# Husserl on the Overlap of Pure and Empirical Concepts

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*Abstract:* This essay clarifies Edmund Husserl’s view of “pure” concepts, with a view to its contemporary metaphilosophical significance. It is argued that Husserl’s conception of pure concepts is unique in that he allows an overlap between pure and empirical concepts. This overlap leads to a potential for confusion between pure and empirical concepts which I label “amphiboly,” following Kant’s use of the term. The essay begins by clarifying Husserl’s view of the divergence in concept formation between empirical and pure concepts, and then articulates the specific properties of pure concepts that allow an empirical overlap. These properties include the modality and range of the extension of the concepts, the ordering of objects under the extension, and the mental faculty required to identify an object under the concept. Once we see the source of amphiboly on Husserl’s view, it can be observed that many concepts of interest to philosophy, even outside phenomenology proper, are potentially subject to amphibolous uses. Thus, Husserl’s view can be a general hermeneutical resource for clarifying the nature of philosophical concepts.

One of the most underappreciated ambitions of Husserl’s phenomenology is his hope to develop the basis for a system of science based on clear and rigorously justified concepts. According to this aspect of his work, phenomenology is not a narrow doctrine about consciousness or the mind, but a method with general implications for any scientific discipline.[[1]](#footnote-2) Many sciences, to say nothing of ordinary life, employ concepts unreflectively, and in some cases these concepts may lack a clear or consistent sense. Husserl believed that his phenomenology involved a method of concept formation that could address this scientific deficiency. He was most interested in phenomenology’s role in constructing “pure” or “eidetic” concepts. Since these terms, as used by Husserl, seem foreign to contemporary philosophy, Husserl’s project may be seen to be idiosyncratic or otherwise otiose. However, Husserl’s attention to the role of concepts in methodological issues of interest to philosophers is extensive, and its relevance does not demand adherence to phenomenology in a narrow sense.[[2]](#footnote-3) Since Husserl’s view of philosophical concepts has been largely eclipsed in his reception, it is worth taking a second look.

The relevance of Husserl’s view of concept formation is especially apparent given the turn in recent metaphilosophical literature from the traditional notion of conceptual analysis to more constructive methods such as conceptual engineering.[[3]](#footnote-4) As I will shortly argue, Husserl claims that many concepts that result from constructive methods are ‘pure’ concepts. Since he gives this term a potentially wider application than other philosophers (such as Kant), this claim is not absurd on its face, as it may seem to be. Indeed, Husserl shows how pure concepts need not be as rare as they might be supposed to be, and that phenomenological concepts that correspond to mental terms are a particularly important class of pure concepts. However, the relation of Husserl’s project of phenomenology to his views on pure and empirical concepts formation is typically ignored or misunderstood.

I hope to show that the most significant feature of Husserl’s conception of concept formation is his view of the way that pure and empirical concepts may *overlap* in such a way that the distinction between might be easily overlooked. The possibility of a pure/empirical conceptual overlap is nearly ever-present according to Husserl, so that overlooking the proper basis of this distinction leads to systematic conceptual ambiguities. Accordingly, a problem I will call (borrowing a Kantian term) “transcendental amphiboly” threatens any enterprise that endeavors to construct pure concepts. In short, almost any pure concept that has application can be interpreted as if it were an empirical concept, and *vice versa*. Yet Husserl shows that the difference between pure and empirical concepts is manifest both in the method of formation proper to each, but also in their respective modal or counterfactual content. Since Husserl’s way of distinguishing pure and empirical concepts does not depend on commitments peculiar to the phenomenological tradition, the warning of transcendental amphiboly that can be found and mitigated in his work may be instructive to contemporary conceptual methods in philosophy. I suspect that the new interest in conceptual engineering may have much to learn from Husserl.

## Conceptual Types and Concept Formation

Philosophers and psychologists often speak of concepts using single words as if they referred to a definite content and could be characterized by certain properties. For example, Kant said that *gold* is an empirical concept (cf. 1998, A 721/B 749) and that *good* is not. Saul Kripke argued that *heat* is a “rigid designator” (1980, p. 152). Though these philosophers may not expect that everyone would attach the same meaning to these terms, they speak about certain definite “properties” of concepts or terms. Perhaps they would admit that different properties can be attached to these concepts, but that if so, they would be different concepts altogether. I will call such predicates (like “empirical,” “rigid,” “singular,” “general”) attached to concepts or words *second-order attributes* or (in some cases) *types*. Accordingly, this essay is about what could lead us to think a concept has a non-empirical second-order type. It seems that the correctness of second-order attribution must be weighed by considering what is *understood* by a term for a given speaker. I do not mean to advance a controversial view here that conceptual content can be individuated by “speaker meaning” or other internalist notions. I simply suggest that if different second-order attributes are attached to the same word by different speakers, that difference must, at least partly, consist in the way those speakers understand the term. When, for example, one philosopher (e.g., Kornblith, 2002) claims that *knowledge* is an empirical concept that can be studied in nature, and another (e.g., Sellars, 1956) that it is an exclusively normative concept that cannot be picked out in nature, it is clear they ascribe different attributes to the concept or concepts, and this must be because they understand the relevant content quite differently. This difference in understanding may be purely *extensional*—they use the terms to classify a different set of “objects”—or *intensional*—they ascribe different definitions or conditions to the terms. But we cannot make sense of different second-order attributes unless some such difference in (first-order) understanding is claimed.

