countersense arguably lacks this corollary countersense, since it's not obvious that for him perceptual experience has any goal other than informing us about how things are *for us*.

²¹ Barbaras reports a criticism very much like this of Husserl by Gérard Granel 1968. See Barbaras 2006, 39-40. Not being able to read French, I can't comment on Granel's criticism.

The difficulty is more dramatic for Husserl than for Kant. Whereas Kant supposes a being with a different form of intuition than ours (i.e., an intuitive intellect) could grasp things' true natures (Kant, 1998, 253 [B145], 349 [A252-253/B308]), Husserl holds that the inadequacy of our intuitive grasp of empirical things would be instanced in any form of intuitive experience, even that of a divine being (Husserl 2014, 315/302; Husserl 1997, §33).²² For Kant, there is some comfort in the possibility that a divine being could access what a mere human can't. It helps support the thinkability of things in themselves. There is no similar consolation for Husserl.

6 Objections

There are several ways to resist the conclusion I've drawn that Husserl's account of transcendence is multiply countersensical and puts him in Kant's company despite his protests to the contrary.

6.1 Transcendent Thing and Intuitive Givenness

Perhaps Husserl's constraint about intuitive givenness—that to meaningfully think (or otherwise be aware) of a worldly item, the item must be available for intuitive givenness—shouldn't be taken to involve adequate givenness. One instance of countersense I claim Husserl is guilty of is that things, which are in their very nature supposed to be experientially accessible, aren't so accessible if perceptual experience is radically inadequate, because the notions of fulfillment and appearance are rendered unintelligible as a consequence. But it might be said that, for Husserl, things are capable of being intuitively experienced. They just aren't capable of being adequately experienced.²³ To “be a thing of experience” really means being a thing of inadequate experience. If true, the countersense vanishes. This reply underestimates the difficulty and ultimately proves too much.

The *radicality* of Husserl's notion of perceptual inadequacy is generally underappreciated.²⁴ The tissue box is inadequately perceived in an obvious way because some of its sides are out of view yet still perceptually intended. Same for the yellow of the banana I see at dusk. Inadequacy means much more than that, though. Even the sides of the tissue box that are in view, or the ambiguous color of the banana in its rough degree of determinacy, are inadequately given. That is what it means for inadequacy to be radical or to affect perceptual experience through and through and that is what Husserl means when he says perceptual experience is inadequate “be it only with respect to the same ever so small objective moment” of the perceived (Husserl 1997, 135/112). Nothing is given adequately, not even in the crudest degree of determinacy.

The radical inadequacy of perceptual experience renders meaningless—hence, my charge of countersense—the very idea of things' intuitive presentation in sensory experience measuring up to their sense. It is supposed to be the case for Husserl both that perceptual sense is capable of intuitive fulfillment and that even what is intuitively fulfilled is necessarily inadequate, that it doesn't present

²² See Tengelyi 2005, 496-498 and Summa 2014, 182.

²³ I read Emiliano Díaz as offering what amounts to this reply, not in so many words, in Díaz 2023, 3.

²⁴ To illustrate: “something intuited adequately so that there is no question about what one has in view may yet leave questions about its further dimensions. Husserl's discussion of this places emphasis on the temporal dimensions of experience. A thing might be adequately given now even while how it has or will appear is not” (Díaz 2023, 14).

things as they are. Not even in part or to some degree. Because it would not be in part or to some degree without there being adequacy in part or to some degree, which Husserl doesn't allow. As I already expressed, once this is appreciated, it should be puzzling that Husserl nevertheless maintains we perceive things immediately and directly, that we perceive them "in the flesh" or "in propria persona" (Husserl 1997, §5; Husserl 2014, §39; Husserl 2001c, 4/40, 6-7/43). All of this holds precisely of *inadequate* experience, and so my conclusion stands.

This reply, as I said, also proves too much. If we are willing to grant that for Husserl, radically inadequate appearances sustain an intuitive relation to the perceived, then we ought to grant the same for Kant. Recall that Husserl admits Kant doesn't commit the error of saying the intentional object of experience is a mental entity (see §3.1 above). For Kant, the intentional object is the thing as it is in itself. It's just that appearances don't reveal it for what it is. Husserl doesn't recognize it, but his view, I am trying to argue, leads to the conclusion that appearances don't reveal things for what they are on his account either.

