

Phenomenological Actualism.

A Husserlian Metaphysics of Modality?

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Abstract

Considering the importance of possible-world semantics for modal logic and for current debates in the philosophy of modality, a phenomenologist may want to ask whether it makes sense to speak of “possible worlds” in phenomenology. The answer will depend on how “possible worlds” are to be interpreted. As that latter question is the subject of the debate about possibilism and actualism in contemporary modal metaphysics, my aim in this paper is to get a better grip on the former question by exploring a Husserlian stance towards this debate. I will argue that the phenomenologist’s way to deal with the problem of intentional reference to *mere possibilitia* is analogous to the actualist’s idea of how “possible worlds” are to be interpreted. Nevertheless, I will be pointing to a decisive difference in the metaphilosophical preconditions of what I call “phenomenological actualism” and analytical versions of actualism.

1. Introduction

In their seminal work *Husserl and Intentionality* (1982) Smith and McIntyre argue that Husserl’s theory of intentionality is best interpreted as a possible-world analysis of meaning. John Drummond (1990) raised serious objections to this interpretation, arguing that it does not make sense to speak of “possible worlds” in a phenomenological framework. In this paper I will not revisit this debate in detail. I take Drummond’s interpretation to be the right one. However, I will argue that what needs to be rejected, from a Husserlian viewpoint, is just a specific interpretation of “possible worlds” – possibilism. I intend to show that Husserl’s account of the horizontal structure of intentionality can not only be reconciled with an actualistic interpretation of “possible worlds” but that in a sense Husserl himself qualifies as a sort of actualist. If I am right about this, the Husserlian ability to accommodate possible-world semantics would stand and fall with the actualist’s ability to do so. I take it that carving out this Husserlian “phenomenological actualism” is progress for the phenomenological debate about modality and meaning. But it is questionable if it would also be progress for the debate in modal metaphysics, as it can be doubted whether “phenomenological actualism” can be seen as a contribution to the *metaphysics* of modality. That will depend on what concept of “metaphysics” one has.

2. *Possibilism and Actualism*

The standard way of stating truth-conditions of modal sentences appeals to possible worlds in the following way:

- (1) The statement ‘It is possible that *p*’ is true iff ‘*p*’ is true in some possible worlds.
- (2) The statement ‘It is necessary that *p*’ is true iff ‘*p*’ is true in all possible worlds.

There has been considerable debate over how possible worlds and possible objects are to be understood ontologically. Possible worlds are – at least on a popular account – possible states of affairs that involve objects that do not actually exist but that might have existed. So, the underlying question seems to be whether there really *are* mere *possibilia*, i.e. merely possible things that do not actually exist. So-called *possibilists* answer this question in the affirmative.

- (P) In addition to actually existing things there *are* merely possible things that do not actually exist.

Roughly speaking, we are dealing with a Meinongian position here. The denial of the possibilist’s thesis is called *actualism*:

- (A) Everything there *is* exists actually.

Whether or not the actualist can make use of the possible-world semantics will depend on the question whether possible worlds can be understood actualistically, i.e. without any appeal to non-actual objects whatsoever.

Distinguishing actualists from possibilists by their respective answers to the question whether there are *mere possibilia* does not do justice to all possibilistic positions on the market. David Lewis’s *modal realism* is typically tagged possibilistic but gives a *negative answer* to that very question – just as the actualist does. Lewis famously holds that possible worlds are concrete existents. This means that (merely) possible worlds as well as the merely possible objects in these worlds exist just like our actual world and objects. Now, if we consider *mere possibilia* as *non-existent* objects that could have existed, for Lewis there clearly are no such

things, as he claims that everything – the actual and the possible – exists in the very same way. But Lewis is considered a possibilist. In a sense even more so than the Meinongian, considering that his ontological commitment to possible worlds and possible objects seems to be even stronger. To make sense of Lewis’s being a possibilist we need to carve up the distinction between possibilism and actualism in a different manner. Lewisian possibilism is the thesis that

(P*) possible worlds are ontologically *on a par* with the actual world.

To make sense of this one has to take into account Lewis’s *indexical* understanding of the term “actual”. Whether something is actual, is relative to a specific world. Relative to our world, talking donkeys are not actual but they surely are relative to the concretely existing talking-donkey-world, i.e. to the “world-mates” of the talking donkeys. (Cf. Lewis 1986, 92f.)