The notion of “concept formation” is largely out of currency, but it will helpful to use this term to designate the way that a concept comes to be understood by someone. For Husserl, concept formation (*Begriffsbildung*) should not be identified with concept acquisition, which we might think of as an individual psychological process, even though the psychological acquisition may be relevant to concept formation. Concept formation can be understood as an idealized genetic account of how a concept could acquire the content it has for an individual, but such that the content of the concept is shared by other thinkers. The account of concept formation, for example, could detail whether there are logical or conceptual prerequisites for the understanding of a concept, or how the concept relates to perceptual cases. Thus, specifying a hypothetical account of how a concept is or can typically be formed seems like a reasonable method for clarifying type-distinctions between different conceptual attributes.

Our question for Husserl is how we should understand these differences in modes of formation, such that it can be correctly said that a concept C is an empirical concept, whereas a concept C\* is a pure concept, even where C and C\* are (or can be) expressed by the same word in the language (e.g., “knowledge”). Obviously, I will have to go some way to argue on behalf of Husserl that the class of pure concepts is not empty if the discussion is to have any purchase. But first: what are concepts, and how are they formed at all?

For our purposes, Husserl’s general understanding of concepts can be simplified to some basic elements.[[4]](#footnote-5) First, unlike now-dominant conceptions, Husserl does not believe that all ‘mental representations’ should be called concepts. Rather, concepts arise when our attitude toward experience is no longer (as it begins) purely passive and receptive, but when we take an explicitly *predicative* stance: we treat something determinately *as something* or we claim something *is something*. Husserl uses “concept” (*Begriff*) or “comprehending” (*Begreifen*), then, to distinguish an active mental attitude as opposed to a passive and receptive one which he sometimes calls “prelogical” or “prepredicative.” All of us are sometimes in a prepredicative state, for Husserl, and it is only by having a receptive or passive layer in our experience that there is “material” for us to conceptualize. For example, we might notice that the wrinkle we saw in our mother’s smile resembles that of our grandmother’s. Taking notice in this way is an activity that actively “synthesizes” two disparate experiences, now treated as similar.[[5]](#footnote-6) We did not have to do this; the similarity might have escaped our notice. But the treatment is an activity that may result in a concept*.* Since all conceptualizing is an activity, it is proper for Husserl to speak of “concept formation.”

Since the active side of concept formation often coincides with our ability to use language in describing our experience, there is for Husserl a close connection between concepts and words, though concepts can be possessed without words, and not all words correspond to concepts. For example, “syncategoremic” expressions (“and,” “not,” etc.) do not correspond to concepts, nor do singular terms such as proper names. As for Kant, concepts for Husserl are exclusively general representations or universals,[[6]](#footnote-7) and these especially as they figure in predicative expressions. Nevertheless, Husserl thinks it proper to treat concepts as themselves having a singular, ideal being, which we represent by nominalizing them; they are then “objectivities of the understanding” (EU309–317; EJ 258-264).Even if the normal use of the word “green,” for example, is as a predicate, we represent its definite character as a concept through the nominalization “greenness” (cf. EU240-41; EJ 204). We can accordingly speak of *the* concept *green,* e.g., as something the same in every predication of greenness. The concept is then a “one over many” (*hen epi pollôn*), which can be considered contentful whether it applies to actual objects or not.[[7]](#footnote-8) It will be important later on to consider how Husserl sees the relation of this “one” and “many” to vary. The ideality of concepts also means that concepts can be shared among individuals and are not localized to individual minds in any strong sense.

Finally, since all concepts are general, Husserl sees them as having open-ended and indeed potentially infinite extensions. He frequently expresses this point by saying that when enumerating the objects that fall under a concept, we can always say “and so on” (*und so weiter*) (cf. EU 257–59; EJ 217–219). Again, how this enumeration can and does continue will differ depending on the type of concept.

## 2. Empirical and Pure Concept Formation

We can now understand the type-distinction of empirical and pure concepts by appealing to their different manners of formation. Clarity on Husserl’s view of empirical concept formation is important here only as a point of contrast to pure concepts, so my sketchy remarks on this topic should not be taken as a full theory of empirical concepts. Though Husserl does not think that all empirical concepts have a direct perceptual basis, since empirical concepts must have some relation to perceptual experience, we can restrict our attention to basic empirical concepts with a direct tie to perception. The formation of basic empirical concepts, for him, is based on a comparative procedure, founded on the reception (“passive pregivenenss”) of a variety of actual, experienced instances of individuals. We experience similarities among individuals, and these similarities are experienced as “types” (*Typen*). Though Husserl distinguishes between types and concepts, any type provides material for a concept: the type is the passive or receptive apprehension of a similarity and an empirical concept makes a type thematic. He calls this similarity of a feature of individuals the “synthesis of coincidence”(EU388–389; EJ 324)*.* The synthesis of coincidence is the co-occurrence of a predicate *P* with respect to at least two substrates, *S* and *S′.* The concept is the result of identifying the similarity in the occurrence of *P*[[8]](#footnote-9)among several substrates. In this transition, the predicate obtains an ideality as described above:

*P* no longer designates an individual predicative core but a general one […] Instead of being determined by the fleeting and variable moment, this is determined, therefore, by an *element ideally and absolutely identical*, which, in the mode of repetition or assimilation, goes through all the individual objects and their multiform moments as an ideal unity. (EU390; EJ 324–325)

Such is the instance in which *P* is first treated as an empirical concept. An important distinction here should be made, however. Husserl does think that the property or kind represented by an empirical concept can be regarded as “absolutely identical,” and a “one over many” (EU391; EJ 326). However, this does not imply that character of that quality *in* each instance is perfectly identical. Rather, though the comparison of empirical instances gives rise to an ideal concept, the relation of the instances to one another is not of *sameness* of kind, but *similarity* or likeness—a matter of degree.[[9]](#footnote-10) Empirical generalities are comparative rather than absolute. This implies for Husserl that each instance of an empirical generality need not be a perfect exemplification of the type. This discrepancy between ideal and instance leads Husserl to adopt the Platonic term “participation” to signify the relation of the ideal generality to its instances (cf. EU391–394; EJ 326–337). ­­

Though it is perhaps obvious, it should also be emphasized that the source of empirical concepts is a likeness in actuality, in contrast to possibility or imagination. A properly empirical concept is not a hypothetical posit. The starting point of an empirical concept is “a contingently given particular object” (EU409/339), something definitely experienced, along with those objects which found the comparative basis of the type. This means that empirical concepts are always delimited in reference to a “possibly actual” extension: “[W]e think of these concepts as *actual* generalities, that is, as bound to this world” (EU398; EJ 330). Though Husserl allows that there is an “open horizon” to empirical concepts (EU402; EJ 333), in that they can extend beyond the individuals apprehended in their formation, their content is still rooted in some common, actual element of experienced individuals.[[10]](#footnote-11)

How now are pure concepts formed, for Husserl?[[11]](#footnote-12) Of interest to us are pure concepts that are not simply formal, such as logical or mathematical concepts, but pure concepts applicable to individuals. (Later I will distinguish these as *material pure concepts*, but since formal concepts are not our concern here, I will usually leave this unmarked.) Husserl’s theory of pure concepts comes from his notion of pure essences or *eidê* (taking the term from Plato) and the correlated method of “eidetic variation.” Though eidetic variation is not always treated as a mode of concept formation,[[12]](#footnote-13) in *Experience and Judgment*, Husserl introduces this method explicitly as the mode of “the acquisition of pure concepts or pure concepts of essences” (EU410; EJ 340).[[13]](#footnote-14) Thus we can speak of pure concepts as a terminus of the method of eidetic variation, which Husserl calls also “seeing essences” (*Wesenserchauung*) (EU421; EJ 348). Eidetic variation exists in service of the scientific aim of constructing clear concepts that motivates Husserl’s phenomenological project.

If we recall that Husserl called call concepts *hen epi pollôn*, the simplest way to understand eidetic variation is a reversal of the ‘arithmetic’ priority vis-à-vis empirical concepts: ‘the one’ here precedes the many, rather than being formed out of the many.[[14]](#footnote-15) Any eidetic variation must begin with a model, an individual of some kind. This model can be anything, real or imagined. Husserl himself uses the example of a sound (cf. EU 412; EJ 341). If we want to attain a pure concept *sound*, we must treat some individual (real or imagined) sound as a model for a series of imagined variations. The criteria for our production of variants is that they maintain something that is *the same* from the model. The wider the variations, the closer we come to attaining the essential features of *sound* as such, pruning out the “accidental” elements in the variations. But we could also have a more specific interest. Perhaps the model sound is now the C# of a violin. But the *same* note can be imagined as emanating from a piano or oboe; this imaginative process “purifies” our conception of the original model. The notion of a *C#*, in contrast to *that-violin’s-C#*, begins to emerge. As Husserl writes, “in juxtaposing the old and the new, we see that it is the *same*, that the variants and the variations on both sides join together in a single variation, and that the variants here and there are, in like fashion, *arbitrary particularizations of the one eidos*” (EU412; EJ 341). Unlike empirical *similarity*, which is required for empirical generality, Husserl emphasizes that, because of the imaginative source of all eidetic variation, the generality captured in the variation can be *equally* or *identically* present in its instances. There is an *eidos* at all only on the basis of such ideal identity, and not mere similarity (EU 414; EJ 343). Once we grasp *just this* identity in variation, for Husserl, we have “seen” the *eidos*; it is thus a kind of non-sensible intuition.[[15]](#footnote-16) The identity grasped within such variation, whatever it is, is then the content of a *pure concept*.