6.2 Adequate Givenness as a Regulative Ideal

I quoted a remark of Husserl's above (Husserl 1997, 135/112) in which he registers a concern I then developed into the charge that his account of transcendence is countersensical. He ends the pertinent passage on an aporetic note: "On this path lie great problems" (Husserl 1997, 139/115). Remarks in subsequent works appear to be crafted precisely to address the problem. The most noteworthy appear in §143 of *Ideas I* (Husserl 2014).²⁵

Husserl prefaces the passage by noting that it is intended "to remove the semblance of a contradiction in our earlier presentation," referring explicitly to his remarks in §138, titled "Adequate and inadequate evidence" (Husserl 2014, 297/284).²⁶ In the earlier passage, Husserl gives a condensed statement of how he takes perceptual experience to be inherently and radically inadequate (Husserl 2014, 286/274-275). He was evidently still sensitive to the problem he identified in his earlier lectures. But, where the prior discussion was inconclusive, Husserl is prepared in *Ideas I* with a solution.

The core of his proposal is to hold that, while reaffirming that no transcendent item can be given with "complete determinacy and with an intuitiveness that is just as complete," nevertheless "the perfect givenness is nonetheless prefigured as an 'idea' (in the Kantian sense)" and that this idea itself can be adequately experienced (Husserl 2014, 297-298/284-285).²⁷

The idea is of "a system of endless processes of continuous appearing or, better, as a field of these processes, an *a priori* determined continuum of appearances" (Husserl 2014, 297/285). What we grasp in the adequately given idea is "a lawful rule" that gives the infinite system its direction toward ever-increasing determinacy (Husserl 2014, 297/284). I can't perceive, say, the green of the cactus on my office windowsill in such a way that its intuitive presentation perfectly matches the sense guiding the experience, nor anticipate concretely the infinite system of appearances that Husserl has stand in place

²⁵ He repeats the analysis *in nuce* much later in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (Husserl 1969, §16, 62, n. 1).

²⁶ Husserl cites page 286/274, in particular, the opening paragraph of the section.

²⁷ On Husserl's conception of such an idea, see Bernet 2004, Tengelyi 2005, Luft 2007, Uemura 2011, and Carta 2022.

of that fulfillment. Even so, as I transition from less-than-ideal viewing circumstances (e.g., occlusion, distance, poor or atypical illumination, etc.) to better ones, Husserl thinks I become conscious of the rule that governs that infinite system.

The problem, again, is that perceptual experience, judged by its own internal norm of adequacy, is driven by an imperative that is impossible to carry out. With what I've just related, he attempts to resolve the problem not by showing how the imperative could be discharged, but rather by rationalizing it independently. It is rational to pursue the imperative regardless of whether it can be executed definitively as long as one grasps the rule that structures the infinite series of possible appearances at every point along the concretely unfathomable way. However far I might progress along that path, I would be following the same rule, which turns out to be the real ground of the experience rather than adequate fulfillment.

6.3 The Emptiness of Adequacy as a Regulative Ideal

Husserl's attempt to alleviate the difficulty his view faces fails and rests on a faulty premise. I'll start with the latter. Assume that being able to adequately experience a norm guiding the way to adequate perceptual experience would rationalize the pursuit of that unattainable ideal. That thought would be no help to Husserl if consciousness of such a norm were lacking in the first place. What I want to question first, then, is his thought that in the experience of some object or property with increasing determinacy—the experience increases in determinacy, to be clear, not the object or property—that consciousness of a consistent and informative rule emerges, a rule that any further increase of experienced determinacy would obey.

6.3.1 A Faulty Premise

An example should easily bring out the difficulty for Husserl's premise. I can make out further down the path I'm walking the presence of an object, but can't discern its kind or what color it is. Approaching, I still can't tell what it is, but I can just barely tell the color is cool. A little closer, I recognize it's a plant of some sort and a green one. Coming up to it now, I see that it's a cactus and, say, pea green. Now, my experience has passed through the following series of increases in determinacy with respect to a certain property: colored --> cool --> green --> pea green. This property isn't peculiar in this respect. Just think of an analogous progression, e.g.: shape --> circular --> oval.