If we understand possibilism along these lines, *actualism* is the denial of (P*). Actualists maintain the special ontological status of the actual world by not taking the term “actual” to be indexical.

(A*) Possible worlds are ontologically *not* on a par with the actual world.

In what follows I will argue that Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology qualifies as a sort of actualism, in the sense that it is in accord with (A*). But, as we shall see, Husserl’s accordance with (A*) will need further qualification.

3. *Phenomenological Actualism*

For the purpose of understanding the Husserlian stance towards the debate about possibilism and actualism we need to sketch the phenomenologist’s way of analyzing intentional relations to “merely possible” things that (apparently) don’t exist. What happens phenomenologically when we intend Pegasus? Does that involve the existence of *mere possibilia*? Do phenomenologists suppose Pegasus to exist in a possible world?

Before answering these questions, we may want to get clear about the phenomenological description of intentionalities involving objects we assume to exist. Let’s take my perception

of this table in front of me. Now, although I'm intentionally directed towards the table as a whole, I'm only actually presented with its front side. The back side and all the other aspects of the table which I am not currently presented with are nonetheless "co-given" as a horizon of possible presentations of the table. (Cf. Husserl 1983, 94.)

Looking at the table from this angle, the colour of the back is not intuitively given, but it is *horizontally anticipated*. What does that mean? It is predelineated by the co-given horizon that the back side will have some colour. But what specific colour that is is left open. In that sense we can speak of the co-given horizon as the "correlate of the components of undeterminateness essentially attached to experiences of physical things themselves" (Husserl 1983, 107). These components of undeterminateness leave open *possibilities of fulfilment*. This is ultimately why Smith and McIntyre speak of the horizon as a set of possible states of affairs and ultimately as a set of possible worlds. (Cf. Smith and McIntyre 1982, 303.)

This interpretation of Husserl's notion of "horizon" as a set of possible worlds has been criticised by John Drummond. (Cf. Drummond 1990.) On Drummond's interpretation of Husserl's notion of "horizon" and of his account of intentional relations to seemingly non-existent objects, it does not make sense to speak of a plurality of worlds in Husserl's framework. I take Drummond's view to be the right one (systematically and exegetically). I will argue, however, that his interpretation is reconcilable with an *actualistic interpretation* of "possible worlds".

Let's consider an example of an apparently object-less intention. Think of Pegasus or of any winged horse. I think we can agree upon the fact that neither Pegasus nor any other winged horse actually exists. Nevertheless, we can be intentionally directed toward Pegasus. Now, does that mean that we are referring to a merely possible thing? Or to a winged horse that exists (concretely) in a merely possible world? On Drummond's account we are *imaginatively* presented with Pegasus and thereby directed toward an imagined object.

Thus, although the imaginative presentation of Pegasus is object-less in the sense that there is no actual *physical* existent which is Pegasus, it is not object-less in the sense that Pegasus does exist in an imagined world, and this imagined world both takes at least some of its components from the real, physical world and has its sense as an imagined world only as a modification of and departure from the real world. The sense of the imagined world is possible, in other words, only in the contrast to the real world [...]. (Drummond 1990, 212)

So, that means that this “imagined world” we consider Pegasus to be a part of is in a sense *founded in the actual world*. In other words, every imagination has to take its departure from the actual world, inasmuch as it can only consist in the variation and recombination of actually given objects and their aspects. Drummond’s point is that the imaginative presentation of Pegasus, therefore, has *horizontal reference* to perceptual presentations of actual objects and thereby to actualities existent in the actual world (Cf. Drummond 1990, 211.) So in these cases of apparently object-less reference there *is* reference, not simply to mere *possibilia*, but “to actual objects or aspects thereof upon whose experience the present, apparently object-less reference to fictional [...] objects depends” (Drummond 1990, 212).

That these “imagined worlds” and the “imaginative presentations of (fictional) objects” are dependent upon the actual world means that they are anything but separated from the actual world. This leads Drummond to the conclusion that *Husserl’s notion of horizons* should not be understood in terms of “possible worlds” but rather as referring to “possible presentations of objects and to possible objects *in the actual world*” (Drummond 1990, 216; *my emphasis*).