A few features of eidetic method should stand out. First, and most obviously, *imagination* is the *sine qua non* of the pure *eidos*, and therewith the pure concept. The purity of such a concept is its freedom from any conditioning actualities. The chosen model may, yet need not, originate in empirical perception. Husserl writes,

For a pure *eidos*, the factual actuality of the particular cases by means of which we progress in the variation is completely irrelevant. And this must be taken literally. The actualities must be treated as possibilities among other possibilities, in fact as arbitrary possibilities of the imagination. (EU423; EJ 350)

In eidetic method, actuality is converted to possibility; the real extension of a concept, even if founded in perception, is converted to an imaginary one. This is connected to a second point, that of the “arbitrariness” just mentioned. Again, strikingly in contrast to empirical generalities, which, even when they have an open horizon are bound by at least two objects taken passively to be similar, the multiple instances of a pure *eidos* are the result of a free and necessarily arbitrary variation, rather than discovery and comparison. Husserl comments, “This remarkable and truly important consciousness of ‘and so on, at my pleasure’ belongs essentially to every multiplicity of variations” (EU413; EJ 342). Thus, eidetic variation produces a sample extension of the concept, which is limitless in principle.

How, then, does Husserl arrive at what he calls “eidetic laws” (cf. EU425–438; EJ 351–354)? Besides the free spontaneity involved in the production of a singular *eidos*, the *eidos* itself must maintain itself as identical in its variations. Thus, upon varying the *eidos* *sound* even in perfect freedom from its actual cases, we discover that it is impossible that the identical *eidos* appears without also having “intensity” (EU456–457; EJ 375): it can’t be imagined away from any case that counts as maintaining the relevant features of model case. An *eidos* like *sound* is thus not a mere simple unity but contains *essential determinations* that must be as it were lawfully present in any case of the *eidos*. Husserl then seamlessly concludes that eidetic laws allow for pure, generic *conceptual* truths (“judgment-complexes which are […] apodictically universal”), since realized purely *a priori* in thought (EU 458; EJ 376). Thus, for Husserl, a judgment such as “all consciousness is intentional” could have an *a priori* origin through an eidetic law prescribing about the *eidos* *consciousness*, rather than as a hypothesis from or generalization about general experience (cf. EU451–454; EJ 372–75).[[16]](#footnote-17) The pure concept, based on the unity of a single *eidos*, contains eidetic laws as its own essential determinations.[[17]](#footnote-18)

## 3. The Overlap and Amphiboly of Pure and Empirical Concepts

We distinguish empirical and pure concepts by their different modes of formation, for Husserl; they are formed differently at least because they are understood on different bases and with respect to different conditions of application. In the following table, we can see the basic differences between empirical and pure concepts with respect to their characteristic modality, extension, ordering (i.e., how one instance is related to another with respect to the concept), and relevant cognitive faculty:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Empirical Concepts** | **Pure Concepts** |
| ***Modality*** | Actuality | Possibility |
| ***Extension*** | Indefinite | Infinite |
| ***Ordering*** | Similarity | Sameness |
| ***Cognitive Faculty*** | Receptive Perception | Active Imagination |

On the one hand, this table makes it clear that empirical and pure concepts must be distinguished. They are different second-order types because of their different attributes. However, less obviously but no less certainly, this table shows how empirical and pure concepts are related: *in short, most second-order attributes of empirical concepts are subordinate to the second-order attributes of pure concepts*. This comes out most clearly in thinking about the individuals falling under a concept. Namely, for some concept C:

1. Actual Membership under C ⊆ Possible Membership under C[[18]](#footnote-19)
2. Indefinite Membership under C ⊆ Infinite Membership under C
3. Ordering of Similarity under C ⊆ Ordering of Sameness (Complete Likeness) under C[[19]](#footnote-20)
4. Perceptual Inclusion under C ⊆ Imagined Inclusion under C

These are relatively classic conceptual inclusions: the actual is included within the possible; the same is a species of the similar; any object of perception could also be the object of imagination. Only (3) deviates from the pattern of inclusion of the empirical within the pure, but this is to be expected. If (3) did not hold, thenall empirical concepts would be (or imply) pure concepts. Since pure concepts are at least distinguished in the complete likeness of their instances across the variation, this cannot be. Yet if only a single object is considered with respect to C (as 1, 2, and 4 allow), there is nothing to prevent C from being pure.

Given these relationships, pure concepts are not distinguished *exclusively* from empirical concepts.[[20]](#footnote-21) Every empirical concept *could be*[[21]](#footnote-22)—i.e., could potentially be understood as—a pure concept. Husserl says much the same:

Naturally, concepts as *pure* concepts can, from the first, originate *outside of all relation to current actuality,* namely, by the comparison of pure possibilities of the imagination. It is clear thereby that every actual likeness, acquired in this way, of possibilities given as existing (as existing, not in the sense of a reality of experience, but precisely *as* a possibility) intentionally includes in itself a possible likeness of possible actualities and a possible universal in which they can possibly participate. *On the other hand, even if they were formed originally on the basis of experience as actual generalities, concepts can always be apprehended as pure concepts*. (EU 397; EJ 330, emphasis added to last sentence)

As I insisted from the outset, what second-order attributes a concept has depends on how that concept is understood. The above table shows that the second-order attributes of pure concepts largely include the second-order attributes of empirical concepts. This has the result that one cannot make a simple division of pure and empirical concepts based on a mere presumption about their content. For example, we might assume that *tree* and *red* are empirical concepts if any are, but Husserl explicitly says in both these cases that they can also be understood as pure concepts.[[22]](#footnote-23) These are relatively trivial examples. Now consider the philosophical use of such concepts as *consciousness*, *belief*, *person*, *representation*, *knowledge*, and *action*. Are these empirical or pure? The answer depends on whether one considers these concepts as having their content—whether one understands them—through a comparative classification that starts from the phenomenal similarity of certain cases, and extends as far as those real and relative similarities extend; or whether one sees an empirical case of these concepts as serving only as an *example* which could be extending in a completely *regular* (law-like) way to all possible imaginary cases. This decision cannot be made presumptively; various thinkers may (and do) understand the same word in terms of both conceptual types.