Husserl may be right that there is a consciousness of identity running through the varying modes of presentation of the one underlying color property. But, contrary to what his solution suggests, the transitions appear to be irregular and not to obey a single rule, except for the trivial and uninteresting one that subsequent experience must be consistent with prior experience.²⁸ What happens in transitioning from colored to cool is not what happens in transitioning from cool to green or from green to pea green. Likewise for the example of shape. My experience doesn't do what Husserl suggests, it doesn't summon to mind a principle that would run through any further conceivable

²⁸ I say the norm of consistency is trivial and uninteresting because it says nothing positive about the future course of experience or the nature of the increasing determinacy that would be exhibited in continued experience.

increase in the determinacy of my experience of a given object or property. Indeed, going back to the cactus example, once I'm positioned about 7 inches from the plant, I'm not at all sure what experience of the color with greater determinacy would be like based on the previous transitions.

6.3.2 Two Root Difficulties

A remaining difficulty concerns the basic move Husserl makes with his proposal. I find two faults with it. The problem concerned the apparent countersense contained in the idea of a sense that refers the perceiver to an empirical item, and to a path toward fulfillment in experiencing that item, but such that adequate fulfillment is inconceivable. Husserl's solution was to say that it is rational to posit the item corresponding to the sense, despite the impossibility of being able to experience it adequately, because we can nevertheless adequately discern the rule that would govern any possible experience of the item with greater determinacy.

Now, to the first fault. With this move, Husserl makes a substitution. Adequate experience of a rule for further experience of an empirical item takes the place of adequate experience of the empirical item. What is not apparent is why the former is an apt replacement for the latter. The impossible demand contained in the experience hasn't gone away. The rule doesn't bring one any closer cognitively to the item in question. It may seem to, because the rule that my experience follows in actuality is the very same one it would follow in the furthest possible reaches of experience of the same object or property with greater determinacy. But that is equally an admission that the law by itself is rather uninformative. It doesn't tell me anything about the future course of experience except that it must be consistent with and enrich my experience as I've enjoyed it up to the present. At most, then, the course of experience becomes intelligible. But the thing that counts is not that but rather the correlate of experience. The substitution makes no advance, then, with respect to the difficulty Husserl means for it to address.

If I am wrong, and insight into the rule is cognitively enriching in some way, the basic point deserves stressing that what this idea refers to is not really adequacy in the first place. Adequate experience involves perfect fulfillment of (perceptual) sense. The rule is several steps removed from this. It points to an infinite system of experiences approaching without ever arriving at the ideal of adequacy. Husserl admits we can't experience this system. We are supposed to settle for the rule instead. Yet, if we could experience the infinite system, not even this would be an adequate experience of the perceived thing, because the infinite system is essentially open and incomplete. There is no point in it where perceptual sense is satisfied adequately by intuitive experience. At *every* point perceptual sense is infinitely distant from that goal.²⁹

It might be said that my complaints about Husserl's proposal miss the point. He is giving another, independent standard of rationality with it, yet I continue to measure it against the standard of

²⁹ It is no consolation to draw a comparison with the way a curve may asymptotically approach a point on an axis on a coordinate plane. There is an analogy between the two. There is also a decisive difference. With the coordinate plane, we know the direction the curve is "headed" and that it gets ever so close to the given axis without need for the curve to tell us. The entire coordinate plane is open to view. We have no analogous insight into what lies on the "coordinate plane" of reality independent of the perceptual experience charting its way across that plane.

adequacy. The first thing to note in reply is that adequacy remains the relevant standard of rationality, since we are supposed to have adequate insight into the “idea in the Kantian sense.” Imagine it weren’t, though. Husserl does recognize apodicticity as a norm for rationality that is in principle independent of the norm of adequacy (Husserl 1950, 55-56/15).

This thought brings us to the second fault I find with Husserl’s basic move. Put bluntly, the rebuttal highlights a tacit assumption underlying his proposal: that *a countersense can be rationalized*.³⁰ The assumption isn’t a further premise. It is an assumption about what would count as a satisfactory solution to the difficulty facing Husserl’s account. Notice, his proposal includes no attempt to eliminate the countersense. Nor does the reply that the proposal can help itself to a norm of rationality other than adequacy. A countersense can’t be rationalized. (If it could, Kant could salvage his conception of transcendence by similar means.) So, the difficulty facing Husserl’s conception of transcendence remains.

I conclude that Husserl’s proposal falls far short of resolving the “semblance of a contradiction” he recognizes in the thought that perceptual experience is inherently and radically inadequate (Husserl 2014, 297/284).

³⁰ I am not suggesting this thought occurred to Husserl, or that anyone else has explicitly recognized it. Regardless, the proposal designed to render unproblematic his conception of the inherent and radical inadequacy of perceptual experience only makes sense on this assumption.

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