This is especially plausible if we consider Husserl’s account of the (actual) world as the *universal horizon*. According to Husserl, the object of our intentional directedness is given within a horizontal field not only of other possible presentations of the given object but also of other objects that are unthematically apprehended. This field and every horizontal field must be taken “as a *sector* ‘of’ the world, of the universe of things for possible perceptions” (Husserl 1970, 162). This notion of the (actual) world as the universal horizon is the correlate of all *possible* intentional references. Let’s turn to our example to make this intelligible: Although the actual world does not contain winged horses qua physical things, it contains all the material on which imaginative variation that leads to the imaginative presentation of winged horses depends. Roughly stated, one can say that although there are no winged horses in the actual world, they are possible precisely because their sense is horizontally “included” in the actual world taken as universal horizon. If the actual world as this universal horizon is the universe of all possible intentional reference, there is neither room nor use for different distinct possible worlds that are *on a par* with this actual world.

I agree that we must not interpret Husserl’s notion of horizons and the horizontally predelineated possibilities as “possible worlds”, *if* these are understood in the Lewisian way as concretely existing entities, on a par with our world but causally and spatiotemporally

separated from it. But the very idea of actualism, as opposed to Lewis's modal realism, is to *not* take the term "possible world" at face value. In Stalnaker's actualistic framework, for instance, "possible worlds" are equated with properties the *actual world* might have. (Cf. Stalnaker 2012, 8.) My claim is that Husserl's account of the horizontal structure of intentionality and of apparently object-less intentional reference is – in an important sense – analogous to actualistic interpretations of possible-world semantics like Stalnaker's. The horizontally predelineated possibilities or Drummond's "imagined worlds" are only aspects or *sectors* of the actual world (taken as universal horizon). That means they are *not on a par* with the actual world, which is – as we remember – the main idea of (anti-Lewisian) actualism.¹

What I hope to have shown is that Husserl's account of the horizontal structure of intentionality draws on the same idea as the actualist's position in the debate about modal metaphysics. We now need to turn to one significant difference between what I'd like to call "*phenomenological actualism*" and other forms of actualism.

Contrary to the current debate about actualism in analytic philosophy, phenomenology *does not presuppose realism about the actual world*. (Cf. Uemura 2013, 142.) Husserl's transcendental method ties his phenomenology to pure description of the correlation of subject and world, i.e. the ways objects are given to us. This is the core idea of Husserl's "transcendental idealism". A *realistic* position that ascribes being to the actual world and the objects therein completely *independent* from this correlation cannot be accommodated in phenomenology. Now, what does that mean?

Phenomenological actualism also maintains (A*) that "possible worlds" (which are taken as horizontally predelineated possibilities in phenomenology) are not *ontologically* on a par with the actual world (taken as the universal horizon of all possible intentional reference). But Husserl's method of phenomenological description and his "transcendental idealism" make it clear that this special "ontological" status that is attributed to the actual world cannot refer to anything beyond the correlation of subject and world. It can – in other words – not point to anything beyond the mode of givenness of the actual world. If we want to understand the terms "ontological" or "metaphysical" as referring to a realm beyond that very correlation, phenomenological actualism cannot be said to determine a special "*ontological*" status of the actual world. We should in that case rather stick to the thesis (A*) that "possible worlds"

¹ Genki Uemura (2013) comes to a similar conclusion about Husserl and actualism, at least as far as the late Husserl is concerned.

(horizontally predelineated possibilities) are not *phenomenologically* on a par with the actual world (universal horizon) and thereby distinguish *phenomenological* actualism from *ontological* actualism. If “metaphysics” and “ontology” are understood that way, phenomenological actualism cannot be seen as a position in modal *metaphysics*, but rather in modal *epistemology*.

4. Conclusion

This peculiar difference between what I’ve called phenomenological and ontological actualism has to do with methodological and ultimately metaphilosophical differences between Husserlian and some branches of analytical philosophy. Phenomenologists do not wish to contribute to the inventory of items we need to put in our ontological shadowbox but to describe what happens if we are intentionally directed towards different things. As this description is taking place strictly within the correlation of subject and world, no reference whatsoever is made to any shadowbox beyond this very correlation. Whether we take that as a cost or a benefit will depend on the beliefs we have about what philosophy can and should do. Nevertheless there surely is a phenomenological inventory of the items, which are all included within the universal horizon, i.e. the actual world. We have seen that this phenomenological inventory suffices for a description of apparently object-less intentionalities.

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