Thus, if there are pure concepts as Husserl describes them, many concepts—or at least words used as concepts—are subject to a special kind of ambiguity. To profit from Kant’s precedent, we can call this ambiguity a “transcendental amphiboly.”[[23]](#footnote-24) Kant’s conception is not unrelated to ours, so it is worth a brief comparison. For Kant, transcendental amphiboly is an ambiguity about the source of a given cognition: whether, say, it derives from empirical deduction, or a purely conceptual inquiry; namely, “a confusion of the pure object of the understanding with the appearance” (Kant, 1998, A 269/B 325). For Kant, following his discovery of the distinction of pure categories of the understanding from deliverances of sensibility, there is only a narrow class of concepts that could be susceptible to this kind of ambiguity. The concepts that remain amphibolous are neither pure categories nor empirical concepts, but concepts used to compare cognitions. He means concepts like *sameness*, *difference, form*, and *matter*. For Kant, it is crucial whether we believe that the application of these concepts belongs to phenomenal objects or to the concepts belonging to those objects. For example, when we say that ‘one drop of water is the same as any other’, the concept of *sameness* (*Einerleiheit*) is potentially amphibolous: for one is either making an empirical comparison of one drop of water with all other objects of the class, or identifying the common marks of all drops of water—all drops of water are the same in concept. Kant claims Leibniz’s mistake was to make this difference unintelligible: Leibniz treated all knowledge as conceptual knowledge, so that it was impossible to divorce knowledge of objects from knowledge of their concepts. For Kant, spatial position, for one, adds something to the concept of a drop of water that is capable of distinguishing one *appearance* of a drop of water from another: for this reason, *sameness* is inappropriately applied to appearances (A 264/B 320). But unless the distinction is made between sameness as it pertains to objects (empirical sameness) and sameness as it pertains to concepts (pure or reflective sameness), the concept is amphibolous.

Kant envisioned amphiboly as a problem with narrow scope. He did not think that his pure concepts could be confused with empirical concepts, nor that empirical concepts could be taken for pure ones, so that amphiboly touched only the small set of “concepts of reflection.” This is no doubt because for Kant sensible concepts were, by definition, not pure (cf. A 88/B 120). One result of Husserl’s method of transcendental reduction is that any deliverance of sensibility can be treated solely as an episode of pure consciousness, and thus without reference to its given natural cause. With reference to eidetic variation, objects of consciousness are treated *as if* they were merely imagined “examples.” This allows Husserl to proliferate pure concepts so that they can refer to sensory objects and thus allows the problem of amphiboly to be nearly ubiquitous. To solve it, it is not enough to know whether a concept applies to an empirical individual, since this could be true of both pure and empirical concepts. What matters is the conditions under which the concept would be extended beyond a given individual.

Moving outside Husserl’s own preferred examples, consider the concept *person*. Is it empirical or pure? Since Locke, many have emphasized the moral or legal provenance of the term.[[24]](#footnote-25) For them, what makes something a person is not a perceptual relation of likeness of similarity from one individual to another. Rather, we might think of the concept as requiring the *same capacities* for any individual that falls under it. This tradition of interpreting the concept can reasonably ask whether an intelligent dolphin could be a person, whether an A.I. would be a person, etc. For members of this tradition, it makes sense to use counterfactual thought-experiments—the imagination—to test what the necessary features of the concept are. Others who consider the concept *person* are impressed rather with the qualities that make “people like us” who and what we are. Though they may concede that personhood connotes something other than *human being*, they think that a theory of personhood need not apply outside the boundaries of ordinary experience, in which bodies, minds, brains, and social environments each play a role in making “us” who we are.[[25]](#footnote-26)

On Husserl’s account (granting for simplicity this basic picture of the theoretical divide about personhood), there is both a pure and empirical concept of personhood. Or, “person” is amphibolous. The Lockean tradition on personhood is much in keeping with Husserl’s method of eidetic variation: if the concept of person strips everything but that of a being that is conscious of itself, it follows that a self-conscious “little finger” is a person indeed.[[26]](#footnote-27) This is not a concept that was formed merely by an inductive generalization of all the “people” one has met so far. It prescribes a rule for all possible cases, such that a borderline case in the realm of imagined *possibilia* can clarify the identity of the concept, its “essential determinations.” The use of thought experiments involves eidetic variation, rather than inductive generalization. For Lockeans, the concept *person* is a pure concept.

It is also clearly possible to form an empirical concept of *person*. On this account, the role of the concept of a person is to be descriptively adequate to group of individuals that may be loosely defined, or perhaps defined by paradigm cases, whose properties do not extend regularly to all possible cases. Those who take the concept in this way are likely to regard fantastic thought experiments involving (for example) the conceptual separation of mind and body with suspicion. Accordingly, Tamar Gendler writes on the issue of persons,

[O]ur very judgments are filtered through the background patterns of fortuitous coincidence which play central roles in the organization of our conceptual scheme. Imaginary cases allow us to separate out apparently contingent concomitants. But some of our conceptual commitments may presuppose the coincidence of such concomitants, even though we can make sense of their coming apart. (Gendler, 2000, p. 158; cf. also Gender, 2010, p. 58)

The role that contingent facts about actual cases here reveals that the concept *person* is being regarded as an empirical concept, in Husserl’s terms.

Which account of the concept is correct? It depends, of course, on what is wanted from the concept: is it meant to track a type discerned among a number of given individuals, or is it meant to prescribe a clear determining feature that may or may not apply to individuals commonly marked out as persons? The virtue of Husserl’s account is in its ability to clarify the source of the ambiguity between apparently rival accounts of concepts. He says, in effect, that if one understands a concept empirically, we should not expect it to apply with complete generality and unaltered sameness across its extension. Contrariwise, if a concept is understood “purely,” we should expect that it will more adequately determined in counterfactual cases of the imagination than in real perceptual cases. Empirical cases can be taken only as examples.

To the extent that philosophers are not clear about these conceptual expectations, they invite confusion about what can be understood through their concepts. Husserl helps explain how such confusion is almost universally possible, and this applies beyond the ken of “phenomenology” according to the letter. While there are some concepts whose use is obviously non-empirical, such as many logical or mathematical ones, whose “objects” are rarely confused with empirical things since they are “formal,” amphiboly is likely, as I mentioned at the outset, whenever pure concepts can have real application to things. That is, even if *person* is a pure concept, most or all empirical people are persons; even if *knowledge* is a pure concept, empirical cognitions may be cases of knowledge. Pure concepts may have concrete application, even if empirical applications only imperfectly “participate” in the concept. In contrast to logical or mathematical concepts which can be called *formal pure concepts,* concepts like *person* and *knowledge* (if pure) can be called *material pure concepts*.[[27]](#footnote-28) They may have content in the actual world, but they need not be determined empirically. Since many philosophical concepts, whether in or outside an expletively phenomenological method, can be understood as material pure concepts, the presence of amphiboly is possible wherever they are used.

Though it applies quite generally, ironically, this problem applies almost especially to Husserl’s own phenomenology. In terms of the formation of pure concepts, Husserl’s phenomenology may be the victim of its own success. That is, it counts as an achievement of Husserlian phenomenology that phenomenological accounts can yield pure concepts that are likewise applicable to empirical reality. Yet the more that phenomenology succeeds in this endeavor, the more easily can the project be confused with a purely descriptive, empirical project, since it may be supposed that these accounts intend only to provide an account of an individual’s first-person experience of something (this is what a “phenomenology of *x*” commonly means today). Thus, even though Husserl provides the hermeneutical tools to avoid transcendental amphiboly, his own writings and tradition may be especially subject to this error if the distinction (and overlap) between pure and empirical concepts is not appreciated.[[28]](#footnote-29) It would take us too far afield to address the many attempts to naturalize (or indeed “sociologize”) phenomenology, but it is worth mentioning that these may be subject to an “amphibolous” adoption of Husserl’s project: they may suppose that descriptions with empirical overlap are meant to serve as empirical descriptions. Whatever valuable purposes such naturalizing attempts may serve, insofar as they ignore the task of the formation of pure concepts, they ignore the philosophical (or “scientific”) upshot that Husserl expected from his work. Recall that Husserl hoped that phenomenology would contribute to an original understandings of such concepts as “*world, Nature, space, time, psychophysical being, man, psyche, animate organism, social community, culture*, and so forth” (Husserl, 1970, p. 154).[[29]](#footnote-30) Husserl was convinced of the scientific value of the construction of pure concepts, and the phenomenological method is for him largely subordinate to this purpose.

## 4. The Interest of Pure Concepts in Philosophy

The dominant conception of concepts in contemporary philosophy emphasizes the importance of a concept’s referential relations, its ability to “track” worldly items. This may be a good way to think about “mental representations” in cognitive psychology and natural language semantics. It is doubtful, however, whether it is the best way to think about the concepts that are of interest in philosophy.[[30]](#footnote-31) Alternative recent accounts stress that philosophical concepts are shot through with “normativity,” so that a merely natural, non-normative referential relation to their correlative objects will not suffice to clarify the meaning of these concepts. On this kind of account, philosophers may have work to do in describing and prescribing the norms implicit in our concepts.

Husserl’s account of pure concepts can, I believe, nicely supplement this ‘normativist’ conception of philosophical concepts. Like the normativists, Husserl wants to develop a science that “judges about <its> apriori possibilities and thus at the same time *prescribes rules* a priori for actualities” (Husserl, 1970, p. 28; emphasis added). The domain of concepts of interest to Husserl are primarily those that filled with human purposes. These are the kind of concepts that can profit from an *a priori “*rule.” Even concepts such as *belief*, *perception*, *will*, and *imagination*, concepts that greatly occupied Husserl, are concerned with things that we *do*, and do well or poorly.[[31]](#footnote-32) An eidetic variation involving these concepts is an attempt to yield a clear and determinate *standard* for these activities, rather than an empirical description. Since this standard prescribes a norm, it cannot be simply derived from these activities as we happen to perform them. Imagination and fiction do just as well to determine what each activity is as successfully carried out.[[32]](#footnote-33) Even these “descriptive” endeavors can have a “normative” conceptual upshot.

But the essentialistic dimension of Husserl’s conception of pure concepts is just as important as the normative one. Even if Husserl’s theory of pure concepts is most applicable in the domain of human purposes, it is not always easy to disentangle each purpose from one another. Is something an *action* or a mere *happening*? Do I *believe* *p*, *accept p*, or merely *suppose* *p*? What would be entailed by calling something one or the other? Even if there is a dimension of construction or stipulation in our concepts of human purposes, the consistency and clarity of these concepts is not given by stipulation but requires considering a wide variety of cases that test putative essential features of our concepts. This, of course, is often what thought experiments have been meant to achieve in analytic philosophy: “Frankfurt cases” have questioned whether *alternative possibilities* is a necessary feature of *responsible action*; “Gettier case” challenge whether the “justified true belief” analysis of knowledge is sufficient; Derek Parfit’s fission cases question whether *identity* can be ascribed to our concept of *person*. Husserl’s method of eidetic variation is a way of vindicating the use of imagination and counterfactual cases to test the determinations of a concept in much the same way. For Husserl, these cases are not merely ways to extend concepts that we first derive from empirical reality to a realm of imaginative possibility in which they may or may not find application; rather imagination or eidetic variation plays a role in *constituting* pure concepts, giving them the essential determinations they must possess to be clear and determinate at all. Once pure concepts are clearly understood in an ideal “eidetic” context, they can be put to a clearer use in ordinary or scientific endeavors.[[33]](#footnote-34)

Regardless of the independent interest of Husserl’s theory of pure concepts, I believe the notion of the amphiboly of pure and empirical concepts, developed using Husserl’s views, is a useful theoretical resource both in and outside of phenomenology proper. Philosophers often leave unclarified the second-order attributes of concepts they employ, especially since a clear conception of the nature of non-empirical concepts has often been lacking. In some cases, disputes on a topic may be prolongated by a failure to disambiguate the source of our concepts, or to suppose complacently that different philosophers merely attend to different dimensions of the same concept.[[34]](#footnote-35) The notion of amphiboly helps explain why philosophers may be tempted to confuse pure material concepts with empirical ones, and what they may do to avoid such confusion.

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1. He writes his investigations meant to be “the beginning of a radical clarification of the sense and origin (or the sense in consequence of the origin) of the concepts: world, Nature, space, time, psychophysical being, man, psyche, animate organism, social community, culture, and so forth. It is plain that the actual carrying out of the indicated investigations would have to lead to all the concepts which, as unexplored, function as fundamental concepts in all positive sciences, but which accrue in phenomenology with an all-round clarity and distinctness that leave no further room for any questionableness” (Husserl, 1970, p. 154). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. In a series of historical papers, Amie Thomasson (2002; 2007) contends not only that Husserl’s phenomenology may have directly influenced twentieth-century conceptual analysis (especially through Ryle), but also that Husserl “offers a more explicit and thorough development and defense of the idea of a priori meaning analysis as the proper method of philosophy than any other philosopher” (Thomasson, 2007, p. 271). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See, e.g., Cappelen (2018) and Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The main source for this overview of Husserl’s theory is his post-humous *Erfahrung und Urteil.* (I will cite this as EU, first listing the page number of the 1939 German edition, following by the 1973 English translation (=EJ) As Lohmar (2011, p. 271) points out, this material is derived from Husserl’s lectures on transcendental logic of 1920/21, so it is representative at least of his Freiburg period. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. John McDowell’s (1994, pp. 57–68) brief discussion of “demonstrative concepts” seems a good approximation of Husserl’s understanding of the perceptual basis of many concepts (i.e., *a wrinkle like that*). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Husserl closely associates concepts with generalities in the following: “Consequently, *the possibility of the formation of general objectivities,* of ‘concepts,’ extends *as far as there are associative syntheses of likeness*” (EU396; EJ 329). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. “The concept in its ideality must be understood as something objective which has a *purely ideal being*, a being which does not presuppose the actual existence of corresponding particulars; it is what it is even if the corresponding particulars are only pure possibilities, though, on the other hand, in the realm of experienced actuality, it can also be the realized concept of actual particulars” (EU395; EJ 328–329). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. I have capitalized the schematic “*P*” from the English translation throughout. The lowercase version used is bound to be confused for the sentential use of *p*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Husserl speaks of a “magnitude” (*Größe*)of similarity (EU386; EJ 322). See also: “Similarity [*Ähnlichkeit*], therefore, has a gradation, and its limit, complete sameness [*Gleichheit*], signifies an absence of divergence in coincidence” (EU 405; EJ: 335–36, slightly modified). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. It is also true that, for scientific concepts, the finite collection of attributes belonging to the original content can expand through new discoveries. See EU 402; EJ 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. In addition to its source in *Experience and Judgment*, the same material on pure concepts and eidetic variation can be found in Husserl’s 1925 lectures on phenomenological psychology (see his 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. But see Sowa (2007, p. 88), where *eidê* are rightly considered the “correlates” of pure concepts. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Likewise, in *Cartesian Meditations*, he claimed that “pure concepts […] must be made to fit the *eidos*” (Husserl 1970: 71). He also speaks of the *eidos* as “the purely conceptual essence” (EU 324; EJ 350). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. See Hopkins (2010) for the Platonic roots of this “arithmetic” approach to *eidê*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Husserl admits the potentially misleading metaphorical connotations of “seeing” at EU421; EJ 348. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See Husserl’s discussion of Brentano’s thesis at Husserl 1977: 22–25. Husserl suggests that was for Brentano was a naturalistic discovery was treated by him, Husserl, on an essentially new *a priori* basis. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. On this theme, cf. especially Sowa (2007) and (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. E.g., “Every color occurring in actuality is certainly, at the same time, a possible color in the pure sense: each can be considered as an example and can be changed into a variant” (EU 426; EJ 352). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Complete likeness is the “limit of similarity” (EU 404; EJ 335) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Rochus Sowa, who has written extensively on the topic of Husserl’s eidetic method, seems to take pure concepts to be more clearly distinguished from empirical concepts, in that he takes it that pure concepts cannot ‘implicitly or explicitly’ posit factually existing individuals (see his 2011, p. 257). On this criterion, concepts that contain potentially indexical elements (such as natural kind terms) cannot be pure concepts. Elsewhere (Sowa, 2007, p. 93) he calls this the “Little-Red-Riding-Hood” criterion of pure concepts, since their content can *only* be imagined. However, Husserl says that concepts like *lion* and *tree*, which might be considered natural kinds, can be pure concepts. No doubt this is because the indexical element can always be suspended (see note 22 below), so that the non-factual element of pure concepts does not exclude concepts with apparent reference to actual individuals. Sowa’s view, on my reading, does not explain how Husserl can say that concepts can “always be apprehended as pure concepts” (EU397; EJ 330). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Though the “could” here is meant in the “potentiality” sense of the term (the concept could become pure), the “epistemic” sense is also relevant: an empirical concept often could “for all we know” be a pure concept, at least as used by another person. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. For *tree*, see EU417; EJ 345. And *red*: EU 425; EJ 349–50. Likewise, in a discussion from the *Nachlass*, Husserl writes, “In this sense, therefore, lion would be [*wäre*] an empirical concept with the thesis, a pure concept without the thesis” (2012, p. 91, my translation). In the context, Husserl means by “thesis” the positing of actual existence. Husserl says all empirical concepts, *qua* empirical, are “burdened with theses [*mit Thesen behaftet*]” (2012, p. 91), but this thesis can always be “dropped” (*fallen lassen*) (2012, p. 90). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. The below discussion of Kant’s “Amphiboly” chapter has benefitted especially from de Boer (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. For Locke’s conception of *person* as a ‘forensic’ term, see the *Essay*, Bk. II. Ch. XXVII, § 26 (1997, p. 312). Thomasson takes this as a paradigm case of a normative use of a term. See her 2017a, pp. 112–113. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Along these lines, see Gendler (2002) and Schechtman (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. ‘Upon separation of this little finger, should this consciousness go along with the finger, and leave the rest of the body, ‘tis evident the little finger would be the *person*, the *same person*; and *self* then would have nothing to do with the rest of the body’ (Locke, 1997, p. 307; *Essay*, Bk. II, Ch. XXVII, § 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. On this sense of “material,” see Sowa, 2011, p. 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. This problem was recognized in a perhaps exaggerated form by Husserl’s student Eugen Fink. Fink (1995) suggests that even the *language* of the phenomenologist, describing phenomena in the *epoché*, cannot be understood by the audience. He insists one “can *never* succeed in *abolishing* the *divergence of signifying* that is present in every transcendental sentence between the natural sense of words and the transcendental sense indicated in them” (Fink, 1995, p. 98). In my view, thanks to the overlap between pure and empirical concepts, the phenomenologist usually can be understood, even if the transcendental status of her claims are misunderstood. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. On the conceptual yield of phenomenology, see also the *Ideas*: “The goal is scientific knowledge of [experience], that is to say, its theoretical development and mastery in a system of concepts and statements of laws, springing from pure intuition of essences” (Husserl, 2014, p. 268). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. See, however, Strevens (2019) who defends a contrary view, though without the philosophically deflationary consequences of similar-sounding claims about philosophical concepts as natural kinds (e.g., Kornblith 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. There are clear affinities between this account and Ryle’s notion that mental terms are “success” or “achievement” words. As Amie Thomasson argues (2002; 2007), this may be no accident, given Ryle’s thorough and consequential acquaintance with Husserl’s phenomenology in the 1920’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. “Thus, if one loves paradoxical talk, one can actually say […] that *‘fiction’ makes up the vital element of phenomenology, as it does of all eidetic science*” (Husserl, 2014, p. 27). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. See Husserl’s (1977, pp. 35–36) own comparison to geometry for an explanation of the way idealized, *a priori* constructions can nevertheless relate to and provide knowledge of empirical nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Compare the recent notion of “dual character concepts” (Reuter 2019), which are concepts with both descriptive and normative components (e.g., *art*, *friendship*, or even *belief*). Whether or in what cases these concepts should be counted as single or different concepts is a complex and difficult issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)